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Voices in Adoption:
A Narrative Analysis of Stories from Birthmother Cyber Communities

A thesis submitted as satisfaction of the requirements for the
degree of Master of Arts

in

Interdisciplinary Humanities

by

Karen Lisa Deeming

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2016
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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my family for never wavering in their support and patience.
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The dynamics of adoption from a closed, sealed records, secretive endeavor to an open model has conflated the intersection of kinship and social roles attached to motherhood. These roles are not natural, universal and unchanging, instead reflecting the reorganization and mutual understanding of social practices. How do birthmothers negotiate their motherhood in the absence of a child? My research discusses the changing nature of birthmother roles as ambiguous, existing outside traditional Western notions of proper motherhood and reflective of transitional social relations. I use anonymous narratives from birthmothers which span 6 decades of adoption to argue that birthmothers are creating an active role and staking their claim to motherhood through proper performance of motherhood in multiple ways.
Introduction

Adoption has been an increasingly popular option for family-building in the United States stretching back to the late 1800’s. Over time the motives for adopting children have changed from free labor for farmers in the Midwest during the Orphan Train era, to a desire for parenthood in childless couples, to an option for family building and philanthropy (Holt 1994; Zelizer 1985). National and political tropes describe adoption in multiple ways, mainly through the eyes of the adoptive parent: an institution that finds homes for abandoned children; a family building institution; a win-win solution to a social problem. Familiar adoption paradigms are frequently found in literature, film and popular culture that work as a framework to explain non-consanguineous relationships and force an expansion of what family means. Popular images and understanding of adoption shape the stories that adoptees, adoptive parents, and biological parents tell about their experiences. For birthmothers, these tropes do not cover the complex circumstances and force stories into neat packages that defend (birth)motherhood and while they provide a familiar, understandable, and socially scripted adoption experience, they also limit the narrative and exclude experiences that are not considered “normal” events in the adoption process.

But what do those who participate in the transfer of their biological children say about the aftermath of adoption in the United States? Mainstream adoption discourse privileges the voices of adoptive parents; so called “closed adoption” in which the birth mother relinquishes all legal ties to the child and has no right of contact or information thereafter is designed to hide the birthmother and her experiences in order to shield her from the presumed stigmas of extra marital sexuality, illegitimacy, and irresponsibility among other putative inadequacies. Moving forward, open adoption offers the promise of having a part in life of the child when making the choice to relinquish but creates an environment ripe for manipulation. Birthmother accounts frequently follow a binary, establishing the experience as either positive or negative, removing the complex duality of emotion that resides in the adoption process. The positive birth mother story embraces the motherhood bond through the acceptance of the adoptive family as the proper choice, the negative narrative expresses lack of agency and stolen motherhood; both narrative models reinforce the role of motherhood by utilizing the ”best interest of the child” trope. I argue that birth mother stories conform to the expectations of proper motherliness in the absence of the child and provide an appropriate explanation for both the pregnancy and the eventual placement of the child with adoptive parents.
Methods

Data was collected utilizing online social media sites which serve as self-sorting cyber-communities populated by those who want to identify themselves as being part of adoption in specific ways. A semi-structured, completely anonymous survey was presented to multiple online adoption sites including Concerned United Birth Parents (CUB), Adoptive Families, Adoption Support Group, Adoptee Central, Adoption Support, and Domestic Adoption Support Network with consent from administrators and members on each site. Participants were provided Informed Consent forms before beginning an anonymous survey which began with preliminary questions regarding position in adoption triad (birthparent, adoptive parent, adoptee), gender, type of adoption (open, semi-open, closed, foster to adopt, other), and degree of contact between members of the triad. Depending upon answers to the preliminary questions, participants were presented with more specific questions directed toward their position in the adoption triad. Birthmothers were asked who other than themselves, if anyone, participated in the decision making process concerning their adoption choices (family, clergy, lawyer, adoption agency, significant other, etc). The last portion of the survey consisted of an open-ended question directing the participant to tell their adoption story in their own words as they experienced it. The anonymity of the survey was purposefully designed to elicit unfettered responses and provide freedom to speak honestly and step away from socially scripted metanarratives. Participants willing to provide written narrative included 40 birthmothers who relinquished their children over the last six decades.

Why Facebook?

Facebook delivers a rich source of data from multiple cultures, socioeconomic statuses, genders, religions, and experiences, allowing a broader scope of analysis necessary when looking at an issue that affects a diverse segment of the population. Ethnographic researchers routinely gather narrative dialogue in person through multiple interview sessions over time; however I found a benefit to collecting anonymous stories, especially in online communities specifically dedicated to adoption. Women who place their children have constructed their identity as (birth)mothers and must reinforce and express their constructed self through a public performance of proper emotion and conduct befitting their role. Anonymous surveys allow engagement in the complexity of emotion and fear without explanation or qualification required, permitting expression of true feelings without jeopardizing carefully constructed sense of self and place both in society and within online groups.
In our age of technology, a new form of online ethnography has emerged providing access to a large database of social activity covering a broad swath of demographic groups. Facebook and other online social networks offer a unique source of information about human behavior, specifically how individuals communicate their identity. Social networks are a core feature of daily life, effectively integrating online and offline worlds for many users. They reflect existing social processes and create new ways of interrelating by changing the way people communicate and share information. Facebook is the most popular social network offering a stage to showcase public presentations of identity through narrative. Social media identity is not created in a social vacuum, but is shaped through interactions, associations, and feedback from other users (Wilson, Gosling and Graham 2012). Membership in self-sorted assemblies, such as Facebook groups, contribute to personal identity through association and similarity to others in similar life paths.

Online Facebook groups catering to birthmothers provide an insulated space to convey their story to others who share similar experiences. Adoption is a sensitive subject for birthmothers to breach and the stakes are emotionally high even in online social groups. In cyber-communities the illusion of privacy provides sanctuary from “real life” consequences, adding an additional layer of anonymity and allowing more honest responses.

Why Written Narrative?

People use the strategy of narrative construction to express and work through fundamental elements of experience. Memory contextualized into narrative is grounded in phenomenology and cannot be separated from the self. It creates boundaries, defines individuals, navigates relationships, provides coherence and depicts a temporal transition from one state to another (Ochs and Capps 1996; Ricoeur 2006). Women who have relinquished their children use narrative to engage in information control and stigma management techniques tailored to particular audiences to manage their identities as women, as mothers, as birthmothers, as members of society and groups.

Interpretation of carefully crafted dialogues use words and phrases rooted in personal history as tools to influence and respond to the world around us (Bakhtin 1986; Riessman and Speedy 2005). There is a dynamic, relational and interminable management of memory and phenomenological interpretation in written narrative that can be constructed and modified to elicit specific reaction and emotion through selection, organization, connection and evaluation of the sequence of the narratives which make them meaningful to a particular audience or individual. Cultural patterns have associated semantic domains that provide an organized set of words referring
to specific conceptual sphered shared by a group. These patterns, or consensus among members of groups, shows competence in knowledge of shared cultural “truths (Romney, Weller and Batchelder 1986) and predict that birthmothers would share comparable experiences, and their narratives would contain universal themes expressed through individualized conceptions of experience.

The adoptive lexicon is imbued with strong emotion evoking and symbolic language, often falling into the positive/negative binary. Birthmothers utilize language that privileges the biological bond and redefines them as mothers (re)negotiating their identity and self-image through their narrative, interpreting themselves as they interpret others (Benjamin 1969), continuously readjusting to meet social expectations. They face a “double consciousness,” (Du Bois 1903), assigned labels of mother and birthmother; each label containing a specific set of positive and/or negative values, morals and expectations.

Labels and social roles are endowed with power, particularly those in which social and economic spheres are entwined: consumption and motherhood intersect in adoption; birthmother as producer, baby as commodity and adoptive parent as consumer (Rothman 2004; Modell 1986; Kopytoff 2004). This is particularly salient in transnational adoption where children are transferred from their point of production to their site of nurture. Social differences in power, authority, prestige and access to resources shape birthing practices (Jordan 1997; Leinaweaver 2009) justifying motherhood for some women while spurning or marginalizing the mother-work of others (Rapp 2001). Personal narratives of birthmothers engage with the power structure in adoption and reclaim motherhood even when children are legally and physically absent.

Adoption Trends and (Birth)motherhood

Closed adoption is based from the start on lies: the lie that the mother is actually a virgin, a “good marriageable girl”, not a mother, that the life experiences she has had never occurred. In earlier generations, social mores condemned premarital sexuality; women who gave up children acted, sometimes under pressure, to create a fictional identity for themselves as marriageable “good girls” with the disallowed sexuality hidden. Birthmothers hid their pregnancies, hid their children, and hid their motherhood in return for respectability and the promise of a clean slate. Birthmothers were told they could simply forget their children and move forward with their lives, never looking back.

“I was the perfect target market for my agency and adoption, 19 and pregnant, "nice middle class" girl who
would not even consider public assistance; dysfunctional family at home, and looking for a way to "fix" my "mistake" and be redeemed. I was hopeful, trusting and wanting to believe that it would all be OK. If I listened to the professionals and did things the "right" way, then it would work out. I let fear and self-doubt guide me. I was given all these reasons adoption was great and wonderful. I was a "family building angel" who was giving this couple a great gift. I was protecting my child from my mother's influence and having the likes of me as a mother. I was placed on a pedestal for being strong and selfless and I liked it. I didn't want to deal with conflict or telling my son's father. It was embarrassing. I was ashamed. I let my son and my motherhood slip away. I was used. I was fed a version of adoption based on fairy tales. I was led to adoption like a lamb to slaughter and I thanked them for it. I was not given accurate information. I was failed by my own family, by the agency that I trusted, by my son's father and by myself. It was a perfect adoption. Everything worked out exactly as it was supposed to. It was the worst mistake of my life and something I regret every single day. It will never be over. I hate having adoption in my life, in my children's lives. There is no healing. It was completely unnecessary. My son didn't need to be taken away from me. There were no benefits except by the family that had the pleasure of my son's life and the agency that took their 30K. And almost 30 years later, the thing that was supposed to allow me to go on with my life "as if" I did not give birth at 19?"

~

Respondent #69

Part of the process of closing adoptions involves replacing original birth certificates with new ones that list adoptive parents on paperwork and legally write out biological relationships (Modell 2002; Babb 1999). This process creates a barrier between birth mother and adoptee which can both protect from, and deter, future contact. The narrative which suggests closing birth records is purely for the protection of the birth mother and the child disregards the hidden transcript concealed within: the transcript of the adoptive parents who fear the interference of the birth parents or the possibility that the child will choose their blood relatives over their adoptive family. James Scott’s (1990) seminal work on hidden transcripts provides a deep discussion regarding the narrative of the powerful and the powerless in
society. Adoptive parents, once given legal control over a child become the powerful, backed by agencies, the legal system, and the dominant discourse surrounding adoption. The birthparents are hidden and secret, literally in some cases, but are able to voice their displeasure and reinsert motherhood into narratives describing oppression by powerful entities promoting adoption.

“I got pregnant at age 20. Although the final decision to place my son for adoption was mine, I felt I had no other choice. I was coerced by my boyfriend who did not want the baby. My family provided no support, and when learning of my pregnancy suggested I leave. I stayed with a friend for about 3 months. The DSS in MA offered no serious counseling and the social worker assigned to me told me ‘you don’t want to go on welfare!’ with the implication that that was a bad solution. Looking back now, had I taken that route I would not have had to endure the anguish and a lifetime of pain over what was a bad decision on my part. I found my son when he was 23 and had a relationship with him for about 10 years. We no longer are in contact with one another.”

~ Respondent #74

Lack of support from family and agencies combined with a lack of options forced women into choices they regretted later. Agencies in place to provide advice, pushed for adoption, discouraging other options. Family members invested in propriety removed options for women and girls to keep their babies. Many birthmothers expressed feeling coerced or deceived by adoption agencies, adoptive parents, and family members to put their children up for adoption. They remain emotionally and psychologically linked to the children they relinquished and suffer loss at each milestone of life.

“I became pregnant while in college. I was not the stereotypical "party girl". I was genuinely in love. Although my pregnancy was unplanned, I wanted to keep my baby. Although I am prochoice, I could not go through with an abortion. Initially, her father and I were going to get married. I felt this was the only way that I was going to be able to provide for my baby. These plans fell through about 3 months into the pregnancy and I didn't hear from the father again. My parents told me I couldn't stay with

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1 Department of Social Services
them if I kept my baby. I went to Planned Parenthood and they were no help. They didn't provide any direction of services that I could seek to support myself and my baby. I didn't know where else to turn. I was shamed into believing I wouldn't be a good parent, I didn't have the right to ask for anything, I didn't deserve any happiness. I was treated as a worthless person. My friends turned away, my professors were indifferent (I returned to college 4 months into my pregnancy and gave birth over the winter break). My future looked uncertain at best, I was afraid to fail with my baby depending on me. I wanted her to have a life better than what I thought I could provide. My parents called the adoption agency. I was given prospective parents' resumes to pick out a couple, which seemed ridiculous. How can you know from a few page questionnaire what they really are going to be like? I never felt the same after the adoption. To say it broke my heart is an understatement and trite. I exchanged letters and pictures with the adoptive parents till she was 19 and then the letters stopped. Just this past summer, when she was 23, I had a chance meeting with my daughter in a public setting. She didn't recognize me, obviously her parents hadn't shared my pictures with her. I didn't think it was appropriate to approach her then while she was working. I found her address on the internet (she was still living with her parents I believe) and wrote a letter to her directly. I didn't think going through the adoption agency was an option due to the fact she was no longer a minor and they had been unreliable communicating in the past. I told her that I was glad that she was a happy, beautiful, intelligent young woman. I briefly explained my circumstances at the time and that I wanted a better life for her than what I thought I could provide. I told her I was open to communication but would leave it up to her out of respect to her privacy and her relationship with her parents. I didn't hear back from her, but her adoptive mother wrote a nasty, sanctimonious letter back to me. It made me wonder what they really told her about me and what they led her to believe just by omission of the truth. It raised more questions than answers, and made me all the more aware that "it doesn't get better" as the adoption social worker told me after signing the relinquishment
papers 24 years ago. In some ways it is worse, because now you know the pain NEVER goes away. 2"

~

Respondent #156

According to popular narrative in the mid-20th century, it was in the best interest of the child to be raised by a sanctioned, married couple instead of a single mother. Birth mothers subscribed to this public transcript, properly displaying and enacting motherhood and the best interest of their child by placing their children for adoption. The change in the demographic of preferred child created a strong baby market which encouraged poor white women to give up their babies under the guise of the best interest of the child (Babb 1999). My survey exposed the trauma experienced by birthmothers when they realized that adoption may not have been in the best interest of their child but rather in the best interest of the adoptive parents and the agencies that benefited from the transaction.

The adoption experience appears to be beneficial for the ADOPTIVE PARENTS... I have been involved with a support group here in Phoenix, for many years now. I have attended the AAC 3 Conference and was a presenter along with 5 other birth mothers... Adoption and the loss of my child negatively impacted my life, my view of myself, and decisions that I have made since I was 18 years old, which was my age at time of relinquishment. My daughter’s natural father was treated, as was I, for many years for depression. I sought GRIEF counseling 24 years after relinquishment. Adoption is the gift that keeps on giving in terms of feelings of loss. YOU NEVER get over the loss of your child. I do not know ONE other mother OF LOSS, that didn't feel as if relinquishment was the WORST DECISION OF THIER LIFE. We were lied to, deceived, and treated INHUMANELY... as a group. There were programs that existed in 1967, to aid mothers and children, however, my experience in a Florence Crittenden home, was an incredibly dehumanizing experience. All that mattered was my beautiful baby girl. There was NO offer of counseling. You had your baby and then it was TAKEN from you three days later by social workers... BECAUSE YOU WERE

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2 Spelling corrected. Commentary written by respondent, all emphasis belongs to respondent.
3 American Adoption Congress
LOWER THAN LOW, YOU WEREN'T EVEN ENTITLED TO COPIES OF YOUR PAPER WORK. IF I take in dry cleaning... I get a receipt. I HAVE nothing ... How my daughter found me remains one of the miracles of my life. Because reunion is so incredibly complicated, many times in the past 13 years I have wished that she had never found me. Adoption should be the LAST OPTION for both mother and for the health and well-being of the child. Both are so harmed by it, that it makes picking up the pieces of your life, nearly impossible.4

~ Respondent #20

Sexual morality and cultural values lie at the heart of adoption. Society’s birth practices are intimately tied to its core values and dictate who can get pregnant by whom and in what circumstance (Harris 2011). The rules surrounding birth ostracize women who do not fit the criteria and force them to perform proper morality in order to remain or return to an honorable status. Undergirding the era of closed adoptions was the idea that good girls did not have premarital sex and married couples were expected to have children. The secret transfer of an illegitimate child from an otherwise respectable girl to a childless couple allowed both parties to live up to the moral code of society but disregarded negative consequences. Focus remained on illegitimacy as the ultimate evil against children, ignoring any transgression, or less than optimal circumstance of married adoptive adults.

“I was 17 when my daughter was born. Both me and my boyfriend were naive kids trying not to make problems for our parents. Boyfriend's brother and his wife were trying to adopt through Catholic Charities, and they encouraged us to surrender. My mother refused to help. There was a lot of shame involved. My dad threatened to walk off the roof to commit suicide because he was so ashamed (he was a roofer). I had a brother who was 10 at the time and a sister 8. I didn't want them left fatherless. After daughter was born, both boyfriend and I wanted to see her. She was in the orphanage at Catholic Charities in Chicago. We were chastised by the social worker. She told us we could never be good parents for this child because we were so young. We would ruin the adoption that was already in process. Being naive and really thinking we were doing the best thing for our baby, we didn't pursue it any

4 Spelling corrected. Commentary written by respondent, all emphasis belongs to respondent.
further. I seriously considered suicide at the time. My boyfriend was a great guy. Loved me and helped me through this extremely difficult time. We stayed together and got married 4 years later, after he finished college. We had three additional children. We are still together for 43 years. Our daughter found us when she was 20. It is a good reunion, but there have been a lot of ups and downs. We will be in reunion for 25 years this March. Her adoption story was not good. She told me her adad\textsuperscript{5} was an alcoholic. Her amom\textsuperscript{6} had an appointment with a divorce attorney, but two days before, Catholic Charities called and told her they had a baby for her. She took my daughter thinking it would save her marriage. It didn't, and my poor daughter suffered. Her adoptive mom helped her search, but after they found us, the adoptive mom told her, "They dumped you to live the good life." Adoptive mother doesn't like us and my daughter is in a tough spot. My husband and I are very happy to be reunited and are very blessed with our great daughter and wonderful grandchildren.”

~Respondent #92

Closed adoption offered women the option to pretend their pregnancies never happened, to go on with their lives and never look back. In exchange for their child, women and girls were promised they would finish school, get married, have other children and a normal life. But no one discussed the lifelong emotional consequences of this pretense, the contradiction between the actualities of the experience for birthmothers, their continuing emotional ties to the relinquished child and the narrative of erasure around the problematic pregnancy. The inequities of this era, along with changes in social mores brought birth mothers’ and adoptive children’s need to know biological information, and to understand one another’s and their own stories, have created a culture of truth seeking in the adoption community (Wrobel 2013; Modell 2002; Lifton 1979) and have rallied around open adoption as the solution to inequalities and a way to correct the manipulations of the past.

Open adoption is the current trend as a response to adoptees’ needs of biological, ancestral and medical information and the birthmothers need to be recognized as a mother and have knowledge of the child and his/her wellbeing (Modell 2002). Openness began in the 1970’s just as social mores regarding unwed mothers began to loosen, abortion was legalized and there was increased access to birth control. Women were given an option that allowed

\textsuperscript{5} Adoptive dad.

\textsuperscript{6} Adoptive mom.
them to make a parenting plan for their child with an adoptive family and remain a part of their child’s life; open adoption made it less painful for mothers to relinquish children. In addition, creating lines of communication between adoptive and birth parents has promoted the open adoption model as the better choice for the wellbeing of children. The best interest of the child includes allowing access to biological information and providing optimal nurturing and care from both adoptive and birth parents in some form.

Women in contemporary society have much more agency over their reproductive bodies and hold more power in choice of adoptive parents than ever before. They make choices regarding whether and when to have children. High demand for adoptable infants gives women who face unwanted or forced pregnancy, who do not choose abortion, multiple options for placing their children. Options for open, semi-open, or other designed adoption arrangements provide women with a possibility of retaining a bond with their child and securing a positive outcome for their children. Contrary to the overwhelming predilection for women in online communities to express negative feeling regarding adoption, my survey responses showed there are positive outcomes with open adoption when both parental parties are willing to make it work. The ongoing relationship between parents may be difficult at times, but when the best interest of the child is forefront, the result is positive. Both mothers are expected and able to perform proper motherhood as birth and adoptive mothers in successful open adoptions.

“I placed my birth son with a loving and stable family 17 years ago. I have been a constant part of his life. He has always known that I was his birth mom. Our families have grown to be one family through love. I not only have an amazing birth son, he has grown to become one of my closest friends.”

~Respondent #8

This example of open adoption shows an extensive and consistent contact between child and birthmother. This system allows the birth mother to participate and perform motherhood without restriction.

“We love the adoptive family. They have been amazing. It’s tough but we know he is where he belongs. We have an open adoption where we get updates often and possible future visits.”

~Respondent #41
In this case, the birthmother is hopeful and endorses the best interest of the child by stating she knows her child is where he belongs with the adoptive family. She is performing proper motherhood through personal sacrifice, providing the better home for her son at the expense of her own desires.

“It’s been very good. We have an open adoption. My son is French American and lives in Paris France. Sometimes it hurts to see him but overall it has been good. His parents feel like family to me. They have always been kind and welcoming. Since French was his first language, it somehow made it feel like he was really theirs. But as he got older it got harder because I never married or had more children and I wanted that so I then regretted the adoption. But my son has grown up confident and loving. He sometimes struggles with not knowing his birthfather but I feel lucky that I have a teenage son who tells me he loves me every time I see him. I would say our adoption story turned out good and in the best interest of our child.”

~Respondent #106

This mother invokes the “best interest of the child” trope in her narrative. She expresses regret and personal turmoil, but reinforces her attachment and commitment to providing the best for her son. Her narrative places herself within the family and her performance of motherhood is unquestioned.

I placed my baby for adoption my senior year of high school. I met the parents and knew she’d be loved and cared for by them. I received pictures and letters with updates for a year. When she was 17 I found her on a social media site. We talked for four years then I met her. We are close friends.

~ Respondent #144

Communication in open adoptions does not always continue throughout the child’s life. In this situation, the communication lasted only the first year but the birthmother reached out and reconnected to her child after many years. This birth mother refers to the capability of the adoptive parents, but her narrative focuses more on the motherhood found aspect of

7 Spelling corrected. Commentary written by respondent, all emphasis belongs to respondent.
the case. This mother performed motherhood through seeking and establishing a bond with her child, reinforcing the concept that birthmothers do not simply go on with their lives and forget the child.

These women embrace opportunity to provide for the best interest of their child through adoption. Their role as mother is intact and their ongoing role in the life of their child is secured through open adoption and acknowledgement of themselves as an essential piece of the adoption triad, present and available to the child as a proper mother should be. Occasional or continuous interaction via photographs, letters, and visits forwards the relationship and designation of birthmother as participant in the child’s life. Birthmothers in truly open adoption are able to perform proper (birth)motherhood publicly and with conviction.

Unfortunately, open adoption only works when both adoptive parents and birthparents follow through with the oral or written agreement. A longitudinal survey by Grotevant et al. (2013) found that birth mothers in open adoptions experience less unresolved grief, sadness, regret and anger than birth mothers in closed adoption in the first wave of their study (1987-1992), but by the second wave of study (1996-2000), the difference was not statistically significant between the birth mothers. Relationships in open adoptions are dynamic and must be renegotiated over time, taking the needs of the participants into account. Mutually satisfying open adoptions are dependent on the flexibility, communication skills, commitment and ability to maintain boundaries in the relationship (Grotevant 2009, 2013). Perception of the contact is more important than the type of contact for the birth mother in open adoption arrangements (Grotevant 2013) and can lead to misrepresentation and false promises.

Open adoption consists of an oral or written agreement; however, as of June 2014, only 28 states and the District of Columbia have statutes that allow written and legally enforceable contracts between adoptive and biological parents (childwelfare.gov). Despite its advantages, the allure of open adoption and the possibility of remaining tethered to your child in some form can be used to manipulate young, poor, unsupported and otherwise disenfranchised women into relinquishing their children under false pretense. The majority of my survey participants who were involved in open adoption feel they were deceived in some way.

“I was 19 and living at home. I was going to school and working. The birthfather’s family wanted me to get abortion. I believe in the right to choose but my personal belief was I could not do this. My mother said she would not help me. She steered me to a nun who sent me to talk to Children’s Home Society. I picked the adoptive family and was told I would get information. I received one letter
and pictures. When I asked the next year I was told “No”---that was not how my adoption was set up. I searched for my daughter when she turned 21 and found her. Her parents would not let her meet me until I answered questions about her. They ran a background check on me, and met me themselves. There was so much fear on their part. She was surprised and said she never received the letter and pictures I sent. (Adoptive mom told me she gave them to her). The second time I saw her, she told me she got my original letter. I feel we do not have any kind of relationship because of her mom. I can’t write any more it’s too painful.

~ Respondent #152

Contracts that are made before the legal transfer are not always honored. Many times these contracts are presented to the birthmother shortly after giving birth when she is vulnerable and conflicted. Once birthparental rights are terminated there is often no recourse to enforce the open adoption contract.

"...I was made to sign the paper while still drugged from the hospital. I never met, held or saw my baby as I was drugged for the delivery and not allowed to see her after..."

~Respondent #83

“I did a private adoption and chose for it to be open so I could have contact with my child. However, after the papers were signed I was told that I could not have their contact information; I could only send letters to the adoption agency. Open adoption was used as a lure, I never would have knowingly consented to the terms that were given."

~ Respondent # 76

The movement towards open adoption promised a new way to transfer children that provided information to all parties but often did not work out as a positive solution. The promise of open adoption lulled birthmothers into a false sense of safety. Their desperation and lack of support allowed adoption agencies, religious organizations, and promises from eager adoptive parents to manipulate them into relinquishing their children. The adopters’ desire to

8 Spelling corrected. Commentary written by respondent, all emphasis belongs to respondent.
9 Part of a much longer narrative.
get a baby at any cost overshadowed the birthmother agency in selecting the preferred placement for their child.

“In 1989, at 16 yrs old, I placed my son in a closed adoption. I did not have familial or financial support, so I felt it would be impossible to raise my son as a single parent. Although I selected an adoptive family, the agency did not honor my choice.”

~Respondent # 170

And what is to be said for the women who find their child’s interest was not priority, how is she to reconcile what she wanted and was promised with what actually occurred? These narratives show the devastation of birthmothers finding out their children were not given the “better” home or the “better” parents through adoption. They struggle with how to repair the damage within themselves and for their children.

“I feel that losing my baby to adoption murdered my soul. I have been amongst the walking dead. Learning that he was not better off without me and has suffered is devastating for me. There is no acknowledgment by society of the travesty. No guidance of how to help myself or my son.”

~ Respondent #120

“Adoption is unnatural and soul-destroying. I wanted to keep my baby but NO help. Nowhere to live. Basically kicked out of the village. It hurt him and it hurt me. It affected how I feel about sex. It made me less present with children I raised. It caused depression and suicidal feelings. I have great distrust for medical professionals and other authority figures. Can rarely get through a day without being triggered. Everyone lied to me. What a brutal shock to discover that adoptees felt abandoned and unloved. Everyone did good cop-bad cop routine. They took advantage of me. Not one person was supportive. Adoptive mother was not this loving superior human after all. Turns out she is selfish and puts herself ahead of my son. She wasn't even infertile after all. Another lie. My firstborn will be 44 in March of 2015. People only care
about adopters. We were just breeders. It was wrong on every level.\textsuperscript{10}

~Respondent #95

“It has been hell. I get tired of explaining it to everyone and not being heard. The adoptive parents betrayed me and my whole family. We were lied to by the agency, by our church, by the adoptive family; coercion all around. They legally kidnapped my baby and blackmailed us... treating us like scum and when we (barely) objected by saying they might be seeing negative where there was none, they cut us out of their lives. They are not concerned with my/our daughter's best interests. They cannot love her fully if they deny half her family as important and relevant to her life. My baby was stolen, my life was stolen. And now that I have kids I am raising, I realize to a greater extent just how we were both wronged. And now I learn how reunions don't always happen and don't often go well... with her controlling parents, our relationship will continue to be non-existent. It’s depressing. It hurt her, me, my parents, her siblings, my husband. Everyone except the adoptive family that is still pretending she is their little girl they dreamed about on their honeymoon.\textsuperscript{11}"

~Respondent #79

For these women, the promise of open adoption lulled them into a false sense of safety. Their desperation and lack of support allowed adoption agencies, religious organizations, and promises from eager adoptive parents to manipulate them into relinquishing their children. Despite changes in social mores, birthmothers still hear messages about how they are not good enough to mother or that their desire to raise their own child selfishly puts their needs first. The desire of both adoption agency and adoptive parents motivates them to continue to promulgate these negative messages. Once the child has been transferred, the birthmother no longer has any rights over the child, and any agreement to share contact or communication becomes unenforceable. Open adoption promises a holistic transfer of children

\textsuperscript{10} Spelling corrected. Commentary written by respondent, all emphasis belongs to respondent.

\textsuperscript{11} Spelling corrected. Commentary written by respondent, all emphasis belongs to respondent.
without the pain of the past, but it can only fulfil that promise if adoptive parents and their agents uphold their agreements with the birthmothers.

“I chose adoption because I felt it was the only option for my child to be raised in a loving family. I did not feel adequate to parent on my own without support, and I felt that the people I did have available for support would shame and stigmatize me and my child. My own parents are self-absorbed and judgmental, and I felt that what support they would give would be done resentfully and that my child would have a marginal status in the family. I did a private adoption and chose for it to be open so I could have contact with my child. However, after the papers were signed I was told that I could not have their contact information, I could only send letters to the adoption agency. Open adoption was used as a lure, I never would have knowingly consented to the terms that were given. It turned out, those were not the only lies told. My child is now 16”.

~ Respondent # 76

“I was young, had 3 other children, didn't have a supportive partner, was not fully educated about potential emotional risks or trauma with adoption. I was made to believe if I did not give up my child my other kids and her would suffer terribly the rest of their lives (agency and society). I wanted an open adoption so that my child would grow up knowing where she came from and who we were. While I have maintained contact with the adoptive parents, this is not what I was promised, my child has suffered for it, and we are strangers to her. Had I known this would happen I would have never went through with it. My other children suffer as well with my choice. A lack of education an ongoing services for all parties involved contributed to this. The first words from my child to my husband were, "Who Am I?" There was no need for this. While I'm not sure what I could have done to change my situation at the time, financially, being given the proper emotional support from an unbiased party to first attempt parenting would have been helpful.”

~Respondent #97
As adoptees grew up they began to ask questions about their biological parents despite the closed records and secret status of their origins. The narrative surrounding adoption and what was in the best interest of the child began to shift from closed and sealed records toward the practice of providing more information to the birth parents and the adoptee. Supporting their children in the search for identity through advocating opening of records and accepting reunion regardless of difficulty is a proper act of motherhood. Birthparents in reunion are allowed to publically perform parenthood and reestablish bonds with their children; however, reentry of the child creates complications for birthmothers who must then reprocess their role as biological mother to a stranger they birthed years earlier. Popular discourse hypes reunion as healing and fully positive but most birthparents in my survey described it as encouraging but difficult to navigate.

“I did not have a say in the adoption. I did not want my daughter to be placed. I was determined to find her when she became an adult and I found her when she was 22. She is now 30 and our relationship is developing slowly, at a pace she can accept. I want more of a relationship than she does. But we have always stayed in contact since reunion.”

~Respondent #85

“Our daughter found us when she was 20. It is a good reunion, but there have been a lot of ups and downs. We will be in reunion for 25 years this March.”

~Respondent #92

Birthmothers are still being manipulated into relinquishing their children by unscrupulous agencies, desperate adoptive parents and lack of resources available to unsupported, underrepresented pregnant women. Although the practice of open adoption is considered a more holistic transfer of children, closed adoption remains the norm. Open adoption, or the promise of openness in adoption is used as a lure to entice birthmothers to place their babies but the contract has little chance of being honored once the legal parental rights have been transferred to the adoptive parents. The institution of adoption has been in place for centuries and across many countries with minimal discussion about how the birthmother has been erased from the process. Her identity is sealed away from the world supposedly for the protection of herself and her child; however, mothers who have given their narrative for this paper are loud and clear that adoption was not the best choice for their child.
Approaches to Memory

Birth mother stories as memories sometimes include an aspect of nostalgia for what might have been if they had kept their babies. Svetlana Boym (2001) categorizes memorializing as restorative nostalgia, a reflective gaze that imagines and longs for something that no longer exists or perhaps never existed at all. Betty-Jean Lifton (1979, 2009) refers to the nostalgic memory as a ghost story, full of fantasy, mystery, and missing persons who are as if dead but remain alive in an alternative present. The ghosts are the unknown cast of characters behind the adoption scene; the idealized version of what could or should have been; a fantasy of the life that might have been had the birth mother raised her child. The ghost kingdom lives within the framework of extended family and may or may not be included in the official narratives because the inhabitants are sometimes too dangerous to be allowed into consciousness. They are relegated to a spectral place, into a liminal geography of the mind, an imagined community of unidentified kinship connections. Fravel, McRoy and Grotevant (2000) refer to the psychologically present adopted child who is mentally present for the birthmother but physically absent, creating an ambiguous boundary placing the child both inside and outside of her family.

When a child is lost in death it is permanent and society permits mourning and memorialization. When a child is placed for adoption, the birth mother is expected to go on with her life and pretend the event, and the child never happened. David Brodzinsky (1990) argues that many problems adopted children face are due to unresolved grief and a gradual unfolding of the realities of adoption over time; I suggest his argument can be extended to birth mothers as well. The point when a woman relinquishes her child is a traumatic and stressful event. The birthmother has memories of her child from pregnancy and perhaps a few hours or days of the baby’s life. Those memories are what she holds on to and that is the child she mourns. As time passes, milestones in the child’s life are imagined and mourned; building onto actual memories are imagined memories of the child. An unfolding of what she has relinquished becomes more traumatic over time and the memories and narratives are her tether to motherhood.

“I was in high school when I got pregnant it was pretty shameful. The social worker said I would forget and move on with my life. I tried really hard to move on. I lived in denial for many years. I finally understood that the loss I felt was for my daughter. Reunion helped a lot, at least I got to see her. It is a life-long grief because you can never get those years back.”
~Respondent #78

“Adoption is something that happens after a terrible tragedy - a mother's loss of a child and a child's loss of a mother. In any other circumstance the world would mourn with you if one of those things happens. But with adoption the world sees your loss through the adoptive parents eyes and calls it wonderful. And this loss happens in your cells and your bones but you have no conscious memory of it. It's very confusing.”

~Respondent #126

Changing Ideas and Practices

To understand why exclusion of birthmothers continues to occur and why it is so painful it is important to reflect on history and morality regarding child transfer and kinship systems. Kinship studies have been significant since the early days of anthropology, gathering information on the most important, and fundamental structure within a culture - the family. Kinship is at the core of the social web and is commonly examined to learn rules about customary interactions, reciprocal alliances, marriage, taboos and other important cultural mores. It remains an important area of study because family traditions and practices provide structure, influencing many aspects of daily life from birth to death and give insight into the larger organization.

Adoption is a human experience that restructures kinship relationships among individuals and across cultures. Because many rules are based on the logic of kinship, adoption, changes and complicates cultural rubrics. In other cultures, people view adoption as a casual, frequent and loving gesture benefitting the society as a whole, and not necessarily as permanent. Different cultural experiences show variation and malleability in adoption, rather than a universal definition (Terrell and Modell 1994; Harris 2011). Women in different cultures may choose adoption for reasons other than our socially accepted reasons in the United States such as youth, unmarried status, and poverty; cultural practices may involve women giving children to relatives for practical reasons such as access to schooling, or out of social obligation within family and are not necessarily permanent or legal arrangements (Terrell and Modell 1994; Cuthbert and Quartly 2012; Roby and Matsumura 2002). Oceanic and North American Arctic cultures routinely exchange children on a large scale in a manner consistent with kin selection.
theory (Darwin; Silk 1980, 1987), an evolutionary strategy that favors the
success and survival of biological relatives over others.

Variation in traditional adoption practices is tied to the nature of
kinship rights and obligation within societies. In most cultures adoption is
tied to family and part of a larger system of sharing among kin. Adoptions in
these cultures are usually open; the children know and have a link to both
sets of parents providing benefit to all parties. Adoptees may gain
socioeconomic status or access to opportunity unavailable to their
birthparents; birth parents have more resources to survive or care for other
children, create beneficial social bonds, and they still retain their identity as
parent; adoptive parents gain an heir, someone to care for them in their old
age or create a beneficial social bond for example. Open adoption is
understood to be the best solution for a healthy and holistic transfer of
children; however, it is perceived differently in Western culture due to
differences in kinship ideology and sociopolitical organization.

American adoption is an institution legally making kin into strangers
and strangers into kin. The woman who gave life to the child is disregarded
and in effect erased from the role of mother through legal processes. She
must learn to negotiate her role as childless mother throughout the phases of
her child’s life. Multiple participants view it as a loss for all: the adoptive
parents lose the chance to have a biological child, the child loses their natural
heritage, and birthparents lose their child. Where other cultures look to
family for adoption, American adoption looks to government agencies,
independent institutions or private parties to provide unrelated children with
no ties and no social obligation to the birth parents. In confidential or closed
adoption, the records are sealed and the birthparents and adoptee are
restricted from access to, or knowledge of, their biological kin. Adoption
American style operates in an ownership model, where only one set of
parents has access to, or authority to contribute to the raising of the child.
The adoptive parents are legally assigned authority and are in control of the
relationship between the adoptee and birthmother.

Common practice in adoption consists of secrecy and denial. A miasma
of shame and illegitimacy resides in adoption stemming from the birthmother
and her “sin.” The practice of closing and legally sealing birth records was
determined to be the right way to protect both mother and child from the
taint of disrespectability. Sexuality among women has not changed
significantly over time, but rather the mechanisms in place to frame morality
surrounding women’s sexuality has. The age of marriage has steadily
increased as cultural priorities and expectations have migrated towards
obtaining a college education and a career before starting a family. As
sexually active unmarried women in society increase, unplanned pregnancies
outside of marriage are bound to increase accordingly. The solution during
the era of closed adoption was to transfer the illegitimate child to a legitimate couple and sever all biological ties.

Since the late 20\textsuperscript{th} century, the preferred adoption model has contained an element of openness negotiable by the adult parties, often with the help of agencies, lawyers, and family members. Contraception, abortion and changing views on unwed motherhood have resulted in a substantial decrease in available infants. Supply and demand has reversed and there are now multiple adopters for each available adoptee, giving more power to the birthmother in deciding who will raise her child. Performance of motherhood and acting in the best interest of the child is more tangible for these birthmothers than women from earlier eras and she can perform her role as mother publicly, playing an active role in the future of her child’s life and owning her choices as non-custodial mother if openness truly is desired and the best interest of the child is kept in focus.

(Birth)Motherhood Identity

Historically, many cultures view the role of mother as fundamental to proper womanhood. But this is not simply motherhood per se, but often includes moral ideas about the sexual acts that create pregnancies, which must be enacted within the bounds of social propriety. Even as motherhood ideals evolve, the performance of historically framed proper motherhood holds political and social power. Many scholars have addressed the socialization of women into motherhood (Broadhurst and Mason 2013; Thomas 2014; Butler 1999; Schepker-Hughes 1999; Butler 1999; March and Miall 2008; Benet 1976), the primacy of their role in kinship webs (Howell 2009; Modell 1986; Terrell and Modell 1994; Faircloth 2009), and the rite of passage into womanhood that it provides (Sutton 1998; Hongnan and Rosenberg 1998). Adoption theorists continue to debate whether motherly love is a natural component of women or whether it is a reflection of the social and political atmosphere of the eras and cultures under study. Regardless of whether it is biological or socialized, the motherhood role is powerful and long reaching, binding generation to generation and family to family with children acting as embodiment of a union. Denial of the very existence of the child removes the links and relationships that lie between.

Birthmothers are caught between double binding societal expectations and mixed messages promoting unattainable proper performance of motherhood. A birthmother who relinquishes her child is met with disdain by others who have managed to keep theirs and if she keeps her child she is admonished by society that she cannot provide properly and/or that she will never achieve the status of proper marriage and motherhood should her moral “fall” of pre- or extra-marital sexuality become known outside of a very small circle around her. Closed adoption also addresses moral concerns about
the ability of the birthmother to ever achieve proper motherhood since she has participated in forbidden extra or pre-marital sex, especially white middle class women who have a class stake in respectability. Adoption is something that is not supposed to happen, it finds its niche in desperation and impossibility; the birthmother cannot care for the child and the adoptive parents cannot have a child of their own.

People try to actively manage their social identities: assembling, disassembling, accepting, contesting, hiding, and performing, but meanwhile others try to pin unwanted identities on them. By claiming identity as a (birth)mother, a woman claims her agency in the creation of her own identity, and stakes a claim of motherhood, rejecting outmoded sexual mores that have been used to exclude her from social legitimacy as a proper mother, and to disqualify her from social participation in, even knowledge of, her child's life. Birthmothers have emerged as among the most vigorous advocates for opening closed adoption records pushing back against claims of guaranteed anonymity (Samuels 2013). Women are fighting not only for their own rights, but for the right of their children to know the story of their relinquishment and adoption, and to meet members of their birth families. In this way, they redefine proper motherhood away from identification with the narrative of sexual propriety, virgin marriage, middle class respectability, and instead toward a new narrative of maternal propriety lying in the role of protector of the child that they see as stolen from them through the secrecy surrounding closed adoption.

Birthmother activists claim the drive to keep birth records closed reinscribes an outmoded culture of sexual shame by disallowing, silencing, and denying their voices in public narratives surrounding adoption. The fight for the rights of their children invokes their role as mother in a specific way. Relinquishment narratives may ring false to adopted children, activists argue the historical secrecy around relinquishment puts adopted children at risk of psychological harm in the absence of the right to know the story of their own lives, and to have a positive explanation of why they were put up for adoption. By defining their fight against closed adoption as benefiting the rights of their biological children and rejecting attempts to portray them as selfishly interfering in the stability of a closed adoption, birthmother activists redefine the “best interest of the child” to include stripping away layers of fiction and secrecy to demonstrate more psychologically true and positive continuing attachment between birthmother and adopted child. In so doing, they claim the role of proper motherhood as based on emotional attachment rather than sexual propriety. In this context, open adoption not only facilitates communication between biological mother and adopted child, it provides both birthmother and adopted child with agency, the birthmother to become involved in her child’s life, the adopted child to possess the knowledge of his or her own origins that non-adopted children may take for granted.
Conclusion

Birthmothers create stories as a sequence of written or spoken words that recount an event or series of events from a particular point of view. They are powerfully moving and represent the strengths and weaknesses of the storytellers. As adoption practices gradually change, the way participants in the institution of adoption interact and express themselves also changes. The era of closed adoption promoted silence and secrecy whereas the new open adoption model provides a social space for birthmothers to discuss the events that in many ways define them. Cyber communities allow for self-sorting groups which provide necessary support but are subject to social controls and groupthink in the same way traditional groups create conformity among members. Birthmother narratives provide an often disregarded voice in the adoption triad and are crucial in the overall understanding of adoption practices and in changing the way we transfer children.

Adoption has changed from an institution that finds homes for children to one that finds children for homes and the market is dependent on the availability of birthmothers to supply babies. The concept of open adoption provides a less painful option for women who are unprepared or unable to raise their children themselves but the contracts are only as good as the people who enter into them. The legal system has not caught up with the changes in the adoption process and many women are misled and manipulated into giving up their children with promises that were never intended to be kept. The image of adoption being a win-win solution to a social problem of unwanted children is deconstructed when we learn the problem is not the child, but instead the institution that preys on young, vulnerable, poor, frightened, and unsupported women who must contend with lifetime consequences for a choice she was unprepared, coerced, or shamed into making. Birthmothers who placed their children are pushing back against social pressures and social stigma that suggest they are irresponsible, promiscuous or heartless women and girls who gave up their children for their own convenience so they could go on with their lives and forget the child. Their narratives clearly state the ways in which their child is never forgotten and remains in a liminal state both inside and outside their daily life.

The ambiguous role of birthmother exists outside traditional public narratives of proper motherhood but they have increasingly seized agency by reconstructing their role as adoption moves from the shadows of secrecy. Open adoption avoids the fictions of closed adoptions, and allows birthmothers greater choice in the circumstances of relinquishment, the degree of relinquishment, and even choice in to whom they plan to relinquish their child. Conceptualization and construction of “ideal” motherhood for
women has changed in response to the change in social norms. Mothering and women’s roles as mothers are not natural, universal and unchanging, but instead they reflect the reorganization of social practices, including the way women who chose adoption navigate this choice. Birthmothers are demanding to move in from the margins and their narratives argue to be included in normative understanding of how proper motherhood “should” look: protective, caring, fighting for their children’s rights, and being available to the child when the child is ready. Birthmother narratives contain an explanation for relinquishment and stakes claim to motherhood in the absence of the child, pushing back against the devaluation of birthmother as an authentic and important category of motherhood.
Works Cited


