

# (M)othering Loss: Telling Adoption Stories, Telling Performativity

Stacy Holman Jones

*This piece explores how telling adoption stories—to and of birth mothers, adoptive mothers, and their children—perform both the failures of language and the pleasures of repeating and rewriting tales of birth and placement, of the fictions of families. I consider how adoption stories spin not only tales of loss and fractured identities but also open-ended narratives of self and parent-child relationships. I use the languages of adoption, feminist and poststructural theories of subjectivity and performativity, and my own experience of adoption and family to tell and tell on the adoption story. And I wonder an adoption story’s potential to (m)other loss and speak other narratives about adoption, its subject(s), and the force and possibility of storytelling.*

*Keywords: Adoption Stories; Subjectivity; Performativity*

The writing of the origin, the writing that retraces the origin, tracking down the signs of its disappearance, the lost writing of the origin. *To write is to have the passion of the origin.* (Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* 295)

It is an effort to articulate the mother’s fantasies, her desire, her stake in that project called “motherhood.” (Mary Kelly, *Post-Partum Document* xxi)

...what happens when a story begins in absence? (Della Pollock, *Telling Bodies/Performing Birth* 27)

## Conception

These stories begin with loss. They are conceived in abandonment,<sup>1</sup> generated out of emptiness. Wan and fragile, unable to succor their own, they work absence into hope. A twisted birth.

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These stories begin with loss. Mothers do the unthinkable. Only mothers could make such plans. Their children are pushed, pulled away by the force of want. For what? Food, money, support. Love. Not enough, never enough to sustain life after, outside. Lack and grief become birthmarks, indelible wounds.<sup>2</sup> Lack and grief create matching scars that become red and angry with each pulse after release.

Other women wait in white, sterile rooms, ready to make families out of such loss. Only women could presume to grow hope in the ruins of want. They no longer imagine the push of breath and pain.<sup>3</sup> These women are not selfless, saintly, good. They are greedy, impatient. Only flesh and bone—molecular miracles their own bodies cannot sustain—will satiate such longing.

Children become shadows in the entanglements of expectant women. Bodies are bartered; birthrights are gambled away in a game of increasing returns. A better life. A stable home. A family. Losses of increasing magnitude. Children become caught in an exchange of blood relations and names changed to protect . . . whom?

It comes down to naming, to language, to untold and unfinished stories. Birth parent. Biological child. Adoptive parent. Forever family. What was my name at birth? My *real* name? Where was I born? Who am I to her? Who is he to me? It comes down to naming, to a “language that assumes and is able to stage its own mode of disappearance.”<sup>4</sup>

Words pile up around these disappearances, repeating stories of desire and loss. Words searching for mothers and sons and daughters “who never existed.”<sup>5</sup> Looking for origins that are “nowhere in the record,”<sup>6</sup> nowhere in a word. Language fails to remember a lost identity. Stories forget the *nom de sin* by tracing selves in a speech that wells up out of an aching for love. Such languages, such stories, begin with loss. Don’t they?

## Initials

My grandmother’s name is Bernice. Her middle initial is *b*, though the letter doesn’t stand for a middle name. It is a placeholder for an absent signature, a name her adoptive parents did not provide. Instead, they gave her an initial, a letter, a beginning. I’ve asked my grandmother several times what her birth name was. I ask my grandmother this each time I see her, and each time she tells me, though later—now—I can’t remember this name. The *b* is a graphic reminder of the play of oppositions in her adoption story—“straight and round,”<sup>7</sup> an absent presence caught in the movement of “memory and forgetting,” birth and experience. The *b* traces a center, an unspeakable origin surrounded by repetition, play, change: a disappeared first name that is invariably invoked in its repetition. A signature of a failure to remember.<sup>8</sup>

She was adopted when she was young, a baby, but no longer an infant. Her adoptive parents—my great-grandparents—took her and her older brother. They wanted a boy and a girl, a matched set to love and to do chores on the farm. Or was it the other way around? Her younger brother, Jimmy—though this is not his given name either—was adopted by another family. My grandmother found Jimmy when

she was older. They had an on-again, off-again relationship: on when Jimmy needed a place to stay and pocket money, off when he moved on to some other state, some other job, some other marriage. Finally they just lost track of each other. I ask my grandmother if she knows where Jimmy is now. She says somewhere in California. This as we're driving through the Northern California wine country during her visit from Iowa. I ask my grandmother if she wants to find Jimmy again. She shakes her head, but does not speak.

She thought she'd found her father, too, long ago. She was sure she'd tracked her story to its source. She wanted to travel to the small Iowa town where her father was living. She wanted her father to meet her husband, to see her own round belly. She wanted to tell him she understood that he couldn't keep her. That she knew he couldn't take care of three babies abandoned by a mother who loved whiskey more than her children, her husband, her family. My grandmother wanted this connection with her father. She wanted to see her own reflection mirrored in his eyes, to trace the missing words of her life in the line of his jaw.

She wanted this for herself, but her husband would not permit it. He said no. He said leave it alone. He said nothing to gain, stirring up the past. He was her husband and she did as he asked. And now, her father and her husband long dead, my grandmother says she doesn't regret not meeting her father, not speaking to him. She says her husband was right. She says no good would have come of it. She knew who her parents were. She knows who she is.

I ask my grandmother to tell me this story each time I see her. Each time she tells me, I hope she will change the ending, hope she will say she wishes she would have defied her husband and sought out the stranger who once was her father. Each time we have this conversation, I hope she will recognize my desire for another story, a different narrative. Each time she says she knew who her parents were, that she knows who she is. I can't seem to accept this ending. I can't seem to remember how my own adoption story might begin with a child who knows who she is.

### **Patient/ce**

The adoption dossier is ready. It's been ready for a month, and still it hasn't been sent to the parent agency, which will begin the real waiting. So I wait to wait. Every week or so, I get a call about a needed document or a form to sign. My impatience with this process is at a fevered pitch. So many approvals to be had and no one can seem to explain how or why I must have them, at least not all at once.

Today I must produce an accounting of my infertility. My usual reaction to the now-familiar requests for information—pen in hand, ready to write, to provide—overwhelms my anxiety about producing this account, committing this story to words. I pull a thick file of medical records from the filing cabinet. I open my journal and begin documenting what is lost and what is found, what is understood and what is created.

***January 1994***

First exam and meeting with Dr. B. to discuss infertility. Dr. B. recommends sperm analysis, charting of basal body temperature, and targeting intercourse during ovulation. I tell Dr. B. my mother says graduate school has me too stressed to conceive. Dr. B. waves this suggestion away with a sigh and a sweep of his hand.

***February 1994***

My husband submits to a sperm analysis. Results: volume, motility, and count are normal. Every morning, I take my body's resting temperature before rising, connecting the dots on an erratic and imaginary course. We target intercourse during ovulation. I am unable to conceive and unable to seek further treatment. Or perhaps I am unwilling to do anything more, anything else. And yet—or perhaps instead—I consider applying to doctoral programs.

***May 1996***

I accept a teaching assistantship in a doctoral program. I finish my thesis and graduate. I do not actively try to conceive, but do nothing to prohibit it, either.

***August 1996***

Move to a new city. Begin work on doctorate. Unable to conceive. It is difficult to adjust to the new surroundings, new work life, new questions. Life is full and empty all at once.

***May 1999***

Finish coursework and move to another city. Begin again. Take part-time teaching position and make an appointment with Dr. K. to discuss infertility. Dr. K. recommends sperm analysis and a 3-month record of basal body temperature. Start process all over while completing qualifying exams.

***March 2000***

Dr. K. reviews basal body temperature records. Determines ovulation is occurring approximately day 14. Recommends a hysterosalpingogram to assess whether fallopian tubes are blocked. I schedule the procedure and then board a plane and fly over mountains and under cloud cover to defend my dissertation prospectus. Successful. Receive dissertation fellowship to support my work. As a seed and sign, this too is successful.

***June 2000***

Dr. K. performs hysterosalpingogram. I am terrified, alone. Dr. K. says both tubes are open, clear. Infertility now inexplicable. Refers me to Dr. M., a fertility specialist. Begin writing dissertation, but work stalls. I become obsessive about gardening and home repair projects. Dissertation waits; files untouched, chapters unwritten. Explanation for this behavior is, too, uncertain.

***July 2000***

Appointment with Dr. M. to discuss infertility. Orders Lab tests for CA-125, Chlamydia Serology, FSH, Lutenizing Hormone, Androstenedione, and DHEA. Results: normal. Prescribes Clomid for next menstrual cycle. I ask Dr. M. about stress, about how outlook and disposition affect fertility. He says I could be a heroin addict, a neurosurgeon, a mental deficient and my body—if it could—would get

pregnant without me. I wonder why, in Dr. M.'s logic, my body is disobedient and yet unmistakably connected to my self, unabashedly known to me in its unruly being, told and spoken as matter *and* meaning.<sup>9</sup> I wonder, but I don't say this.

As I am leaving the office suite, Dr. M. says, "We'll get you pregnant," a promise. He adds that, for some reason at this moment in the process—the inexplicable, experimental moment—it's the women who visit the specialists. He tells me this, but he doesn't say why.

**October 2000**

Take Clomid days 3-7 of menstrual cycle. Drug causes severe headaches. Result: not pregnant. Return to work on dissertation. Words come slowly, but they begin to emerge, almost by force or will, one after another on the screen.

**November 2000**

Take Clomid days 3-7 of menstrual cycle. Result: not pregnant. Dr. M. orders a post-coital test. I go alone to the appointment and am kept waiting for nearly an hour due to a difficult procedure at the hospital that delays the doctor's arrival. Result: sperm present, active, and mobile. Dr. M. invites me to see for myself by looking at the slide under the microscope. Humiliating, all of it.

**December 2000**

Take Clomid days 3-7 of menstrual cycle. Result: not pregnant. Dr. M. says we'll try again next year. At Christmas dinner, talk of my teenage niece, who is pregnant. Someone wonders aloud whether adoption is an option. Someone says I might make a good surrogate. My niece and I look at one another through lowered lashes.

**March 2001**

Continue taking Clomid and submitting to laboratory tests. Result: unable to conceive. Interview for assistant professor position thousands of miles from home. On the campus visit, I ask a member of the faculty how he balances work and childcare responsibilities. He says it just happens. Unable to conceive how this story might be mine, decide not to pursue further fertility treatment. Begin working diligently on dissertation.

**April 2001**

I am offered and accept the assistant professor position, promising to complete the dissertation before I begin. Finish chapters every few weeks throughout the spring.

**August 2001**

Begin position as assistant professor. Defend and submit dissertation. Celebrate 35th birthday. Consider inquiring about adoption, thinking I might make a good surrogate.

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I fax this inventory to the social worker, who calls minutes after the transmission. She says my account is fine, but it isn't complete.

No, I think, it isn't. It doesn't begin to fill in the fear, the pain, the cost, the hope. Possibility vanishes before fact. Productivity emerges out of disappointment.

The social worker says, "It doesn't state that you've given up trying to conceive a child, that you've accepted that loss and are ready to move on."

No, it doesn't. It doesn't prove that I've accepted loss. It doesn't promise that I am ready to love a child who was never, not once, a part of me.<sup>10</sup> What it promises is the fecund potential of bonds forged in the move among presence and absence, language and silence, abandon and desire. I tell the social worker I will try again.

### No Partum

How to story the fictions of a mother's desire? How to unsettle failed maternity as difference, as loss, as "resignation punctuated with protests"?<sup>11</sup> How to trace a rupture, a rent, a gap, a confrontation that create, in me, a desire to speak, the promise of another chance to tell?<sup>12</sup> How to begin again, to write a *no-partum document*?

How to write a no-partum document that still tells the subjective moment of a mother-child relationship, the intersubjective relationship of ideology, material practices, and discursive structures and strategies?<sup>13</sup> That tells too of a speaking, questioning subject. That questions whether feminism can do without a "subject" called woman,<sup>14</sup> a subject called mother. That traces the relationship of art making, politics, and subjective experience?<sup>15</sup>

Initially, you might get "caught up in the mother's story,"<sup>16</sup> the events that anticipate and constitute her relationship with a child, the development of mother-and-child. But this story documents more than the creation of a relationship. This story traces a mother's fantasies, her desires, her aching to have a "stake in that project called 'motherhood.'"<sup>17</sup> It consistently poses the problems of subjectivity, history, difference, representation, and resistance, though no resolution is inscribed. In sight.

Originally, you might get caught up in the mother's story, but you might also "picture" the mother, the child in this story as subjects of your own desire.<sup>18</sup> You might figure how this story tells of and tells on the stories you tell yourself about the subjects of art, politics, and experience. And you might wonder how this story generates and understands itself in/through/of discourses of origins, identities, and performativities—again and again and again.

You might tell yourself these things, initially and otherwise. And yet, what do you do when your story's incompleteness is deemed inadequate? When openness is judged as lack? How then to tell the story of motherhood, of mother-child relationships, of subjects of desire, without conceiving it, of them, as your own? Without experiencing it? Without giving birth? Such is the desire of this story, of these words, of this no-partum document. Such is the desire that consoles itself with the hope of words where bodies used to be, want to be.<sup>19</sup>

### Fertile

My grandmother accompanied me to the doctor's office that December when I was due to have my blood drawn for yet another pregnancy test. She was visiting over

the Christmas holidays. When we arrived at the medical complex, I asked if she wanted to ride the elevator with me up to the lab. She said no. She said she'd wait in the lobby.

When I returned, a bloodstained square of cotton taped into the bend of my arm, my grandmother was smiling. She was holding the trunk of a plastic weeping fig. The tree was lopsided and covered in dust. She told me a woman brought the tree into the lobby and asked if anyone wanted it. Asked if anyone wanted to take it home. My grandmother said yes on my behalf. I asked my grandmother what I should do with this plastic tree. She said, "You should clean it up and find a nice sunny place for it in the dining room."

## Telling

If you are adopted, a hush falls around you, the conditions of your move into the world and into language. Decisions are made about which stories to tell and which to keep silent, what to reveal and what to keep sealed. This hush is a pact, an unarticulated presence<sup>20</sup> that structures what is known and felt for all involved. It is an exchange—of noisy silences and seething absences<sup>21</sup>—for order, for something tangible and predictable: a family. This silence speaks the loss of a mother—a maternal body—over and over. There are no words of consolation.<sup>22</sup> You tell yourself as loss and lose yourself in the telling: I am adopted.

Or so I am told.

I ask my grandmother if she'd always known she was adopted. She says yes, and then reconsiders. She says she's known for so long that she feels as if it was always a part of her. But she remembers the day silence told her story. She was a schoolgirl—seven or eight or nine. A girl in her class—a mouthy, nosy girl—came running up on the playground and asked her,

*"Did you know you and your brother were adopted?"*

She didn't know what to say. Didn't remember if she said anything to this loud, prying girl. She doesn't think so. Instead, she waited. She waited for her brother after school and on the walk home she told him this story—the new story of their lives. She wanted to know what to do. Her brother decided she would ask their mother if it were true.

"Mother, a girl at school today said we were adopted. Are we?"

"What?"

"Adopted?"

*"Go ask that girl if she's adopted."*

That was the end of the conversation and the beginning of a story my grandmother would try to tell much of her childhood and into her adult life—the story of her birth, her beginnings, her self. It was a story she would return to, again and again, until she gave birth to her own daughter. After that, the story lost focus, desire. At least that's how my grandmother tells it.

Decisions about who to tell and what to say are made when there is seamlessness to incorporation and identification; when you look and act the part—a member of the

family. But when you don't—when you're too dark or too fair to fit—your story becomes arbitrary, public, subject to interpretation. This story is also a pact; an unarticulated exchange of what is *natural*<sup>23</sup> for what is *right*: the natural needs of often abandoned, often poor, often dark-skinned children are bartered against the rights of often childless, often affluent, often light-skinned parents.<sup>24</sup> The naturalness of a child's belonging—to a person and to a place—strains against the rightness of assimilation and wholeness.<sup>25</sup> Blood relations are a stain in stark contrast to the fabric of an “*as if*” family.<sup>26</sup> Beginnings are erased and origins contained in an abandoned elsewhere.<sup>27</sup>

Or so I am told.

### Adoption Story

The story of adoption, as told in the language of adoption, as told through the talk of theory: Adoption is a play of abandonment and abundance wrought in a tangle of words and bodies.<sup>28</sup> In this story, motherhood is both anticipated and denied, rights are claimed and relinquished, bodies are pushed away and clenched. Birth is vacated, made absent of joy and filled with abjection. Placement—finding and being received into a place, a home, a family—overflows with pleasure, with want, with anticipation. In this story, birth and adoption are staged in the move and split between language and drive, loss and plenitude.<sup>29</sup> Though there are other stories, other sorts of poetry written in the dance of mothers and their children, birthrights and adoption plans, hesitantly articulated decisions and pregnant promises.

The story of adoption as I want the language of adoption, as I want the talk of theory, to tell it: Birth performs the encounter of a speaking subject and the spark of life—the newly born and the body politic—in the passage of desire into sign and back. Julia Kristeva writes this encounter as an opportunity to reconceive maternity (and infertility) as more than lack, as more than fear, as more than a failed and contained desire to bear and keep the father's child.<sup>30</sup> Birth reestablishes—reasserts—the persistent and unruly connection between women and their mothers, the symbolic and the semiotic, in the choric womb of possibility.<sup>31</sup> Giving birth, a woman becomes a mother and reconnects with her own mother, with maternal desire, with the pleasures of woman-to-woman contact.<sup>32</sup> She is at once mother and child, at once a subject undifferentiated from the mother and child she bears in/through/of her self.<sup>33</sup>

In Kristeva's telling, birth becomes a whirl of “words and bodies.”<sup>34</sup> It is “feeling, displacement, rhythm, sound, flashes”<sup>35</sup> and fantasized clinging to the maternal body as a screen against the plunge into the symbolic. Birth breathes the force of life, of living bodies into the suffocating language of birthrights and paternal law. Bodies give birth to language and language to bodies in a pleasurable, “utopic force” that draws “together women, mothers, and their children.”<sup>36</sup> Birth becomes a moment and movement to break into and down and out of a search for origins. A moment and movement that doesn't ask where did I come from? Who am I? Instead, as Jacques Derrida might tell it, birth stories perform the lure, the passion, the pleasurable failure

of narrating beginnings. Telling such stories performs the power of revision, of play, of moving out of mourning and into . . . openings.<sup>37</sup>

Adoption too performs an encounter both symbolic and semiotic, an opportunity to reconceive maternity as always and only lack, always and only and a failed desire to bear the father's child, any child. And if Kristeva and Derrida were to tell this story, adoption is revolutionary and revisionary in the encounter of wombs barren and buzzing, in the stitching together of women, mothers, and their children. The adopted child's unconscious drives—orchestrated around a connection to and separation from a birth mother's body and a connection to and separation from an adopted mother's body—do more than trouble the purity of corporeal experience or the stasis of symbolic language, challenge the Oedipal story of conception, and/or create a “rupture in the social fabric” of culture.<sup>38</sup> Adoption manifests the nostalgia born of abjection and the pleasures that wend in through weep holes to pools of loss. Children, mothers, and surrogates identify with and desire an absent maternal body, imagining reunions in airports and conference rooms as fulfilling as the movement of conception and birth.<sup>39</sup> They play and replay these scenes on the screens of memory long before and after the moment of connection. The desires of maternity, of the women and children wrought and brought together in these scenes, are here . . . and gone, out *there* and *beyond*.<sup>40</sup>

A triplicity of mother, surrogate, and child, adoption is not staged in a semiotic womb *anterior to* (though touched by) or *on its way into* language—but is instead birth, afterbirth, and its repetition; a corporeal, symbolic, and desirous dance staged within and without the logics of symbolic law and the twisting glances of incorporation . . . rejection . . . identification . . . differentiation.<sup>41</sup> Adoption stories might thus be a *poetic* that functions to introduce through the symbolic the bodies that “work on, move through, and threaten”<sup>42</sup> stories of loss, empty and wounding beginnings. Adoption stories might underscore how subjects-in-process are always *speaking* subjects telling tales of experience as an-other-within, of selves we recognize as part of us but never completely our own.<sup>43</sup>

The challenge in telling such stories is to hold flesh and word close, so that bodies and lives do not become wounds or gifts, neither selves nor part of a self, objects destined to be subjects, others.<sup>44</sup> Mothers. Children. Not of me, not part of me, not my own. The challenge is to begin the story again and differently, to speak the poetry of “sign and rhythm, of representation and light,”<sup>45</sup> a whirl of words.

I lose.

## Difference

I tell my grandmother we've decided to adopt a Korean child. She says, “You'll make a wonderful mother.”

I tell my grandmother the things other people tell me: This child will be stubborn, good at math, and playing the piano. This child will like spicy foods. This child will be polite, with porcelain skin and obsidian hair. She—this child will be a girl because Asians want to keep their boys and throw away their girls<sup>46</sup>—will be lucky to have me

as a mother. Lucky to have a mother. My grandmother says, “Nonsense. You will be lucky to have each other.”

I ask her what she thinks about raising a baby who doesn’t look like me, of a relation whose difference will announce itself at the grocery store, the park, the neighborhood swimming pool. What I don’t ask is how our differences might tell, without speaking, a silenced separation, a “broken narrative” of birth, family, home.<sup>47</sup> Hearing what I don’t ask as well as what I do, my grandmother says, “That difference will be part of things, part of the story that you’ll tell, always, again and again.”

### Acceptable

*Dear Birth Mother,*

*We are pleased and grateful to be considered parents for your child. We understand that the decision to place your child for adoption is heartrending. We know that you will worry about your child’s growth and circumstances, and want to assure you that our primary goal is to create a safe, enriching, and loving home. We are excited about the challenges as well as the great joys of parenting. We are also humbled by your choice to allow us this opportunity to become parents and make a home for your child. We’d like to tell you about our life, our home, and ourselves. . . .*

I settle on these opening lines after several failed attempts. How can I write of an imagined mother’s grief inside of my own failed desires? How can I touch a place words will not go? Such is the “anxious desire” of the “Dear Birth Mother” letter.<sup>48</sup>

I write about family and parenting philosophies, home and hope. I bind this letter in between wedding photos and portraits of my husband and me holding other people’s children. I slide the carefully chosen words and images into an envelope and mail it into nowhere. I settle into a silent narrative, one in which a waiting mother sifts among hundreds of pleas until she sees the slim volume bound in gold thread, opens it, and finds a place, a mother for her child. This story seems impossible, and I know this isn’t how it unfolds, but I keep repeating it to myself, over and over. I keep repeating it so that one day I might believe that she *chose* me. Such is the desire that consoles itself with the hope of words where bodies used to be, want to be.<sup>49</sup>

The letter and photos arrive in the mail, returned. The album is too bulky, the letter too personal. It is acceptable to write, “I understand how difficult it must be for you to make the decision to make an adoption plan for your child.” It is not acceptable to write myself into that plan. I dismantle the album, tearing the handwritten pages from the binding, and begin again.

*Dear Birth Mother,*

*We understand that the decision to make an adoption plan for your child is heartrending. We also know that you hope your child will be placed with a family that will provide him or her with a safe and happy home. . . .*

I reassemble the album with an abrupt letter detailing age, education, occupation, and hobbies. Gone are the personal references, the multitude of photos, the gold

thread. This revised, rescripted, pallid assemblage is now acceptable. I begin waiting again, absent the scene of a mother choosing. Instead—now—I wait my turn.

Another envelope arrives in the mail and I am certain the album is inside, returned again. Anger makes my skin hot and my fingers clumsy as I tear at the package. It is not the album. It is a letter from the social worker saying, “I am enclosing just one more form! Please fill it out honestly.” I put the letter aside and ready myself for the request, pen in hand. It is a list of final conditions:

We understand that there is a 1% legal risk that the baby could be returned to the Korean birth parent at his/her request after we have accepted the Child Referral, but before the baby has been brought to the U.S.A. We understand that some babies may have a complicated birth or be born with some minor correctable medial condition. . . .

And a list of medical conditions we can, if we choose, agree to consider:

	Yes	No
Prematurity	—	—
Cleft lip and palate	—	—
Club foot	—	—
Missing limb/extra digit	—	—
Child 11 months to two years of age	—	—
Heart murmur	—	—
Other (please specify)	—	—

My hands begin shaking and I drop the pen, a weapon with which I must inscribe, calculate, choose. Everything is acceptable. And nothing.

## Letters

Dear. . . .

I want to write something for you, to you. I want to write you into presence, feel you breathing through my fingertips. I begin composing letters, uncertain about how to speak to you, of you. I don’t yet know you, know how to say your name. Words do not come in the spaces of anticipation, save a desire to remember our earliest memories, our beginnings. I worry you will want these words someday and find them inadequate, wanting. I cannot conjure your past or satisfy your longing for story. I cannot imagine the details of your beginnings or the tearing away. I cannot bear the thought that, when you are grown, you might speak and know and write as a child who mourns the death of a mother, of a *self*.<sup>50</sup> And yet I am willing to believe in a love, in a story wrought in language, rather than lack.<sup>51</sup> I am willing to have a part in making a life “besieged by ghosts” and “haunted by questions,”<sup>52</sup> for in such spectral spaces we might transform a shadow of existence into an undiminished life.<sup>53</sup>

I want to write something that begins with loss so that you will know what I fear to know and become, to love, and yes, to lose. And I want to write something that doesn’t

end in loss, but instead figures another sort of presence, caring, and yes, separation, into existence. I want to write something for you, to you, of you, and so I begin again.

Dear. . . .

### Assignment

I miss the moment of your arrival. Not your arrival into the world, but your arrival into mine. I am out, sunning myself on a Florida beach. My husband is away in California taking meetings. Absent, I don't have word of you for three days. The social worker tracks us through phone calls to relatives, finally leaving an urgent message on cell phone voice mail. When my husband calls from California, I can hear him breathing fast, the waver in his voice.

"What? What is it?"

"It's a boy."

A boy. I drive to the social worker's office alone. My head is buzzing.

I sit across the desk from the social worker, who smiles and pushes a stack of photos toward me. There you are, tiny and startled, straining to hold your head up, looking right at me, waiting. And I am late.

The social worker gives me your medical records—cesarean birth, hospitalized for jaundice for three days, developing well and normally. She also tells me your mother's story—abandoned by her father at birth, by her mother at eight. Raised by her grandmother. Left home at fourteen and went to work in a sewing factory. An affair at seventeen, though she didn't tell him about you. She tried—*wanted*—to make a home out of will and the force of her body. *She wanted you*. This is the story the social worker tells. It is your story, your mother's story, my story, her story.

I leave the social worker's office with your pleading eyes and a story of your birth, your life. We have twenty-four hours to accept or reject the placement; to accept or reject you.

Rejection.

Acceptance.

I was wrong. Rejection doesn't happen at the moment of birth—the moment of separation from a mother's body or the moment language moves on our tongues or the moment we realize this language isn't enough to keep us from our worst fears. No. Rejection happens in the moment of acceptance—of loss, of separation, of love.

### Telling Again

As Kristeva tells it, bodies give birth to language and language to bodies in a pleasurable, utopic force that draws together women, mothers, and their children in a moment of unseen recognition. As Kristeva tells it, birth becomes a moment and movement to break into and down and out of a symbolic search for origins.

Though, as Judith Butler and Della Pollock (and others) point out, this utopic force might also be an empty space, a "glance from nowhere"<sup>54</sup> that exists and takes place outside of and prior to language.<sup>55</sup> The moment of recognition in such birth stories might lose sight of individual women, mothers, and their children inside the need

to know maternity in its public and symbolic functions and to understand women and children as social, speaking beings.<sup>56</sup> The movement to break into and down and out of a symbolic search for origins might speak maternity as a story unraveling in the pleasures of psychosis, the privileges of poetry, a melancholy compulsion to re-produce heterosexual relations of desire.<sup>57</sup> Such stories of birth—and of adoption—are fragile, obedient, tenuous. They are hardly subversive in a culture parsed from repression, misplaced maternal dependence, displaced homosexuality, unnamed racism.<sup>58</sup> Maternity becomes an impossible pleasure, a biological dead-end that might, in the telling, become the very origin of a desire to give birth, to create,<sup>59</sup> to have a stake in that project called motherhood.<sup>60</sup>

As I want to tell them, adoption stories create a poetic in which bodies work on, move through, and threaten—which *tell on*—stories of loss, empty and wounding beginnings. Adoption stories underscore how subjects-in-process are always *speaking* subjects telling tales of experience as an-other-within, of selves we recognize as part of us but never completely our own. Yet they are also unable to conceive a *natural* childbirth, of a real or true mothers and children returning, again and again, to the pleasurable interiority of maternal *jouissance* or a mother's body displaced and dispersed as nation, in culture. . . .<sup>61</sup>

Telling again: Adoption performs another sort of becoming. Staged in the interstices of bodies, births, and words, adoption revises the fiction of a natural and abiding mother-child relation. In and through the painfully, materially real and true acts of conception and childbirth, adoption speaks the absence of *real* or *true* mothers. Real or true children.<sup>62</sup> Real or true birthplaces, homes.<sup>63</sup> There are no sure selves, no foundational bodies of *being* (mother . . . child . . . family) in adoption, only boundaries tenuously, impossibly maintained.<sup>64</sup> In questioning the abject ex-pression me/not me, not of me/not mine,<sup>65</sup> adoption stories are *performative*. They are a doing and a thing done, a whirl of acts and actions staged and witnessed in space, time, and history.<sup>66</sup> They are promises and pacts, public proclamations suffused with grief, joy, absence, and hope.

Adoption stories provide the necessary scene, the material-discursive *matter* of adoption.<sup>67</sup> They emerge in and through their performance. Situated in a moments of “increasing *unquiet*,”<sup>68</sup> they are the enactments through which adoption begins and persists in its “*presencing*.”<sup>69</sup>

### **Birthday**

On your birthday, I light four candles. One for you, one for your birth mother, and one each for your adoptive parents. I don't use language of adoption and say, “forever family.” I tell you the story of your birth as I know it. I show you the photos of your first year—the months with a foster family, your arrival at JFK, your early moments at home. My words weave a life story out of what cannot be known, yet can be spoken, felt, understood, told.

A “child's self is centered in a past known only because” it is spoken by others. It is a self borne of memory in the telling. Mothers make and remake their children's

“identities and being in the world” in the telling of and on their origins, “in stories whose originality is renewed in each (re)telling.”<sup>70</sup> Their repetition spins a sureness about beginnings while destabilizing the myth of origins and playing through and in the pleasures of bodies and becomings. These stories gather force and matter in their performative command,<sup>71</sup> in the possibilities of their making. Told in the shift and flash of “mother and child, mother and mother, self and other,” birth stories speak selves at the moments of their meaning.<sup>72</sup>

Adoption stories radically contextualize<sup>73</sup> the meaning and movement of just how birth stories speak selves. Generated out of loss and in spite of absence, such stories move in and through telling and experience, story, and performance. They tell a mother-child relation in a story through which talk of beginnings, identities, bodies, and desires are “articulated, structured, and struggled over.”<sup>74</sup>

Our stories—yours and the stories of your children and your mothers—may begin with loss, may be marked by shame and absence, may be shadowed in mourning. But as we tell and retell them, as we perform them on the stages of our own desire, they become something else, something other. In their becoming—in the ways they (m)other loss—adoption stories speak a telling performativity.

### Third Person

You are toddling now, and talking. *Telling*. Language rushes over your tongue and into the spaces of your days in ways that both exhilarate and frustrate. You refer to yourself in the third person, pushing autobiography into a steady discourse of you-in-the-world: “Look at Noah. Noah was born in Korea. Noah lives in Florida. Noah is adopted.” And then, always, a sudden shift in perspective. “Are you adopted, too?”

If you were born into the language of loss, into a discourse of lack and discipline, your speech disrupts the search for origins, the desire of responsibility, the laws of reference. And you are *telling*, not only of maternal fantasies or the constant replay of separation and loss,<sup>75</sup> but also of your own will to know and to create and to speak. May your desire have no end. May it resist normalization, ignore biology, and disperse the body and the spirit.<sup>76</sup>

### (De)Partures

What is telling here, in the stories of birth and adoption as I read them in theory, in story, in my own experience? What have I produced in my telling of/in/on adoption stories? First, that adoption stories are spaces and stages for negotiating the performance/performativity dynamic. If performance is both “a doing and a thing done”<sup>77</sup>—a presencing and a presence—adoption stories are telling discussions of how known origins, given identities, and stable homes come to constitute the very ground from which we create notions of self, family, culture, and critique.<sup>78</sup> They are *particular* performances that, in their self-conscious construction, raise questions about the relationships among bodies and identities, rights and responsibilities, institutions and effects. In their performance, in their telling over and over again, adoption stories put

these relationships into play and at risk.<sup>79</sup> In this way, adoption stories are *aporetic*. Inclined to doubt and uncertain where to begin, they raise objections about the *very nature* of maternity, birth, and the language we create to talk about parent-child relationships, about familial connections.

Second, adoption stories provide a moment for telling how writing figures in the iteration of performance and performativity, bodies and embodiment. Such stories depend on a “belief that language can do as well as be.”<sup>80</sup> They take pleasure in the impossibility of distinguishing between where a story begins and where it ends<sup>81</sup> and where any one telling might take us. If performative writing brings the performance-performativity dynamic to moments in which identities and experiences are constructed, interpreted, and changed, adoption stories tell the ways in which maternal fantasies, memories, discourses, and desires<sup>82</sup> have a stake in that project called motherhood.<sup>83</sup> And while such stories might begin with loss and are flushed with shame, they unfold in the tripled movements that loss and shame make: toward painful decision making, toward the impossibility of any simple or natural maternal connection, toward a refigured and renewing relationality.<sup>84</sup> In this way, adoption stories are *parturient*, always about to bring forth, to produce—a relation, an idea, a chance for a new telling.

Third, adoption stories create an opening for spinning out the tale of a postfoundational, posthumanist, postpsychoanalytic subject *of/for* feminism. Lacking the fiction of a bodily, maternal connection or a self-same mother-child relationship constituted prior to outside language, adoption stories suspend the quest for origin stories, interrogate the fear-in-loss borne in the move to language, and shift notions of how we might (and do) subvert and resist symbolic law and Oedipal fantasies from self-defeating (if playful) poetic interruptions into more productive spaces of intervention. In this way, adoption stories are *labyrinthine*. They enact an intricate struggle in which bodies are inextricable from minds, matter is entangled with meaning, and praxis is a “differential becoming.”<sup>85</sup>

### Afterglow

She is on a step stool, pressing yellow fluorescent stars into the textured ceiling. She bends down and receives the star that her small son has peeled up from the sticky contact sheet. He is focused tightly on this task. Only after he carefully places his chosen star in the palm of her open hand does he look up and meet her eyes. He smiles. She steps up and presses, then bends down to receive his next offering. They repeat this pattern all about the room, creating a field of starry outlines to receive the daylight and, later, to illuminate a night sky.

When they turn out the lamp that evening, he asks why the stars aren't glowing. She tells him that lighting a sky takes time. The stars must take in the energy around them. He asks if the stars are empty. She tells him they aren't empty, only waiting. She tells him that tomorrow night the stars will be out, all aglow.

When his breathing slows and turns heavy, she eases her arm from underneath his small body. She stands up and watches him, not yet ready to leave. She bends and

reaches to pull the blanket up over his shoulders. He stirs, then rolls over. Yellow stars are pressed into the white cotton of his pajamas. They trace a constellation over his round belly and down his strong legs. They are ablaze with light.

## Notes

- [1] Yngvesson writes that one of the two predominant stories in the world of intercountry adoption is the story of abandonment (7).
- [2] My language is drawn from (and revises) Verrier, who describes the separation of biological mothers and their children as a “primal wound.” She notes, “Many doctors and psychologists now understand that bonding doesn’t begin at birth, but is a continuum of physiological, psychological, and spiritual events which begin in utero and continue throughout the postnatal bonding period. When this natural evolution is interrupted by a postnatal separation from the biological mother, the resultant experience of abandonment and loss is indelibly imprinted upon the unconscious minds of these children, causing that which I call the ‘primal wound’” (1).
- [3] My language is again inspired by and comments on Verrier’s words. She writes, “Very few parents seek counseling previous to adopting, perhaps thinking that having a baby will obviate the need for such work. Yet there is certainly much work to be done. Not only do prospective adoptive parents need to examine the impact infertility has upon them. . . .” Verrier goes on to advise adoptive parents to “work through their own issues of abandonment and loss in order to be adequately able to help their adopted children work through theirs.” She continues by writing, “And altruistic adoptive parents, who have children already and just want to provide a family for those ‘poor abandoned children’ need to examine their motives and expectations more closely” (2–3).
- [4] Baudrillard 192.
- [5] Adapted from Flax, whose text reads, “They search for mothers who never existed, whose names are nowhere in the record” (5).
- [6] Flax 5.
- [7] Kelly writes of a child’s text as a “fetish object” that inscribes and thus replays the differences and separations of the Oedipal complex (*Post-Partum* 188). Elsewhere Kelly writes, “In having the child, in a sense [a mother] has the phallus. So the loss of the child is the loss of that symbolic plenitude—more exactly the ability to represent lack” (41). This post-partum loss is created in the child’s move into identification and language. She writes that the letter b (along with p, d, and q)—inscribes “straight and a round” figures, “pairs of graphemic oppositions [that] designate the symbolic function of presence and absence in a double movement of memory and forgetting.” She continues by saying that the text as gift (as fetish object) “unfolds the child’s desire to-be-what-she-wants-him-to-be; but the letter constructs the cannot-be of his autonomy and instigates the unexpected pleasure of deferment” (188).
- [8] These lines are inspired by Derrida. He writes, “The first book, the mythic book, the eve prior to all repetition, has lived on the deception that the center was sheltered from play: irreplaceable, withdrawn from metaphor and metonymy, a kind of invariable first name that could be invoked, but not repeated” (296).
- [9] Barad writes, “materiality is discursive (i.e., material phenomena are inseparable from the apparatuses of bodily production; matter emerges out of and includes as part of its being the ongoing reconfiguring of boundaries), just as discursive practices are always already material (i.e., they are ongoing material reconfigurings of the world). . . . The separation of epistemology from ontology is a reverberation of a metaphysics that assumes an inherent difference between human and nonhuman, subject and object, mind and body, matter and discourse. *Onto-epistem-ology*—the study of practices of knowing in being—is probably a better way to think

- about the kind of understandings that are needed to come to terms with how specific intra-actions matter” (822, 829).
- [10] This is taken from Kelly’s description of weaning as parallel to an infant’s move to identification (as in Jacques Lacan’s mirror stage). She writes, “It is this identificatory movement of the child towards an ideal which mediates his/her anaclitic and primary relationship to the mother (or a part of her body) and subsequently inscribes a sense of lack in her because it threatens her own Imaginary identification with the child as someone who was once part of her” (*Post-Partum* 40).
- [11] Kelly, *Post-Partum* 189.
- [12] My language in this line is drawn, again, from Kelly, who writes that the separation of mother and child “articulates a rupture, a rent, a gap and a confrontation . . . in which the dialectic of desire . . . transgresses the system of representation in which it is founded. The construction of femininity as essentially natural and maternal is never finally fixed but forever unsettled in the process of articulating her difference, her loss. And it is precisely at such moments that it is possible to desire to speak and to change” (*Post-Partum* 189).
- [13] Kelly, *Imaging* 22.
- [14] Butler writes, “I began with the speculative question of whether feminist politics could do without a ‘subject’ in the category of women” (*Gender Trouble* 142).
- [15] In addition to reflecting my own (and this essay’s) interests in how personal narrative and performative writing might constitute an aesthetic *and* political practice, my language here references Kelly’s reflections on *Post-Partum Document* in her more recent *Imaging Desire*. She writes that when the work was exhibited at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London in 1976, it was staged within the “rupture” of feminist thinking and the women’s movement and avant-garde art making. She notes, “identity’s unruly content—sexual difference—had divided the field, not only of feminist debate within the movement, but also of critical practice within the institutions of fine art” (*Imaging* xv).
- [16] Kelly, *Post-Partum* xxi.
- [17] Kelly writes, “*Post-Partum Document* . . . is an effort to articulate the mother’s fantasies, her desire, her stake in that project called ‘motherhood’. In this sense, too, it is not a traditional narrative; a problem is continually posed but no resolution is reached. There is only a replay of moments of separation and loss, perhaps because desire has no end” (*Post-Partum* xxi).
- [18] Kelly writes that *Post-Partum Document* aspired to “‘picture’ the woman”—as mother, as a representation of femininity and of sexual difference—“as subject of her own desire” (xii).
- [19] Oliver writes, “In the traditional psychoanalytic model of both Freud and Lacan, the child enters the social realm and language out of fear of castration. The child experiences its separation from the maternal body as a tragic loss and consoles itself with words instead” (“Introduction” xxi).
- [20] This phrase is inspired by Williams (135). Williams describes a structure of feeling as that which articulates presence. Like Kristeva, Williams is working to theorize the relationship between language and matter, feeling and thought, rhythm and logic, the personal and the social.
- [21] Gordon 200. Gordon is riffing on Williams’s notion of structures of feeling as a haunting, the “tangled exchange of noisy silences and seething absences.”
- [22] Oliver xxi.
- [23] My use of the opposition of “natural” and “right” is taken from Guillaumin’s writing on the evolution and workings of modern racial categories and, in turn, racism (77-80). She notes that, beginning in the nineteenth century, conceptions of race are based on “natural” or phenotypical characteristics and are used to create scientific, legal, and social relations that operate on an oppressor-oppressed model. The correctness or “rightness” of such relations hinges on the “natural” distinctions among races and as such enacts a dialectic of nature and right: “An ideology or interpretation of reality which balanced the *right* of the oppressors against the *nature* of the oppressed” (79).

- [24] Volkman, "Introduction" 2.
- [25] Yngvesson 9.
- [26] Volkman, "Introduction" 2–3.
- [27] Volkman writes of, specifically, "early-era" Korean adoptees placed with families in America: "The past was erased or contained in an abandoned 'there'; the racialized trace of origins tended to be treated as manageable" ("Introduction" 2).
- [28] Barthes writes, "Any episode of language which stages the absence of the loved object—whatever its cause and its duration—and which tends to transform this absence into an ordeal of abandonment" (13).
- [29] Kristeva describes the symbolic as linguistic sign and the semiotic as a forceful, pleasurable, insistent, and expressive desire that troubles the sign even as it informs its creation and representation ("Motherhood" 304; see also Kristeva, *Revolution* 40).
- [30] Kristeva characterizes this lack as the "symbolic paternal facet," contained in a mother's "desire to bear the father's child." She contrasts this lack—as described by Freud—with the "homosexual-maternal facet," which she characterizes birth as a reunification (identification) of women with their mothers, though here Kristeva is speaking generally about women, childbirth, and discourses of maternity rather than about individual women and their mothers ("Motherhood" 303).
- [31] Kristeva, *Revolution* 27. Kristeva's *chora* is a space—a womb—that contains trace and mark of the unconscious and its ineluctable drives and energies. These drives, which are organized around the infant's connection to and separation from the mother's body, mediate between the biological and the social in a space anterior to symbolic language.
- [32] Kristeva writes, "By giving birth, the woman enters into contact with her mother; she becomes, she is her own mother they are the same continuity differentiating itself. She thus actualizes the homosexual facet of motherhood, through which a woman is simultaneously closer to her instinctual memory, more open to her own psychosis, and consequently, more negatory of the social, symbolic bond" ("Motherhood" 303).
- [33] Kristeva, "Motherhood" 303.
- [34] Kristeva, "Motherhood" 303.
- [35] Kristeva, "Motherhood" 303.
- [36] Pollock writes, "I remain moved by Kristeva's sense that maternity is a utopic force, drawing together women, mothers, and their children—male and female—in the deep and sensual renewal of their lives together" (*Telling Bodies* 59).
- [37] Derrida explores and interrogates the notion of an originary identity or subjectivity through his theory of writing as *differance*, as difference deferred, always a "double origin plus its repetition" (299). If a sign is apprehendable as a sign only in its repetition (its *beginning as repetition*), Derrida asserts that a search for origins—for a "natural site" or "natural center"—is both part of the impulse to write and a failed, yet playful and powerful attempt to (re)produce experience. He writes, "Rendered hopeless by repetition, and yet joyous for having affirmed the abyss, for having inhabited the labyrinth as a poet, for having written the hole, 'the chance for a book,' into which one can only plunge, and that one must maintain while destroying it" (298). The repetition of adoption stories—to and for and from birth mothers, adoptive mothers, adopted children—is such a hopeless and joyous search to write (and tell) the (w)hole story of birth and placement, the chance for a family. This project posits such stories as an abyss one must plunge into and strive to maintain, while at the same time repeating and rewriting these stories with the "power of perversion and subversion" and the serenity that comes by "remaining open, by pronouncing nonclosure, simultaneously infinitely open and infinitely reflecting on itself" (296, 298).
- [38] Pollock writes, "As I understand Kristeva, the maternal body is a rupture in the social fabric always already about to happen" (*Telling Bodies* 58).

- [39] Kristeva writes, “in order to separate from their mother’s bodies females must separate from themselves as women; and in order to maintain some identification with their mothers as the bodies of women females carry around the ‘corpse’ of their mothers’ bodies locked in the crypts of their psyches” (*Black Sun* 28-29). Kristeva writes that the rejection of the same-sex (homosexual) desire of women for and with their mothers creates a melancholy and repressed desire for an abject maternal body. Where Kristeva focuses on the relationship of women and their mothers, I am suggesting that adoption creates, among other things, a dynamic of abjection and melancholic desire for mothers, children and surrogates.
- [40] Adapted from Derrida, who writes, “the time of writing no longer follows the line of modified present tenses. What is to come is not a future present, yesterday is not a past present. The beyond of closure of the book is neither to be awaited nor to be refound. It is *there*, but out there, *beyond*, within repetition, but eluding us there” (300).
- [41] This relationship is meant to evoke Kristeva’s conceptualization of the signifying process as an exchange among semiotic, symbolic, and significance (see *Revolution* 41), and Derrida’s use of triplicity, a “double origin plus its repetition. Three is the first figure of repetition” (299).
- [42] Kristeva writes that the function of poetic language is to “introduce through the symbolic that which works on, moves through, and threatens it” (*Revolution* 81).
- [43] Oliver writes, “Even if the mother is not the subject or agent of her pregnancy and birth, she never ceases to be primarily a *speaking* subject. In fact, Kristeva uses the maternal body with its two-in-one, or other within, as a model for all subjective relations” (“Kristeva and Feminism” par. 12).
- [44] Adapted from Kristeva, who, writing of the symbolic paternal (which she contrasts with the homosexual-material), notes, “It is an appeasement [of the desire to bear the father’s child] that turns into melancholy as soon as the child becomes an object, a gift to others, neither self nor part of the self, an object destined to be a subject, an other” (“Motherhood” 303).
- [45] Kristeva, “Motherhood” 306.
- [46] This perception is due in large part to the creation of the “one child” policy in China in 1979, which mandated that couples limit themselves to one child in order to limit population growth. This was, according to Volkman, often a “‘one son/two children’ policy: parents were allowed to try for a second child—a son—if the firstborn was a daughter” (“Embodying” 33). Enforcement measures for the policy (which included fines for “over-quota” children, sterilization, and the threat of forced abortions) and social pressures led to a marked increase in abandonment of baby girls, crowding China’s state-run orphanages and, in turn, an explosion of transnational adoptions of the (mostly) infant girls. This perception, along with the preference for girls among most adoptive parents (see “Gender Preference”), has meant that, according to my social worker, other countries have trouble placing boys. Thus, some agencies, including those facilitating Korean adoptions, have mandated that no gender preference may be stated by adoptive parents (at least for the first child placement with a given family).
- [47] Lifton 11.
- [48] My phrasing is drawn from Derrida, who writes, “Such is the anxious desire of the book” (298).
- [49] Oliver, “Introduction” xxi.
- [50] Adapted from Verrier, who writes, “for the child abandonment is a kind of death, not only of the mother, but of part of the Self, that core-being or essence of oneself which makes one feel whole. In acknowledging this loss and its impact on all involved in adoption, there is no way one can get around the pain: the pain of separation and loss for both the child and the birthmother, and the pain of not understanding or being able to make up for that pain and loss on the part of adoptive parents” (6).
- [51] Kristeva questions Lacan’s ideas about desire and signification, noting, “This desire, the principle of negativity, is essentially the death wish. . . . [The] subject’s desire is founded on drives . . . that remain unsatisfied, no matter what phantasmatic identifications desire may lead to because, unlike desire, drives divide the subject from desire. . . . Desire will be seen as an

always already accomplished subjugation of the subject to lack" (*Revolution* 131). Rather than view a subject's desire as fulfilled only in sublimation of the drives to language (and thus to lack, castration, death), Kristeva proposes that we view language as (always already) "mixed with the drives" and subjectivity as fluid, in-process, and exceeding the death wish or any other static and nonresistant construct. Rather than view subject and sign as impossibly and forever separate, Kristeva wants to reunite language and body, life and death, desire and signification—though, again, not into a unified, stable whole but in temporary and shifting moments of connection.

- [52] I am quoting Helen Hill, an adult adoptee, who observes, "We are besieged by ghosts. . . . We are haunted by questions" ("Tracking Down Mom" 64).
- [53] Adapted from Gordon, who writes, "Because ultimately haunting is about how to transform a shadow of a life into an undiminished life whose shadows touch softly in the spirit of peaceful reconciliation" (208).
- [54] Ricoeur 266.
- [55] Butler writes, "It is unclear whether the primary relationship to the maternal body which both Kristeva and Lacan appear to accept is a viable construct and whether it is even a knowable experience. . . . The multiple drives that characterize the semiotic constitute a prediscursive libidinal economy which occasionally makes itself known in language, but which maintains an ontological status prior to language itself." She continues by saying, "Moreover, Kristeva describes the maternal body as bearing a set of meanings that are prior to culture itself. Her naturalistic descriptions of the maternal body effectively reify motherhood and preclude an analysis of its cultural construction and variability" (*Gender Trouble* 80).
- [56] See Pollock, *Telling Bodies* 58–59; and Oliver, "Kristeva and Feminism" par. 12.
- [57] See Pollock, *Telling Bodies* 60; Butler, *Gender Trouble* 88.
- [58] Butler, *Gender Trouble* 89–90; see also Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 167.
- [59] Butler, *Gender Trouble* 88–90.
- [60] Kelly, *Post-Partum* xxi.
- [61] Adapted from Volkman, who writes, "In the absence of the mother's body, the longing for origins may be displaced onto the body of the nation and its imagined culture" ("Embodying" 42).
- [62] I am referencing the oft-repeated opposition of biology (biological parents, biological children) as more "real" and "true" than the bonds forged by adoption and my own attempts in this essay—and elsewhere—to intervene in, play with, and move outside of such constructions, much in the same way Butler questions a biological and foundational subjectivity in *Gender Trouble*. Butler writes that if gender is performative, "then there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured (original); there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction" (141). Yngvesson echoes the difficulties that distinctions of true/false, real/distorted, inner/outer introduce for theories of adoptive subjectivity in her critique of how the "roots" adoption story in which "identity is associated with a root or ground of belonging that is *inside* the child (as 'blood,' 'primal connectedness,' and 'identity hunger') and unchanging" works with and against an identity "*outside* the child in the sense that it is assumed to tie her to others whom she is like (as defined by skin color, hair texture, facial features, and so forth). Alienation from this source of likeness produces 'genealogical bewilderment' and a psychological need for the adopted child to return to where she *really* belongs" (8).
- [63] Yngvesson writes, "The search for roots . . . is part of a familiar story of belonging and of lost belongings in which an alienated self must be reconnected to a ground (an author, a nation, a parent) that constitutes its identity" (13).
- [64] Adapted from Butler, who writes, "If the body is not a 'being,' but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated. . . ." (*Gender Trouble* 139).

- [65] Butler writes that Kristeva's "construction of the 'not-me' as the abject establishes the boundaries of the body which are also the first contours of the subject." (*Gender Trouble* 133). For Butler's discussion of Kristeva's abject, see 133-34.
- [66] Diamond 2.
- [67] Barad writes that "matter comes to matter through the iterative intra-activity of the world in its becoming. The point is not merely that there are important material factors in addition to discursive ones; rather, the issue is the conjoined material-discursive nature of constraints, conditions, and practices" (823). This observation is helpful for me to conceive and write of the intersecting "material" and "discursive" facets of adoption stories.
- [68] Volkman writes, "adoption, like other forms of transnational kinship, is situated in a moment of increasingly unquiet, crisscrossing migrations" ("Embodying" 51). The emphasis on *unquiet* is mine.
- [69] Of birth stories Pollock asks, "But what happens when a story begins in absence. . . . What happens when 'the boundary becomes the place from which *something begins its presencing*'?" (*Telling Bodies* 27). This is echoed in Yngvesson's discussion of how "roots trips" (during which adoptees "return" to their "home culture") "interrupt the myth of the return as a form of completion or fulfillment in which one can find oneself in another (be consumed by another) at a place or point of fusion. . . . Rather, interruption 'occurs at the edge or rather it constitutes the edge where beings touch each other' (quoting Jean-Luc Nancy)."
- [70] Pollock writes, "[A child's] self is centered in a past she knows only because we tell her. We perform her. We make and remake her foundational sense of identity and being in the world in the reiteration of stories of her origin, in stories whose originality is renewed in each (re)telling" (*Telling Bodies* 68).
- [71] I am referring to the distinction that J.L. Austin makes in *How To Do Things With Words* between constative and performative utterances, where constative utterances *refer* to actions and performative utterances *are* actions (6). Austin gives a wedding vow as an example of a performative utterance—saying "I do," is the act (the doing) of marriage. A constative utterance, by contrast, represents or refers to an action—"I heard them say 'I do.'"
- [72] Pollock writes that birth stories, because they are narratives, are open, "vulnerable to variation and reinvention." These stories charge "the self and its (internalized) others with the possibilities of becoming (otherwise). [Birth stories] do not reflect an originary moment as much as [they] mirror back and forth images of the mother and child, mother and mother, self and other, in the act of looking, each into the other, for the grounds of their respective identities" (*Telling Bodies* 69).
- [73] Langellier writes, "personal narrative performance is radically contextualized: first, in the voice and body of the narrator; second, and as significantly, in conversation with empirically present listeners; and third, in dialogue with absent or 'ghostly audiences'" (127).
- [74] Langellier 128.
- [75] Kelly, *Post-Partum* xxi.
- [76] Adapted from Kelly, who writes, "desire has no end, resists normalization, ignores biology, disperses the body" (*Post-Partum*, xxi).
- [77] Diamond 1.
- [78] Diamond writes, "as soon as performativity comes to rest on a performance, questions of embodiment, of social relations, of ideological interpellations, of emotional and political effects, all become discussable" (5).
- [79] Diamond writes, "When performativity materializes as performance in that risky and dangerous negotiation between a doing (a reiteration of norms) and a thing done (discursive conventions that frame our interpretations) . . . we have access to cultural meanings and critique." (4-5; see also Pollock, *Telling Bodies* 256n1 and 260n10).
- [80] Stucky xii; see also Gingrich-Philbrook vii.

- [81] Phelan asserts that performative writing “Animates the “impossibility of maintaining the distinction between temporal senses, between an absolutely singular beginning and ending, between living and dying . . . [and] the generative force of those ‘betweens’” (8; see also Pollock, “Performing Writing”).
- [82] Pollock writes that telling birth stories, women “became themselves *becoming* . . . subjects, narrators, actors, given, possible, impossible, intolerable selves. They subjected themselves, and me, and you, to often unnerving, transforming articulations of memory, discourse, desire” (*Telling Bodies* 7).
- [83] Kelly, *Post-Partum* xxi.
- [84] I am shamefully borrowing from and adding to Sedgwick. Speaking of how shame interrupts and creates identities and relationships, she writes, “That’s the double movement shame makes: toward painful individuation, toward uncontrollable relationality” (37).
- [85] Barad writes, “We are part of the world in its differential becoming” (829).

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