'I knew who I was not, but not who I was.' Public storytelling in the lives of Australian adoptees.

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Abstract

A central focus of Monash University’s History of Adoption in Australia project was the creation of an online repository of self-generated life stories from those who had been touched by the adoption experience. There are currently seventy-three stories online, forty-four of which come from adoptees, thirty-seven of whom are local. These generally speak in a confessional mode from a position of grief, suffering and a pervasive sense of betrayal. There are also audio interviews with seven intercountry adoptees, whose life stories are framed somewhat differently. This paper will explore the distinguishing features of this select group of intercountry adoptees’ stories, how they express the indeterminacy of transnational identity and redefine concepts of ‘home’ and ‘family’.

Key words: intercountry adoption, transnational identity, dislocation, duality, public story-telling

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'I knew who I was not, but not who I was’.\textsuperscript{1} Public storytelling in the lives of Australian adoptees.

In February 2012, the Australian Federal Parliament released the report of an inquiry into the ‘Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption’\textsuperscript{2}. The inquiry drew extensively on accounts offered by birth parents (typically in their 50s to 70s) and of adoptees now in their 30s and 40s. In so doing, the committee recognised the need of people affected by adoption and particularly those scarred by trauma to have their stories heard and their experiences acknowledged and respected. Subsequent public discussion and media interest has highlighted adoption as a defining life experience of compelling power. This experience is often linked to grief, pain and anguish on the part of mothers and children forcibly separated by the policies of governments and public institutions. While the term ‘forced adoption’ has primarily been used to describe the experience of mothers separated from their children by adoption, adoptees are also coming to claim it as their own.

Between 2009 and 2012, Monash University undertook a major research project, funded by the Australian Research Council, to investigate the history of adoption in Australia. A central focus of this project was the creation of an online repository of self-generated life stories from those who had been touched by the adoption experience: adoptees, adopting parents, parents who had lost their children, and professionals engaged in managing these processes. Investigators imagined that the creation of such a website could serve both as a research tool and a place where hidden and silenced life stories and experiences could be openly and publicly shared and validated as well as being made available to a global audience. They thought that the processes of telling and recording would also offer insight into the ways in which particular groups of people reconstructed and framed their life stories and into the
agency those stories acquired through the act of public performance. The study thus sits at a nexus of history, memory, and autobiography.³

The website currently has 73 online contributions. Forty-four contributions are from adoptees, 37 of whom (the overwhelming majority) are local adoptees, and the remainder are intercountry adoptees. The central concern of this article is to explore the online life stories of this select group of seven intercountry adoptees against the context of the rather differently framed narratives of the local adoptees, with a view to identifying their distinguishing features.⁴

**The role of trauma and the need to speak out**

The local stories are mostly written or spoken by the adoptees themselves, who all self-selected to participate in the project. Self-selection is an important defining element. Clearly for these contributors there is a correlation between the need to come forward, apparently in the hope that some form of resolution can be achieved through the very act of speaking out, and by the active engagement of a public audience. As a result, the website elicited a skewed sampling: those who felt an impulse to tell their stories were mostly seeking resolution of some kind, or moral and in some cases judicial restitution and this shaped their stories in ways that are discussed below.

In ‘Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation’ Alcoff and Gray argue that ‘speaking out’ can empower victims to act constructively … and thus make the transition from passive victim to active survivor’. In their view ‘the experience of speaking out is transformative as well as a sheer relief’.⁵ It would seem therefore that interactive websites such as that supporting the Monash project help to frame particular types of life stories. They offer the
opportunity for some individuals to publicly express their pain and sorrow, apparently in the hope that some form of resolution can be achieved through the act of public revelation and having their stories heard. Most of the local adoptees speak in a confessional mode from a position of grief and suffering and a pervasive sense of betrayal. The knowledge that they were ‘adopted’ becomes in itself a central and often damaging experience. For example, one male adoptee describes the effects of discovering ‘by accident’, at the age of 38, the fact that he was adopted:

In the fifties adoptive parents were advised not to tell the children they were adopted, so I never knew, never had a clue and found out by accident when I was 38. It slipped out during a conversation with an aunty. I was devastated, angry, confused, wanted to abuse everyone in the family. They all assumed that I knew and the subject was never brought up … The day I found out, my Father had already passed and my Mother was in a nursing home with dementia, so she couldn’t answer any questions. I suffered and had a mild nervous breakdown.

This is not always the case. As Elaine Heeney recalled about her experiences of being an adopted child, ‘I had two wonderful parents, three grandparents and an uncle, plus numerous cousins of my father, seventy-two in all, although I only knew twenty on a personal level. Mum had a much smaller family of cousins but I knew all of them very well too. My uncle married after the War and eventually I had five cousins’. Heeney also seems to be reconciled to her adoptive status: ‘Socially I had very little problems, the odd comment I either ignored or responded with a curt comment [of my own]’. However as far as the stories on the Monash History of Adoption website are concerned, Heeney’s experience is the exception rather than the rule.

The intercountry adoptees differ from the local ones in that their stories have been recorded by an interviewer who sought them out, rather than being voluntarily offered to the website. The emphases and lacunae that emerge from the recorded interviews may therefore reflect as
much about the approach of the interviewer as the lived experiences of the interviewees, though it is also relevant to note that the interviewer was himself an intercountry adoptee.

In sociological terms, the interviewer is very much an insider—that is, located within the population under inquiry. Dominic Golding (Nguyen Hong Duc) left Vietnam in 1975 as a war orphan and was adopted by an Australian family. More important than his insider status as interviewer within this subject group, however, is the fact that the members of such groups are primarily telling their stories to each other. Although interviewee and researcher Indigo Williams Willing has also articulated and explained aspects of the transnational adoptee experience for a wider readership, it is the sharing of issues of identity and belonging with a community of people of similar background that has provided the most significant opportunity for personal growth and resolution for many of these intercountry adoptees. While ‘local’ adoptees in the Monash University sample speak ‘out’, this cohort of transnational adoptees turn ‘in’.

There are currently seven intercountry adoptee stories on the website. Of the seven, five are female and two are male. All are similar in age, being born in the early to mid-1970s, and all were adopted as babies. Five are Vietnamese, one is Malaysian and one is Nepalese. After several unsuccessful appeals to existing internet groups of intercountry adoptees the Monash researchers decided that the only way these stories could be accessed was by enlisting the services of an interviewer who was already known to his subjects. The role of social media in the creation of ‘virtual diasporic’ communities is in itself a significant feature of the self-identification of intercountry adoptees, especially the Vietnamese, and has become a base for a certain kind of activism, one to which we will return shortly.
All participants were therefore invited to participate by the one interviewer. The structure and the content of the interviews—all one hour audio files—are very much mediated by the interviewer, whose questions focus on the adoption process and the search for birth origins and cultural heritage. Although they are heard as first person accounts, they are not ‘self directed’ autobiographical narratives, but are structured by a mediator who acts as facilitator and convenor. The role of the interviewer therefore forms part of the way in which these life stories are framed, as part of a negotiated dialogical process. So, for example, the interviewer does not probe relationship issues with the adoptive parents. Nevertheless this issue does reveal itself in the interviews, although, unlike those of the local adoptees, it is not spoken of in anguished terms of grief and suffering. On the contrary, interviewees often express great love for their adoptive families and the support they have been given.

It is possible that the selection of participants has resulted in a certain uniformity of response: these are well-adapted, educated middle-class Australians who are thoughtful and articulate about their life experiences; several of them are actively engaged in professional or community activities for the benefit of other intercountry adoptees. Writer Dai Le, who spent five years researching a documentary on Operation Babylift, screened on SBS television (Australia) in July 2005, has described a more varied and probably more realistic outcome for this group of intercountry adoptees:

‘Originally I thought it was great that these kids were saved’, she says. ‘But as the research went on, it emerged that a lot of these kids struggled with the issue of identity, with being uprooted.

‘A lot of them felt the impact of the physical difference from the often white family they grew up in. Some said, “I have to make the most out of my life and move on”, but many went through very hard times.

‘It's a mixture—some are happy, some are OK, and some are very damaged’.
Natalie Cherot, in her study of Vietnamese adoptees in the USA, alleges that for them there is potentially a degree of trauma associated with the fact ‘of having missing pieces of past and memory as related to war’, not to mention the loss of homeland culture. This judgement seems relevant to only one of these intercountry adoptees, who has undertaken a nine-year search for what she calls the ‘truth’ about her birth origins. Her quest has obsessive features that seem to suggest a degree of anguish, if not actual trauma. She has travelled to Vietnam five times and and interviewed a wide range of people including a Vietnam war veteran and various Vietnamese officials. Her search has led her to conclude, in the face of widespread falsification of records, that only DNA testing will provide convincing proof. But even in this case it would seem that the acknowledgement and resolution of traumatic early childhood experiences is not the driving preoccupation of the intercountry adoptees; characteristically they admit to having few memories of early childhood in their birth country. By contrast with the local adoptees, there is little in the narratives of this cohort of intercountry adoptees of the anguished sense of loss and anger concerning the circumstances of their birth and subsequent adoption. These do not present as trauma narratives. There is little of ‘confession’ or ‘revelation’ either. Rather these intercountry adoptees express the indeterminacy of their identity, their sense of self as adult adoptees and the complex, negotiated relationship between their feelings for their country of birth and their home and family in Australia. Their stories are shaped by a search for ‘who they are’ which may be a transformative and sometimes troubling process, but is rarely traumatic. Moreover, when these intercountry adoptees speak out to a larger audience, they speak to others like themselves, linking into networks of global ‘virtual’ communities in which they find cultural connections and commonality of experience that facilitates self-validation. As Kim Nguyen Edgar tells us, the members of these virtual families are ‘Brothers and sisters, not by blood but by circumstance’.
However, in spite of the constraints and circumstances imposed by the interviewing process, the method of participant selection and the degree of mediation by the interviewer, these interviews inform and reinforce some significant findings regarding intercountry adoption in Australia. Our analysis finds six additional key points of contrast between these and the stories of domestic Australian adoptees: lack of secrecy, visible difference, rescue narratives, dissonance and dislocation concerning notions of ‘home’ and ‘family’, conflicted identity and ‘double consciousness’.

### Lack of secrecy

In *Other People’s Children*, Helen Riley discusses the psychologically damaging issues surrounding ‘late discovery’ adoption with locally adopted children. In particular she highlights the problems associated with ‘secrecy’ as part of the ‘closed’ adoption system of the past. A domestic female adoptee who recorded her history on the Monash website tells us that when she found out that she was adopted she ‘became depressed and developed anxiety while at the university, attempting suicide in the second year’. Her adoption was ‘hidden’ and never spoken of for years. In her words, ‘My (adoptive) parents did not do anything about my obvious distress, and neither did I. Our household was full of secrets’. As all the intercountry adoptees in this study are visibly ‘different’ to their ‘family,’ adoption could never be a secret. One adoptee summed it up, ‘it was obvious, as I was Asian and my parents were Caucasian’. Adoption was therefore never spoken about but rather viewed as an accepted fact. She has no ‘issues about being abandoned’. This reinforces Riley’s view. Lack of secrecy is a strength, not a weakness. As there was no point of ‘disclosure’ and no ‘revelation’ there was no sense of betrayal. Adoption has always been openly discussed and
acknowledged, and has occurred in an environment in which, perforce, openness about the fact of adoption is a given.

Visible Difference

Looking different from their families was, however, a difficulty for Asian adoptees. Riley writes of the importance of ‘resemblance talk’ as ‘an accepted form of public discourse and a social convention that legitimises the child as part of the family and is part of the process of constructing the child’s identity within the family’. Resemblance talk was not an option for these transracial adoptees, who, moreover, as Indigo Williams Willing recounts, ‘entered Australia at a time when multi-culturalism was just beginning’, a time when ‘race patrolled the cultural homogeneity of the nation’. In the mid-1970s Australia was just beginning to shake off the effects of its restrictive immigration policy, the so-called White Australia Policy, one of the aims of which had been specifically to exclude Asian immigrants. Based in the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901, the White Australia Policy was at once an immigration policy and a nationalist doctrine aimed at ensuring and preserving Australia’s ethnic and cultural links to the British mother country. The policy’s racist underpinnings created harsh conditions for non-Europeans living in the country, and anti-Asian sentiments did not immediately disappear when Al Grassby (Immigration Minister in the Whitlam Labor government) announced its demise in 1973. As Ien Ang has written in a different context, the identity of these intercountry adoptees as Asians thus placed them at the centre of Australian anxieties about race. Vietnamese adoptees have a particular place in the push and pull of early Australian acceptance of Asian immigration, since it might be argued that the Vietnam war brought Asia to Australia and the years that followed the fall of Saigon saw the plight of Vietnamese boat people become an international humanitarian crisis that
impacted directly on Australia, where 94,000 Vietnamese refugees were accepted between 1976 and 1986, including some 2,000 that arrived by boat.\textsuperscript{18}

It was their identity as \textit{Asians} rather than as adoptees, together with the historical moment of their arrival, that was most troublesome for this group, suggesting that race and cultural difference may sideline adoptedness in the identity negotiations of this group. Williams writes of ‘feeling unique and isolated’ as a child; Simon Keogh now sees that the identity crisis he experienced at puberty, with its associated anger and emotional turmoil, was directly linked to being Asian in a white society and a common experience for kids who look different.\textsuperscript{19} \textbf{INSERT PHOTOGRAPH AS FIGURE 1 HERE} Several experienced racial slurs and taunts as children growing up in neighbourhoods where few Asians lived in Australia, ‘their home country’. Jen Fitzpatrick grew up in Kyabram, a Victorian country town, where she was the only Asian at her primary school, as was ‘Catherine’, a Malaysian adoptee born in 1975, who contributed semi-anonymously to the website.\textsuperscript{20} Catherine’s mother had recourse to the old adage about sticks and stones and told her daughter ‘you’re Australian’. Fitzpatrick describes her parents’ efforts to help her with her early social difficulties. Her mother tried to fix things, but her father was tougher, telling her, ‘It could be worse; deal with it’. Accordingly she learned to handle difficult experiences by herself and places high value on her resilience. When she later met and married an Australian man with a deep love of Asia and its people and culture, she arrived at a unique symbiosis. As she describes it: ‘He is white on the outside and Asian on the inside; I am Asian on the outside and white on the inside’. Their children live comfortably with both possibilities and she relishes their mixed-race appearance, ‘not just plain white Caucasian’. But modern Australia is a very different place: Fitzpatrick notes the ‘huge mix of cultures’ at her children’s school.
To hear the voices of these adoptees is to understand what she and others mean when they say ‘I am only Vietnamese/Asian when I look in the mirror’. At the same time, it is their voices that betray them as not properly belonging to their country of birth. In her study of intercountry adoptee narratives, Kim Gray reports the experience of one of her informants, My Dung, on returning to Vietnam:

… when we landed in Saigon, I really felt I was going somewhere familiar and I felt really comfortable being there. I could walk down the street and be just like any other Asian and not be looked at sideways, but as my brother said, ‘my cover was blown’ as soon as I spoke. After this experience I really identified as an Asian/Australian. I felt sad though, that I had missed out on that culture and wondered what it would have been like if I’d have stayed there.21

Ambiguity arises in both situations: in Australia, these adoptees (and their adoptive families) saw themselves as ‘Australian’ in a society which was not yet ready to accept this without question; in birth countries, adoptees were distanced by language, and by social and cultural experiences. So where do they belong? Ien Ang an academic of Chinese descent living in Australia expresses this ambiguity as both dissonance and opportunity: ‘if I am inescapably Chinese by “descent”, I am only sometimes Chinese by “consent”’.22 The quest for an integrated sense of self characterises the life narratives of this group of intercountry adoptees, often as a response to the socially-imposed identity that their Asian appearance invited at a time when Asian faces were still novelties on Australian streets. ‘Do you use chopsticks?’ ‘Do you speak Chinese?’ ‘Have you been back to Vietnam?’ ‘Where are you from?’ were some of the questions these adoptees encountered. Responses were often ambivalent: ‘Should I go back?’ ‘Why should I go back?’

**Rescue narratives**

Child rescue is perhaps the most pervasive socially-imposed trope in the life narratives of intercountry adoptees. This is hardly surprising, since ‘the rise of intercountry adoption is
entwined with the annals of modern geo-political and environmental disaster’. The ‘rescue’ narrative is particularly attractive to governments of ‘receiving’ countries that sanction practices of overseas adoption and to parents who have adopted children from overseas. There are three written submissions on the Monash website from Australian mothers who have adopted children born overseas in which rescue and rehabilitation is a key motive. In telling her story, Emma Anderson often employs religious tropes; the name of her adopted Ethiopian daughter, ‘Grace’, invokes its own Christian connotations. Not atypically, Liz Peter, the third contributing mother, describes her adopted Thai son Samuel as ‘Our Angel’. Rescue is redemptive, and not just for the children, but for infertile parents yearning for family and enduring the long travail of the formal adoption process that can lead to ‘paper pregnancies’ which last for years. Although Anderson chose Ethiopia for entirely pragmatic and practical reasons, there is no doubt that ‘rescue’ played a definite part in her choice of her child:

[Grace] was sitting on a mat picking up crumbs from the ground next to her. This place was not an orphanage as such. It is a transition home. Grace had skin hanging off her bones, a bloated stomach and a blank stare. She had been found at a police station in Agaro (Jimma region) at 9 months, weighing only 3.5kg. By now at 11 months she weighed 6kg. They had fed her an egg every day, given her formula and some medicine with vitamins. Apparently they also wormed her, but judging by the 15cm worm that I pulled out of her mouth in December after a coughing fit, the worming was not effective. I agreed straight away to adopt her and picked her up for a cuddle.

Grace was a child with mild special needs, and Emma speaks passionately about the situation of neglected children in Ethiopia:

Anyone who has ever been to Ethiopia, worked with an aid agency or orphanage linked with Ethiopia knows that no matter what the press, the government and the agency’s tell you, there are tens of thousands of kids between the ages of 1 and 10 that are living in orphanages or on the street without family contact. There are 4 million orphans but that number includes children up to 18 and who still
have other family contact. I don’t know the exact number that have no family contact or who are under 10 but even if it was only 20% of those orphans that is 800,000 children.26

Marian Jacobs is another adopting mother who speaks of the benefits to the child:

I believe ultimately it would be the best for the children if they could have stayed with their birth parents in their home country. But we all know that the reality of poverty, relinquishment and abandonment create a situation where it is best for the child to be raised by a loving family.27

Scholars see the use of the rescue trope as contentious and coloured by heroic myths of salvation in which the needs of the children merge with or are sometimes subsumed into the self-interest of prospective parents, and notions of rescue are superimposed on the realities of removal, severance of homeland ties and cultural bereavement.28 However, it is not our purpose here to provide a critique of this very problematic trope, but to examine briefly how it might impact on the life narratives of the adoptees themselves.

At first glance, it might seem that this group of adoptees is comfortable using the same trope, with individuals expressing gratitude for the ‘good’ life they have been given in Australia. Simon Keogh, adopted at the age of four months from a Vietnamese orphanage by a Melbourne couple in 1973, felt lucky to have been adopted and to have experienced what he sees as a ‘better life’. As a result he has resolved to ‘give back to society’ through voluntary work he now undertakes with different adoption agencies. Ironically this sense of gratitude is often reinforced after adoptees have returned to their countries of birth and seen the standard of living there.

For Vietnamese adoptees whose adoption occurred in the 1970s, however, rescue narratives are embedded in complex narratives about a highly contentious war and the need to redeem a public relations catastrophe involving loss of life and disastrous long-term after-effects for
American and Australian servicemen. Two of the Vietnamese adoptees on the Monash website arrived in Australia as part of the Saigon baby lift of April 1975. Operation Babylift, as it became known, was one of the largest mass overseas evacuation of children since the Second World War and marks a major turning point in the history of Australia’s official intercountry adoption programme. The Babylift occurred in two stages, as part of a larger operation instigated by the US in response to pressure from humanitarian organisations working in Vietnam. As a result of intense lobbying by individuals (including politicians), church groups and adoption organizations and in what could be described as an act of political opportunism, the Australian government organised the airlifting of nearly three hundred children in two flights out of Vietnam just prior to the fall of Saigon on 30 April. The public response was enormous: six hundred applications were received when fourteen children were available for adoption in New South Wales alone. In the case of the Monash cohort of Vietnamese adoptees, the Babylift is spoken of as a defining moment, a point of demarcation; they were either a part of the Babylift or they came before or after it.

Historical emphasis on the Babylift operation, enhanced by the publication of the memoirs of Babylift volunteers, those individuals who assisted with the evacuation of orphans, has had the effect of highlighting the lives of Vietnamese adoptees as ‘saved babies’ while glossing over their lives as adult adoptees. At the same time, volunteer memoirs may contain the only information adoptees can access about their early childhood since they themselves may have no memory of it. The online social network Adopted Vietnamese International (AVI), dedicated to Vietnam War adoptees, was launched in 2000 following the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Babylift and is convened in Australia by Indigo Williams Willing, one of the Monash interviewees. It provides a space and a forum in which members of the Vietnamese adoptee community can tell their own stories, identify as part of the online
collective and create their own commemorations. In Cherot’s words, members contribute to a community space to ‘weave various Vietnamese adoptee life stories and construct them into claims-making narratives to contend with competing accounts of their adoption history’. By confronting and contesting the rescue trope and asserting what Ien Ang calls the ‘complicated entanglements, of living hybridities’, Vietnamese adoptees make an ownership claim to their own life narratives. Membership of an online community does more than break down isolation; it gives adoptees agency and a voice among competing claimants who have historically appropriated the right to speak in the best interests of the children. Public storytelling in this sense becomes an enabling political act.

Rescue narratives rationalise adoption practices by focussing attention on presumed needs of children in crisis in Third World countries, essentialising adoptees as victims. Adult adoptee advocates redirect attention to the lived consequences of displacement, nuancing and complicating the individual responses of a group of people who happened to share an early experience of ‘profoundly destabilising events’. Action has become activism in the lives of some of these contributing intercountry adoptees. In addition to her volunteer activities within the adoptee community and the formation of AVI, Indigo Willing has devoted her professional life as a scholar and writer to the exploration of themes of migration, race, identity, transnationalism, and the limitations and constraints of cosmopolitanism. Jen Fitzpatrick, a former Adoption Officer with Adoption Services Queensland, is co-Founder of the IAC Group and was Adoptee National Representative in 2011 for the National Intercountry Adoption Advisory Group (NICAAG), providing advice to the federal government on intercountry adoption. Simon Keogh does voluntary work with various adoption organizations and serves as a policy adviser to concerned government departments.
Dissonance and dislocation concerning notions of ‘home’ and ‘family’

Indigo Willing sees Vietnamese orphans’ ‘sense of identity as marked by feelings of lack of authenticity’. For the seven intercountry adoptees in the Monash study a spectrum of complex identity tensions about what constitutes ‘home’ and ‘family’ are revealed. Jen Fitzpatrick felt no real connection with her birth country (Vietnam) even after visiting there: ‘It is just a place where I was’. At the same time, she is ‘immensely proud’ of being Vietnamese—a pride that is nurtured by her husband’s enthusiasm for Asia—and identifies as such, even though she is close to her Anglo-Australian family. It was only after meeting other Asian students at university in Queensland that Fitzpatrick felt that she ‘really belonged’ in Australia. There, her contact with international students gave her an appreciation of her unique position as an Asian Australian. The international students accepted her as one of them, as Asian, but valued her understanding of Australian society and culture. Simon Keogh ‘felt like an outsider’ on returning to Vietnam, while Kim Nguyen Edgar ‘wants to return to find a little more of myself’.

A variety of motives supported the decisions of this cohort of intercountry adoptees to return to their birth countries. Some went in response to the pressure of social expectations that they would wish to do so; others were driven by curiosity. High levels of anxiety often accompanied the decision to undertake such journeys. The female Nepalese adoptee (Anonymous 13) wrote eloquently of the emotional roller-coaster she experienced on returning to Nepal: ‘incredible, exciting, distressing, frustrating, a ridiculously incredibly hard thing to do’. Unlike the Vietnamese adoptees, this woman’s birth family had been found; she returned to a clan of more than three hundred relatives, many of whom ‘felt like they knew me and I felt like they were complete strangers’.
Historians including Karl Weintraub, Laura Marcus and Sidonie Smith discuss three key features of the historical development of autobiography: the 'conversion', the 'confession' and the 'apology'. All these features are structured around a point of transformation, a moment in the reconstruction of a life that centres on change and revelation. This point of transformation could be an ‘event’ that enables the storyteller to make public a private crisis—such as that experienced by relinquishing mothers and local adoptees—by speaking out at public enquiries, and by giving their stories to a public website. These are potentially enabling, transformative events that aim to impart meaning and understanding of past practice, in this case that of ‘forced adoptions’. These crisis points are seen as moments of enlightenment, seen from a vantage point beyond the experience, reaching from the present into the past to establish coherence, reconciliation and re-education. To reach such a moment requires a high degree of reconciliation and soul-searching. Arguably many adoption storytellers do not reach such a positive moment of ‘enlightenment’ (rather one of inconsolable grief), but they do undergo a sense of anguished soul searching in their attempt to reconcile the past with the present.

James Goodwin claims that 'confession' is a ‘baring of the soul, heart and mind’, whilst an 'apology' serves to vindicate one's own actions and beliefs often in the face of official censure or public controversy. It implies no admission of guilt on the part of the author. As far as the Monash group of contributing relinquishing mothers are concerned, there is a pattern of transformation that also gives them agency and allows them to reclaim the moral ground, one from which they had previously been displaced. For the local adoptees speaking out arises from an impulse to resolve a point of crisis (often of betrayal). For the intercountry adoptees, the moment of enlightenment revolves around some form of cultural recognition, one that may or may not be linked to the return to a birth country which they do not really know, and
where language, customs, lifestyle and standard of living can appear as significant obstacles to connection. For Kim Nguyen Edgar, it was his contact with other Vietnamese adoptees, people who had had the same experience, which was healing. Only one of the Monash contributors, ‘Anonymous 12’ from Nepal, has managed to establish a relationship with her birth family and homeland, but even she feels unable to develop a true sense of cultural connection and kinship. And she feels reluctant to try and do so due to what she sees as ‘cultural challenges’, ‘different value systems’ and ‘different lifestyles’ which conflict with her own. Her solution is to maintain a space between her two families, which allows her ‘to create of it what I will’. ‘Searching is a rocky road’, she warns, ‘there is no guarantee you will like what you find’.

**Conflicted Identity, ‘double consciousness’**

European scholars of adoption tend to identify ambiguity as a problem for adoptees. Barbara Yngvesson sees the lived experience of adoption as a constant unresolved tension between what and who this ‘real’ (this ‘us’) and this ‘meant-to-be’ consist of. All seven intercountry adoptees share a conflicted sense of identity to some degree by virtue of being visibly different to their adoptive family and host environment while still being very much a part of them, and by the circumstances of their birth and subsequent adoption, but this does not seem to be a ‘damaging’ experience as such. The Nepalese-born adoptee commented that while she was confused about her identity and felt ‘freaky’ having another family, she identified with and loved her adoptive family.

Rather what emerges is an opportunity to explore points of difference and issues of transnational identity. Ien Ang sees these points of difference as ‘a space of complicated entanglement, of together-in-difference’, one that is interconnected and intermingled, where
‘economies, cultures and people intersect’ and where ‘confluence of cultural difference and diversity has become increasingly routinized’. Volkman understands intercountry adoption as being an experience of a transnational nature where ‘new geographies of kinship’ are established. All adoptions that cross borders of culture, race, ethnicity, nation and class are, in Volkman’s words ‘shaped by … contradictions and ambivalence’. As Simon Keogh, one intercountry adoptee participant put it, ‘I felt like an outsider in Vietnam but also like I had come home’. Transnational adoption therefore raises important questions about belonging, race, culture and subjectivity. Issues of ‘belonging’ and ‘not belonging’ are central to the experiences of intercountry adoptees; contradictory narratives emerge where the issue of ‘exclusive belonging’ (a term employed by Yngvesson) can never be established and therefore no sense of a single identity can exist. As Kim Nguyen Edgar expressed it, ‘I am a child of two different worlds’.

**Not confessional stories**

The stories of intercountry adoptees on the History of Adoption website reveal no sense of betrayal, no sense of guilt and no sense of shame at being adopted. They harbour no resentment, anger or bitterness about the circumstances of their birth and their adoption. There is no search for moral restitution although some feel sorrow at the thought that their birth mothers were put into such a predicament. In some cases, the search for the ‘truth’ about an interviewee’s birth circumstances was frustrated by inadequate or inauthentic record keeping in the country of origin. Similarly, there is a real paucity of literature or research on the plight of the relinquishing intercountry birth mothers or their families. *I wish for you a beautiful life* is a collection of poignant letters written by relinquishing Korean birth mothers in one of the many maternity homes that existed for single girls awaiting the birth of their child. The letters were written as a means of helping the girls deal with giving up their
babies but were never actually delivered to the children. The letters show that in the social context of Korean society and under an oppressive political regime where there was total secrecy surrounding the circumstances of the birth of their children and no support structures, there was absolutely no choice other than relinquishment, silence and erasure. The mothers’ voices are diminished and in most cases erased. Is there a connection here? Do these interviewees not express the same sense of maternal abandonment that marks local adoptee discourse because the voices of their birth families have been so clinically erased?

Conclusion

All adoptees search for their past in an attempt to better understand themselves and the circumstances of their birth and relinquishment and their stories have a generic shape. For local adoptees this often focuses on finding their birth mothers. For the intercountry adoptees, as evinced by the narratives on the History of Adoption website analysed in this article, it is a search for an integrated sense of self, which may include a return to the country of ‘birth’ as an important element. However, in her contribution to Other People’s Children, Kim Gray cautions against uncritically accepting the ‘search and reunion’ metanarrative which sees intercountry adoptees undertake return trips to their country of birth as mandatory for a ‘healthy’ and ‘positive’ identity.48 Not all the individuals in the present sample have chosen to explore the circumstances of their relinquishment and determine their birth origins. Unlike the local adoptees, for whom the search for the birth mother is often all-absorbing, questions surrounding the circumstances of their birth do not always present as urgent for this group. Only one has found her birth mother (in Nepal) and did so reluctantly at the behest of her adoptive mother. For those who have undertaken this search, all express a frustration at the lack of information available, poor or falsified records and the inability to find answers.49 On the other hand, all seven intercountry adoptees have undertaken life journeys as adults back
to their country of birth to understand better their cultural origins, and their inability to establish strong cultural ties features largely in their accounts of the experience. Does the pursuit of cultural heritage supplant the need to pursue familial origins? Or is it part of the ‘entanglement’ that cultural indeterminancy presents?

The different adoption experiences of intercountry adoptees have led to specific types of searches for identity and family. As ‘outsiders within’⁵⁰, these people inhabit a unique and unusual cultural space; according to Kim Gray, they live within a framework of ‘ambiguity and ambivalence’.⁵¹ Their lives are framed and defined by a sense of cultural duality, of identities that express varying degrees of ‘togetherness-in-difference’ along a continuum of possibilities, as individuals negotiate and navigate new pathways through their sense of ‘belonging’ and ‘not belonging’, according to their personalities and resilience. The Monash interviewees found that their differing degrees of conflict within their search for personal identity were not always resolved by returning to their birth countries. These ‘return’ journeys often produced more questions than answers, more conflicts and inconsistencies than resolutions; rarely did they offer ‘closure’. What emerges in the case of these intercountry adoptees, who experience the tension between displacement and opportunity, is an imperative to evaluate what they perceive has been lost and what has been gained, perhaps in the best case scenario to realise the possibilities of transnational identity as part of an ongoing life long process.

Several of the interviewees studied here have found some comfort and social location within their own ‘virtual’ diasporic communities, created out of a sense of kinship and a sharing of stories with other intercountry adoptees, whether or not from the same country of origin. These virtual communities largely owe their existence to a fortuitous concurrence of the
global technologies of the Internet and the historical impetus of Vietnam war commemorations. The very act of the public sharing of stories within these particular communities—whether face to face or internet communities—in itself creates a strong sense of immediate contact that provides social cohesion. At the same time each storyteller lays claim to his or her own history in a unique and individualised way. Public story-telling is here an act of profound personal consequence and political agency.

1 Anonymous storyteller 15, Monash History of Adoption website. The website may be found at http://www.arts.monash.edu.au/historyofadoption/ with a further link to the storytellers’ page at http://www.arts.monash.edu.au/historyofadoption/storytellers.php. All quotations from website contributions are used with permission.


4 Interview with the authors, March 2012.


10 Sue Bylund interviewed by Dominic Golding (Nguyen Hong Duc) for the Monash History of Adoption website, 2010. The list of story-tellers and access to online interviews may be found at https://confluence-vrc.its.monash.edu.au/display/hoa/Stories+about+the+adoption+experience+in+Australia

11 Kim Nguyen Edgar interviewed by Dominic Golding for the Monash History of Adoption website, 2010. The importance of adoption communities is well-established in the ICA experience. Internet technology and social media participation, however, have facilitated a transnational, global expansion of historically limited local networks, and there is a growing body of research on these developments. See, for example: Luciano Paccagnella, ‘Getting the seats of your pants dirty: strategies for ethnographic research on virtual communities’, Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication vol 3 no 1, 1997, pp 1-24, at http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol3/issue1/paccagnella.html; Williams, L. 'Downloading heritage: Vietnamese diaspora online', paper delivered to the international conference Media in Transition: Globalization and Convergence,

Theoretical speculations on the nature of such a cyber-community lie beyond the scope of this article, but see, for example, Jan Fernback, ‘Beyond the diluted community concept: a symbolic interactionist perspective on online social relations’, New Media Society 9/1 (2007): 49–69, accessed online at http://nms.sagepub.com/content/9/1/49.full.pdf+html, 10 September 2012.


13 Riley, ‘Listening to late discovery adoption’, p 147.


19 Simon Keogh interviewed by Dominic Golding for the Monash History of Adoption website, 2010. See also ‘Inter-country Adoption’, in Audrey Marshall and Margaret McDonald, The Many-sided Triangle: Adoption in Australia, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2001, p 198: ‘It is generally accepted that the children are likely to develop some problems in adolescence as they struggle with the concept of their identity’.


22 Ang, On Not Speaking Chinese, p 36.


24 Högbacka also notes that some parents ‘used almost religious language when describing their feelings upon the arrival of their child’. ‘The quest for a child of one’s own’, p 325.

25 This phrase is used by a prospective ICA adoptive mother in conversation with one of the authors (September 2008).


27 https://confluence-vre.its.monash.edu.au/display/hoa/Marian+Jacobs

28 For an extended discussion of this point and related research, see Fronek and Cuthbert, ‘History repeating’.


For a full discussion of these issues of ownership and commemoration, see Cherot, ‘Storytelling and ethnographic intersections’. For this reference, see Cherot, p 114.

Ibid., p 115


The phrase is Alistair Thomson’s, from his unpublished paper, “Australian generations”? Reflections on generational experience, memory and oral history”, Monash University, 27 April 2012.


Ibid, p 3.

Yngvesson, Belonging in an Adopted World, p 19.


The phrase is from Indigo Willing’s interview with Dominic Golding.

Gray, “‘Bananas, bastards and victims?’”, p 155.