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Going "Home"

ADOPTION, LOSS OF BEARINGS, AND THE MYTHOLOGY OF ROOTS

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> An angel with no face embraced me
> And whispered through my whole body;
> "Don't be ashamed of being human, be proud!
> Inside you vault opens behind vault endlessly.
> You will never be complete, that's how it's meant to be."
> —Tomas Tranströmer, "Romanesque Arches"

In the world of intercountry adoption, two stories predominate: a story of abandonment and a story about roots. In the abandonment story, a baby is found in a marketplace, on a roadside, outside a police station, or in the tour of an orphanage; alternately, a child is left by its mother at a hospital or is relinquished or surrendered to child welfare officials, a social worker, or the staff of a children's home. After passing through the hands of social workers, lawyers, and/or orphanage staff and perhaps in and out of hospitals, foster homes, and courts, this child may ultimately be declared free for adoption, a process that requires a second, legal separation that constitutes the child as a legal orphan. Similarly, a mother who relinquishes her child to state agents must consent to the irrevocable termination of her rights to the child. In international adoptions, the child will also be separated from its state of origin (a procedure that in some nations involves sealing the record of this severance and altering the child's birth certificate) so that it can be connected to a new family, a new name, a new nation. The child is given a new identity. It now *belongs* in a new place.

This story of separation is a story about loss and the transformation of loss into a "clean break" (Duncan 1993, 51) that forms the ground for starting anew. The clean break separates the child from everything that constitutes her grounds for belonging as a child to *this* family and *this* nation, while establishing her transferability to *that* family and *that* nation. With a past that has been cut away—an old identity that no longer exists—the child can be reembedded in a new place, almost as though he or she never moved at all.

Even as this legal story of separation is the official ground for constituting adoptive identities, another story competes with it in both law and adoption practice. This other story was a persistent counterpoint to the movement for "strong" adoptions that prevailed at the Hague Conference

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in the early 1990s (Duncan 1993) and was incorporated into the Hague Convention as children's right to preservation of their "ethnic, religious and cultural background" (Hague Convention 1993, Article 16c). The preservation story implies that there is no such thing as a clean break and underpins the search movement in domestic adoptions, the debate over sealed records, and the movement to keep adoptions open in the United States today (Yngvesson 1997; Carp 1998; Verhovek 2000). In this story, identity is associated with a root or ground of belonging that is *inside* the child (as "blood," "primal connectedness," and "identity hunger") (Lifton 1994, 67–71) and unchanging. But it is also *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" (Lifton 1994, 68, citing Sants 1964) and a psychological need for the adopted child to return to where she *really* belongs.

The story of a freestanding child and the story about a rooted child appear to be mutually exclusive and are associated with different adoption practices. The former is associated with race and other forms of matching that are intended to produce "as if" adoptive families that mimic natural ones (Modell 1994). Even in international transracial adoptions, where race matching is impossible, adoption practices in the 1960s and 1970s emphasized complete absorption of the adopted child into the new family and nation (Andersson 1991). By contrast, the story about roots is associated with the recognition of adoption as a distinct family form (Kirk 1981) and involves acknowledging (even underscoring) the differences between an adoptee and his or her adoptive parents, constituting the adoptive family as a site of tension because of its inclusion of a child who "naturally" belongs to another person or place.

Both practices are versions of a familiar and powerful (Western) myth about identity as a matter of exclusive belongings and belonging as a matter of "an active proprietorship" (Strathern 1988, 135).[1] In the clean break version of this myth, the adoptive child is set free from the past (constituted as "abandoned" or "motherless") so that he or she can be assimilated completely into the adoptive family. In the preservation story, on the other hand, the child is imagined as a part of his or her birth mother or birth nation, imagined as being constantly pulled back to that ground.

In what follows I propose an alternative to the narrative of exclusive belongings as a way of thinking about the connections between adoptive parent and child, adoptive family and birth family, and giving and receiving nations. This alternative begins with the lived experience of adoptees, adoptive parents, and birth parents—that no one of them is freestanding vis-à-vis the others, but that there is a pull toward the other parent, the

other nation. The pull back is an effect of the closures and cutoffs of adoption law and has materialized in the practices of open adoption, roots trips, searches, and so forth. These trips and the reunions to which they sometimes lead reveal how compelling the myth of the return can be. But they also unsettle the idea that such journeys of self-realization are likely to produce completion for the adoptee, or that they constitute a "journey towards wholeness" (Lifton 1994). Rather, as Elspeth Probyn (1996, 114) suggests, "Bringing forth beginnings can result in a loss of bearings."

This loss of bearings involves the discovery of a self both familiar and strange, me and not-me, a pull to the adoptive parent at the very moment one is in the arms of a birth mother, a pull toward the birth mother at the very moment that she is embracing one's child. The identity narrative and the concept of a child or a parent as "a part of me" are inadequate for capturing the contradictions of desire that constitute this state "in-between being and longing" (Probyn 1996, 35). Neither do they capture the *movement*—the "desire for becoming-other"—(ibid., 5) that is part of the search for a root of belonging and that is provoked by the experience of seeing someone who "looks like me," by touching the native soil of an adopted son or by the realization that there is a connection, not an unbridgeable gulf, between oneself and the birth mother of one's child. Each of these moments provokes "yet another journey" (Saffian 1998, 301–2), an opening rather than an experience of closure.

Roots trips reveal the precariousness of "I am," the simultaneous fascination and terror evoked by what might have been, and a longing for the safety of home. They materialize an unfathomable moment of choice, when one life that might have been was curtailed and another life that exists now came into being: "Why just me? It feels very strange. One wonders, 'What would have become of me if I had remained there? Who was I during the time I was there?' " (Sarah Nordin, interview, August 1999). Such moments interrupt the myth that the legal transformation to an "other" was free—that the child simply came home to a site of love where he or she always belonged—revealing instead the cost of belonging (and of love), its inseparability from the birth mother, the orphanage, the courthouse, the agency, and the histories linking nations that give children to those that receive them.[2] But they also interrupt the myth of the return as a form of completion or fulfillment in which one can find oneself in another (be consumed by an other) at a place or point of fusion, of "immanence regained" (Nancy 1991, 59). Rather, interruption "occurs at the edge, or rather it constitutes the edge where beings touch each other, expose themselves to each other and separate from one another" (ibid.). It is at this edge that both connects and separates, as Jean-Luc Nancy suggests, that beings "come into being" (ibid., 61).

The account of a roots trip that follows explores these issues, focusing on the experiences of adoptive parents as they sought to fill a gap in the belonging of their adoptive children, the complex emotions of adoptees as they were pulled between a familiar self and an unknown other, and the position of adoptive parents as witnesses to the "labor of mourning" (J. Benjamin 1995, 113) in which their children (and the parents themselves) were involved. My analysis is based on participant observation and on interviews conducted in 1998 and 1999 with adult adoptees born in Chile and with the Swedish parents who adopted them in the 1970s and early 1980s. I also interviewed staff of Stockholm's Adoption Centre (AC) and Chilean adoption officials. This work is part of a larger study of Swedish international adoption in which I have been engaged since 1995.

Return to Chile

> The Greek word for "return" is *nostos*. *Algos* means "suffering." So nostalgia is the suffering caused by an unappeased yearning to return.
> —Milan Kundera, *Ignorance*

In April of 1998, I accompanied a group of twelve Swedish families (nineteen parents and sixteen children, ranging from ten to twenty-one years of age) to Santiago, Chile, on a roots trip organized by Stockholm's Adoption Centre. No one in the families spoke Spanish, and as I am fluent in both Spanish and Swedish, it was agreed that I would serve as one of the three interpreters for the group. I had lived in Santiago as a teenager but had not been back since that time, and in many ways the trip felt like a return to roots for me as well as for the adopted children.

The adoptions had taken place during the middle years of the Pinochet dictatorship, and for the parents this was their first visit to Chile. Some of them had adopted other children from countries such as Thailand or El Salvador, where they had journeyed to fetch their child. As I discuss below, such trips are charged (often difficult) moments for adopting parents and many consider them a key piece in the work of transforming themselves into their adopted child's "real" parents. Tense political relations between Sweden and Chile during the 1970s and early 1980s—Sweden was a place of refuge for significant numbers of Chileans who fled their country during Pinochet's dictatorship—meant that children adopted from Chile at that time were not picked up by their adoptive parents but arrived with escorts.

To complicate matters further, Swedish adoptions from Chile ended in 1991 under strained circumstances. A new adoption law introduced in

Chile in 1988 as a result of concerns about child trafficking changed the relationship between AC's representative in Santiago and the tribunals in southern Chile that were responsible for approving international adoptions. Chile was one of Sweden's principal "sending" or "giving" nations between 1974 and the early 1980s, with adoptions exceeding two hundred children annually in the late 1970s and remaining in excess of one hundred annually until 1985. In the late 1980s, Swedish adoptions from Chile dropped off steeply, and after 1991 they stopped completely.

Marta García, head of the adoption division of SENAME (Servicio Nacional del Menor), Chile's child welfare office, explained the ending of Chilean adoptions to Sweden in an interview in 1998:

> Before 1988, the Swedish Adoption Centre had its representative here and worked very well through an arrangement involving direct coordination with the tribunals [family courts], especially those in the south. . . . The babies were transported from the south to Santiago, and in Santiago they were placed in the care of the Adoption Centre, an institution which always guaranteed excellent care for the children: seriousness, transparency. No fault with the Swedish Adoption Centre, none! They had good foster mothers, good social workers who were in contact with the families, everything. But everything was very easy, also. The babies came to Santiago—almost all were from Temuco—and were entered in the civil register in Santiago with the names of the adoptive parents, with Swedish surnames. So everything was very easy for them.
>
> When SENAME was established in 1988, I had to deal with AC's representative in Santiago and we had many clashes, trying to make her understand that things had changed and that now the business of international adoption was to be regularized. (Interview, 15 April 1998)[3]

The tensions surrounding Swedish adoptions from Chile are suggested in Marta García's observation that the processing of Chilean babies for adoption in Sweden was "very easy" for the Adoption Centre. Her comment hints at the complications that, in her opinion, *should* surround the conversion of a child, who is assumed to be by nature Chilean, into a Swedish child, while tacitly acknowledging the power of state officials to effect such arbitrary conversions—the babies were simply "entered in the civil register in Santiago with the names of the adoptive parents, with Swedish surnames." The "Chilean child" in effect disappeared before it even left the country.

García's unease gestures toward the implicit assumption that underpins such transactions in children: they can only take place if the Chilean and the Swedish child are treated "as if" they are directly exchangeable for one another—that is, "as if" they are the same. Clearly, the child who

might have grown up in Chile and whose mother was compelled or perhaps "chose" to relinquish, abandon, or place her child for adoption is not "the same" child who grows up in Sweden and whose mother was unable or chose not to give birth to a child, or who adopted a Chilean baby for political, humanitarian, or other reasons. The exchange is only possible, however, if this knowledge is bracketed. The adoptable child is treated "as if" it were not a material object that bears traces of its passage in the world but rather a "sublime" object that can "endure all torments with its beauty immaculate" (Žižek 1989, 18). The sublime object is treated "'as if it were made of a special substance over which time has no power'" (ibid., quoting Sohn-Rethel 1983, 59). It was this assumption and the seeming transparency of transactions that obscured it that were disturbing to Marta García, no less than the concern that some foreign adoptions were set in motion by money, or that there was a clandestine network of caring women through which the movement of babies from Chile to Sweden was occurring.[4]

By contrast, for Swedish parents who adopted from Chile at this time, the ease of the transaction was part of its appeal: there was little delay, the children were very young, and parents assumed that there was little of their child's developmental history that they were missing. The only thing needed to complete the child was his or her "culture," something that could be passed on through stories, albums, and eventually visits to a distant land with its exotic tastes, smells, and customs. For Swedish parents, the ease of the transaction eased the process of the baby becoming "my child."

García's discomfort and the satisfaction of the parents are both an effect of the power of the market in constituting *any* child—any person—as an entity that "qualifies . . . for life" in a market economy.[5] The discomfort it occasioned for García suggests how important it is to our consistency as subjects that we be blind to this truth (like the parents). Child adoption brings us face-to-face with this needed blindness and the myth it produces: that the circulation of children in a global economy is free, leaving no traces on the body of the child.

The clashes with AC's local representative over the ease with which Chilean children were becoming Swedish disrupted this myth and in doing so brought to an end Sweden's complex relationship with Chile as a sending country for adoptive children. For Chilean adoptees and their families, this meant that there was indeed a clean break with the past, one that was no less significant than the official cutoff instantiated by adoption law. The informal relationships of communication and cooperation that tie agencies in receiving countries to orphanages, foster parents, social workers, and child welfare officials in sending countries were disbanded. These

relationships, which are crucial to the movement of children from nations that give to nations that receive, are no less important (as I argue in more detail below) to the memories, desires, and (re)constructions that constitute an adopted child's identity. They provide the grounds through which adoptees (and their adoptive parents) can "seize" (W. Benjamin 1969, 255) and "own" (Petcheskey 1995) a past in which the prevailing characteristic is only fleetingly and problematically captured in the metaphor of a search for roots from which adopted children have been "cut off."

The search for roots assumes a past that is there, if we can just find the right file, the right papers, or the right person. This kind of search 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. By contrast, seizing the past involves not so much finding a ground as piecing one together, a process that is more material than intellectual, an active (re)inhabiting of events in order to lay claim to them (and in this sense, to "own" them). Reinhabiting encompasses a broad range of processes that adopted children and their families are presently involved in but always involves bringing the "past" into dialogue with the present, rather than collapsing present into past (or privileging one over the other).[6]

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In my analysis here, I am particularly interested in the revisitation of sites of involuntary displacement, separation, and (sometimes temporary) emplacement through which a child who is "abandoned" and placed for adoption undergoes the complex transformations in identity necessary to make it an *adoptable* child, a "precious resource" for the nations that receive it and that give it away (Yngvesson 2000). Laying claim to the past in this way may shake up identity in the very moment of grounding it by revealing the interruptions, contradictions, and breaks through which the process we know as "identity" takes shape.[7] The informal relationships that bind (Northern) agency to (Southern) orphanage are crucial to this process of simultaneously making and shaking up identity.

In the case of Swedish adoptions from Chile, seizing the past required what Birgitta Löwstedt, the AC representative in charge of the agency's Resor och Rötter (Trips and Roots) division for South America, describes as "true detective work" (interview, 18 May 1998). During the first months of 1996, Löwstedt received over fifty calls from families who had adopted from Chile inquiring about adoptee backgrounds or requesting assistance in making contact with Chilean adoption officials. As a result, she renewed AC's contact with SENAME and in late 1996 made a trip to Santiago. She took with her a suitcase filled with letters and photographs from 250 adoptive families with Chilean-born children and the name and address of one of the foster mothers who had cared for the Swedish adoptees. She

was cautiously hopeful that she could contact social workers and foster mothers and possibly the doctor who had delivered many of the children.

SENAME was unexpectedly helpful in this process, in part because of its own interest in rethinking the relationship between Chile and its children adopted abroad. This rethinking of the relationship of adopted children to their birth nations has become increasingly important to officials in all of the major sending nations. While SENAME had had no contact with the foster mothers, Löwstedt located one whose (incorrect) address she had with the help of a determined taxi driver. Through her, she was able to locate others who were related as sisters, daughters, aunts, and inlaws, bringing them news of children they had been told to "forget" once the children left the country. Because the Swedish foster mother system was unofficial—although not clandestine—in the 1970s and 1980s, and because Sweden's activities as an adopting nation at that time were regarded with suspicion by the Pinochet government, the women had kept a low profile and had simply disappeared as a "system" when adoptions to Sweden came to an end. They had never expected to hear of the children again.

The success of Birgitta Löwstedt's trip led to plans for a group tour to Chile in April 1998. The aim of the tour was in part simply to see the country, since none of the parents had been there before and the children had left when they were infants. More significantly, however, Löwstedt saw this as an opportunity for parents and children to visit the hospitals, orphanages, courts, foster mothers, social workers, doctor, judges, and government offices that had been involved in the adoption of the children to Sweden. For some families, there was the possibility of locating a birth parent. For all, there would be access to court records that contained details of the birth and relinquishment, key materials for piecing together a story of the early weeks or months of their child's life.

Going Back

> What do you mean, go "back"? I want to travel there as if it were any other country. I want to see the *country*.
> —Nina, eighteen-year-old Chilean-born adoptee

While adoptees sometimes respond negatively to the idea that they might want to return to their birth country, insisting that they are "completely Swedish" (Clara, interview, 20 May 1998; and see von Melen 1998, 116) and that for them a visit is *not* a "return," adoptive parents on the Chile trip expressed a powerful desire to go to the birth country of their children. This was especially noticeable in the stories of parents who fetched

their first adopted child in his or her home country but were unable to do so for the second child. Two of these parents, who traveled to Chile with their sixteen-year-old daughter, explained why they felt this way:

> **Mother:** For my part, I missed not having been in Chile. I wanted some time in my life to come to Chile, especially because we had been in El Salvador when we adopted Daniel [their eldest child] and saw how it was there. That piece was missing, I thought, when we got Maria, because we hadn't been in Chile. But then, we have always said that the compensation was that she was so young.
> **Father:** I felt that because we traveled to El Salvador we could be a means for passing on some of that to him [*förmedla något till honom*]. So we wanted to do the same for Maria, later.
> **Mother:** We missed being able to pass on to her our sense of the sounds and smells, what one has experienced oneself. That's not something you see on TV, you can't experience it on the TV. And it's the same thing, being able to see the Andes from the hotel window, the buses they drive. (Interview, 15 May 1998)

The use by these parents of the Swedish word *förmedla* (for which there is no good English translation in this context) is telling. *Förmedla* means to mediate, to go between. It also means to make peace, restore harmony, bring into agreement. For them, going to Chile or to El Salvador was a way of bridging the experienced gap, of restoring harmony in the experienced dissonance of having a child who belongs on (whose roots are in) the other side of the world. The parents become a bridge between there and here, become, in other words, a kind of "back" for their child by virtue of having been there to fetch the child. The album with photographs of the orphanage, the caretakers or foster mother, and other scenes from the birth country, or in more recent adoptions, a video of the arrival at the orphanage and the stay (typically lasting weeks or months) in the child's birth country are a visual prop for this "back." Because none of the parents on the Chile trip had been able to make the voyage to Chile when they adopted their children, the roots trip became, in the words of another adoptive mother, "my *own* life's trip [*min livs resa*]. It was very powerful." It provided for her (and she assumed for her daughter) something concrete to grasp on to [*någonting att ta på*]. "If someone asks about Chile, then you can tell about it, that you have been there, you have a photographic memory of it, you have powerful experiences associated with it" (interview, 19 May 1998).

Here, the adoptive parent becomes—like Walter Benjamin's storyteller—someone who "exchanges" experience, who "takes what he tells from experience . . . and makes it the experience of those who are listen-

ing to his tale" (1969, 83, 87). In the stories told to their children by adoptive parents, "it is not the object of the story to convey a happening *per se*, which is the purpose of information; rather, it embeds it in the life of the storyteller in order to pass it on as experience to those listening. It thus bears the marks of the storyteller much as the earthen vessel bears the marks of the potter's hand" (ibid., 159). The adoptive parents' "powerful experiences" associated with the trip to fetch (or revisit the birth country of) their child become embedded in both parent and child through the telling of the story. By recounting experiences that might provide their adoptive children with "something concrete to grasp onto" about their native land, parents thus become engaged not only in the work of completing a child who (it is assumed) might otherwise remain fragmented but in completing themselves as parents as well.

"Completion" here (unlike the conventional understanding of completion as fulfillment or a making "whole") is a spatial and temporal process of "infolding" (Rose 1996, 43).[8] Through travel to a child's birth country and retelling the story about bringing the child home, powerful experiences associated with that distant landscape (the long journey to reach it, its associated sights, tastes, and smells) become a "part of me" for the parent in a process that places the adoptive child "within" the parent as well. For another family on the Chile trip, this infolding of an "exterior" place was accomplished not only by stepping together with their son onto Chilean ground but by collecting in a small plastic bag some earth from outside the hospital where he was born. The moment of gathering the earth was highly charged for the little boy's parents, who returned to the bus on which we were traveling in tears. The child himself, at ten years of age the youngest on the trip, appeared to have little interest in this event. For his parents, on the other hand, their son's past was made present in the plastic bag that they took back with them to Sweden. It contained fragments of a place and was powerfully associated with the memory of their son's birth—and would become part of the story of their return.[9]

In words that are familiar from countless stories told by adoptees, a mother on the Chile trip spoke of her daughter's need for completion in terms that applied no less (and perhaps even more) to adoptive parents. For both, adoption is a process that can never be complete. It is a response to, but continually reproduces for parent and child, a "hole in their lives that must be filled if they are to be whole people" (interview, 19 May 1998). The trip to Chile and the memories it made possible in stories, photograph albums, and handfuls of soil were a way of attempting to fill this hole. At the same time, these embodied memories were a constant

reminder of what the adoptee had left behind, of what he or she lacked. In the words of another adoptee who had chosen not to revisit her birthplace, this lack—which she described as "some kind of empty space"—does not go away. It remains as "some kind of pull towards an origin [*en slags strävan mot urprunget*]" (von Melen 1998, 166).

As this suggests, roots trips, journeys by parents to the birth country of the child they plan to adopt, and the stories that are told about these movements that bring a child home or take him or her back are not only a way of bridging a narrative gap in the relation of adoptive parent to child or completing a "break" in the child's narrative (Lifton 1994, 36–37). These practices also create gaps and narrative breaks. Journeys "back" materialize a moment of abandonment by a return to the physical spaces (orphanages, foster homes, and courtrooms) in which this break was concretized. They constitute a kind of "time travel" (Saffian 1998, 296) that displaces "home" (even as homes are made through such journeys) and split the present with powerful memories from the past (Aronson 1997). They reveal the impossibility of ever being fully integrated, of having anything "that constitutes both an outer and inner place where I belong" (Trotzig 1996, 214).

Roots trips propel adoptees and their parents into what one Swedish social worker, in a talk about her work with adoptive parents, describes as "the eye of the storm." They bring the adoptive family and the adoptee face-to-face with the terror and the promise of confronting an "other" who is experienced as "a part of me" by the adoptee, but who cannot be fully contained and remains irredeemably "other" for the adoptive family. In adoption practice, the birth mother embodies this "other," but the birth country is also a powerful site where the potential and the impossibility of full belonging may be experienced (Trotzig 1996; Liem 2000; Yngvesson and Mahoney 2000). Confrontation with this impossibility shakes up the idea of a coherent "I" and the illusion of autonomous families, nations, and selves on which this "I" is contingent, gesturing instead toward the dependence of receiving nations and adoptive parents on the *dis*possessed for their *self*-possession and at the irreducible distance and asymmetry involved in this relation of difference and of nonpossession. The stories below illuminate these contingencies of belonging, focusing on the ambivalence and discomfort experienced by adult adoptees, while opening a space in which a more complex understanding of the relationship of self and other can materialize.

> I don't think I had so many expectations. I didn't know what to expect of the country, except maybe that in some way I would get to know myself, but then of course one knew that one was into [*in på*] two different places, that one belongs in two different places. I already knew that before I went.
> —Maria, sixteen-year-old Chilean-born adoptee

Like adoptive parents, for whom the journey to Chile was a way of placing their (unknown) child within themselves, for adoptees, coming to know Chile was a way of connecting to an unknown part of themselves, a part that they weren't even sure *was* themselves. For example, Maria talked about how she had wondered, before going on the trip, "Do I really come from Chile?" By contrast to a friend from Colombia, whom she described as "having more of a Mapuche-like appearance," she herself was not obviously "from Latin America."[10] With her light skin, "I could have been something else." Maria described a ceremony held at the offices of SENAME on one of the last days of the trip, when the director said to all of them, " 'This is your country.' It was, I think it was for everyone, it was a conviction that, 'OK, I am from Chile, too!' It was like a confirmation from a Chilean and from the country itself that I am from Chile. It was so big in some way. That was why we dared to respond and began to cry."

Clara (an eighteen-year-old) described an evening gathering with the foster mothers as the moment when "I began to realize that I was really there." She had fantasized about Chile before the trip, but "it felt strange to be there. It felt as though I myself was left in Sweden although my body was in Chile, and so one was somewhere in between, *where one didn't know where one was*. It was really strange. But when we met the foster mothers, I found myself" (emphasis added).

Like Maria, whose light skin made her wonder if she "really" came from Chile (as though, her father commented wryly, "we had fooled you"), Clara worried at times about who she was, but in her case it was her dark skin that occasioned doubts. She recalled a time in the second grade when people came up and began speaking Spanish to her "and I couldn't grasp what they were saying. And then I began to think, 'they see me as an immigrant, when actually I am Swedish.' " Anti-immigrant incidents in Stockholm made her feel "scared, since it isn't obvious on the outside that one is adopted": "There is that feeling of unease [*en sådan här oroskänsla*], that others see one as though one is dark, those around you, those you know, and you know yourself that you are completely Swedish. And you know, sometimes I forget that I am dark-skinned. When I sit with

friends and chat. And then when one looks in the mirror: 'Aha! That's how it is!'" (interview, 20 May 1998).

This sudden sense of "aha!" was intensified on the roots trip to Chile and was a key element in the repeated (re)discovery by adoptees that one is *not* "completely Swedish [*helsvensk*]." This discovery was mediated, in part, by its collective dimension and by the support experienced from other adoptees and from parents.[11] As Clara explained, regarding the close bonds developed among adoptees on the trip, "one didn't need to explain how one felt, because everyone felt the same." This "same" feeling was on the one hand exhilarating. It involved a kind of grounding of an intuited self as Chilean that had always seemed just out of reach in Sweden, until one "looked in the mirror." But it was complicated by the inseparability of being Chilean (of being "dark-skinned," of being "Mapuche-like") from the experience of abandonment that was rediscovered in the physical spaces of hospitals, orphanages, and courtrooms, in the spoken words of social workers and government officials, and in the writing on "papers" that finalized the separation of each adoptee from her mother and from the country to which she was now returning in order to find or know her *self*. The carefully cultivated experience of pride in being Chilean, transmitted by the Swedish parents of the adoptees and connected to their own experience of the trip as "my life's trip," was contingent on the adoptees' displacement to Sweden, on their being able to imagine Chile in the way their parents did, as part of a tour of Chile or a temporary visit from afar. Adoptees could share this imagined Chile with their parents, in part; but their parents could only act as witnesses to a part of Chile that their children had once experienced firsthand, up close. This complex, emotionally explosive Chile was in the rooms and beds of an orphanage, in the feel and smell of a rosary that belonged to an adoptee's birth mother, and in the written words and physical presence of a doctor or a matron who had recorded the details of a particular child's birth. As one twenty-year-old woman described her feelings after reading through a file of documents at the Temuco court, visiting the orphanage where she had spent three weeks as an infant, and driving by the house where her mother once lived, "It was the most tumultuous day of my life. I found out about everything! [*Det var det mest omtumlande dag av mitt liv. Jag fick veta allt*]" (interview, 9 April 1998).

> **Father:** How do they choose which children will be adopted? What criteria does the court have for accepting or rejecting a child?
> **Social Worker:** There are no criteria for accepting or rejecting a child, but the mother is advised of her rights. Before the child is born, we explain what it means to place the child "in a state of abandonment" [*en situación de abandono*]. It will be like the child is dead to her. She will never hear more about the child.
> —Field notes from visit to Temuco court, 18 April 1998

Central to the meaning of the Chile trip for each adoptee, in one form or another, was some attempt to grapple with the experience of abandonment and what Jessica Benjamin (1995, 113) describes as "the labor of mourning." For some, this desire was more clearly formulated than for others. Clara went to Chile together with her adoptive mother in the explicit hope of meeting her birth mother. She had learned her name from documents in Sweden and carried with her a letter in which she wrote, "Although I don't know you, I feel as though in spite of everything, you are a part of me." Clara explained how much she longed to know what her mother looked like and who she was. With the cooperation of SENAME and the assistance of a distant relative who had cared for her mother when she became pregnant and was forced to leave home, the woman was located after a week's search, and Clara's letter was delivered to her. A meeting was arranged for the day prior to our departure for Sweden. Clara explained her feelings about this meeting during an interview in Stockholm a month later:

> **Clara:** I felt so strange, and wondered how I would react, if I would stay in one piece [*sitta helt*], that is, if I would not start to cry or if I would immediately begin to cry when she came. . . . But when she saw me, she began to cry and then . . . but it was as though, because I have always had a hole inside, or however one might say it, and then when I saw her, immediately I cried and then it [the hole] was filled again. I still don't understand that feeling, that it went so fast. I was almost a little scared.
> **Barbara:** That the thoughts were gone, you mean?
> **Clara:** Yes, or rather, the thoughts, the fantasy of how she would look. Now I had a picture of how she looked and how she was, how the house was. So everything fell into place in an hour. It was such a short time.
> **Mother:** It was a very strong experience. I had also imagined what she would be like, that she was probably very poor and had lived a hard life and would be marked by that. But that wasn't the way it was. Well, she was poor, but not very poor. One understood how much she had suffered.
> **Clara:** One thing I had thought a lot about was sitting in the same room with two mothers. I thought it would feel very strange.

Barbara: And when it actually happened?

Clara: It felt good, partly because I could speak Swedish with my mother from Sweden, and then I had you, who could translate. I felt supported to have mamma along, someone from Sweden. It was something one could return to, that one wasn't alone in Chile. (Interview, 20 May 1998)

The meeting with Clara's "mother from Chile" was held in the modest house of the woman who had cared for her eighteen years previously and was attended by Clara's cousins, a half-sister, a nephew, and other extended kin, as well as by her adoptive mother and a social worker from SENAME. I was present at the meeting, to interpret for Clara and her birth mother. As they "cried themselves out together" and I leaned toward them to catch their whispered words, there was a kind of breathless silence. Clara's mother caressed her daughter's face and begged her forgiveness. I felt like the thinnest of membranes connecting the two women—linguistically, physically—and separating them from (joining them to) Clara's "Swedish mother," who stood nearby. I struggled to maintain my composure. Even the youngest children seemed to be suspended in the tension that caught us all up in this collective moment of recognition, in which Clara said she felt as though she were "more or less the same and yet not the same [as her birth mother], since she is mother to me and I am daughter to her."

Afterward, we all sat down to a long meal together, gifts were exchanged, addresses written down, and eventually Clara, her adoptive mother, and I left. Clara took with her a rosary that was a gift from her birth mother. She described this later as "a wonderful present. One could see that it had been used and that it had a special smell. It smelled like her." It was "something one knows about that one can make something of [later], on one's own."

This "making something of" an object surely includes moments of completion or of "filling a hole," as in Clara's meeting with her mother. Similar moments were experienced by other adoptees in the midst of the turbulence of the return, as they walked on the street in the neighborhood where their mother once lived, visited the maternity ward of a hospital where they could "feel that my mother was here once when she gave birth to me," or held a file containing details about the time and place of their birth, the name and age of their mother, and the date on which she formally consented to their abandonment. But return trips and other efforts at recovering or confronting the past "are always double-edged" (to quote a social worker with over twenty-five years of experience with transnational adoptions), and moments of clarity are typically that—moments—in a process of self-constitution that is ongoing, painful, and turbulent, challenging any sense of a stable ground of belonging.

One woman, elated finally to be touching the papers in her court file and overwhelmed with the sense that finally she had "found out about everything"—the hour of her birth, her mother's name, the address where her mother had lived when she was born—became distraught when she was advised not to make contact with the woman. She insisted on driving by her house, lingering on the street where she imagined she had once lived, and photographing the area. When I spoke to her a month later, she was still shaken by the experience. She had also become worried about the issue of how babies are chosen for adoptive parents. Her own parents expressed shock at the discovery that children today are carefully monitored by the agency for defects, and that their adopted son, who suffers from Asperger syndrome, would surely have remained in his Thai orphanage had his affliction been known. Another adoptee, who hoped to contact her mother and brother in Chile, was told by a court social worker that this would be unwise because the woman was "extremely aggressive" and had threatened to harm herself and the baby had she not been permitted to surrender her for adoption nineteen years earlier.

These events, no less than the meeting of Clara with her birth mother, disturb the notion of return as completion or closure, revealing the distance and asymmetry separating women who give their children away and those who receive them as acts of love. They expose the work involved in producing a child who can be chosen (by the agency, by the parent) so that it can be loved as though it were "one's own," and the key role of a legal clean break in securing the ground on which exclusive belonging is forged: the freedom of the child, the adoptive parent, and the birth parent vis-à-vis one another. Returns unsettle these freedoms, revealing the powerful dependencies that underpin them. On the Chile trip, these dependencies were pieced together from fragments of a past that each person seized in an effort to make sense of an event that could *never* make sense, that would forever remain "somewhere beyond the reach of the intellect," even as it was "unmistakably present" in papers, places, and the ambiguities and silences of a court document (W. Benjamin 1969, 158).

In each of these situations, the mediating presence of others (adoptive parents, other adoptees, AC staff, the kin of Clara's mother, the children in an orphanage, myself as interpreter) was crucial to the process of seizing the past. We became both witness and bridge, a potential space in which the complex and contradictory meanings of being "the same as me" (or "different" from me) could materialize in places that were saturated with meaning for adoptees and their families (the hospital, the maternity ward, the orphanage, the court, the house of a foster mother, and so forth). These places, perhaps more than any words that were spoken, infused present encounters with meanings that were linked to mem-

ories and fantasies of what had once taken place there. At the same time, these fantasies, and the work of constructing an account of the adoptee's abandonment, depended on her capacity to "return to [them]" in Sweden, a return that was possible because "one wasn't alone in Chile."

Accepting that the child belongs to no one means accepting that she is neither rooted nor freestanding.

The Eye of the Storm

> An area like a hole or column in the center of a tropical cyclone marked by only light winds or complete calm with no precipitation and sometimes by a sunlit clear sky (the eye of a hurricane).
> —*Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language*

Ingrid Stjerna, a Swedish social worker who works with prospective adoptive parents, speaks about how important it is to "awaken [in them] positive, warm empathic feelings for this person who could not take care of her child. It is important for the child that they have these positive feelings." Stjerna notes that this is harder to accomplish when "you became a parent standing at Arlanda [the Stockholm airport] with money in your hands—none of this traveling to difficult countries." Meeting the mother, by contrast, "awakens anxiety. Background and country and decorations and songs, all that is fine—but the mother: no. That puts them into the eye of the storm. That forces them to come to terms with the pain and misery" (address to visiting AC representatives, Stockholm, 21 August 1996).

Coming to terms with the fact that "there is no such thing as a motherless child—even if she is dead, she is important"—has been crucial to the transformations that have taken place in adoption over the past two decades and in international adoption during the past ten years. That the child is not motherless implies that adoptive parents must accept the fact that this isn't really *their* child, Stjerna argues. What I understand her to mean by this is not that the child belongs to somebody else, but that the child is not freestanding: she came from someone, and from somewhere, and bears the traces of that elsewhere, just as she bears traces of the pull, the desire that links her to the adoptive parent and adoptive country. Accepting that the child belongs to no one means accepting that she is neither rooted nor freestanding, but is marked by an existential condition of thrownness into the world as much as by the need for connection, for hands to catch him or her, so that she can take her "place" in the world (Doyle 1994, 210, paraphrasing Merleau-Ponty 1968). The return trip to Chile illuminated the contradictory truths that the adopted child—like other children—has been thrown into the world, but that she is not motherless. Thrownness is the

condition that marks the child as not-me, as fundamentally other-than-me, while the condition of being "not motherless" marks the child's proximity, his or her openness to an encounter with a stranger who can say, "This is my child, too." [12]

Ingrid Stjerna's insistence that this is not a motherless child in spite of the breaks mandated by adoption law captures (in different words) Marilyn Strathern's (1997, 301) idea of the "double-evocatory power" of the gift—the gift child of adoption has been freed for exchange and links the giver and receiver as partners in the exchange. These partners are embedded in a complex web of connections, a web that broke down when adoptions from Chile to Sweden ceased in 1991. This web binds orphanage to agency and adopting mother to abandoning mother, tying developing nations with an "excess" of children to overdeveloped nations that need these children. The physical movement of a child in adoption—the routes it takes from "there" to "here"—is a part of this interdependence and the exchanges through which it is played out. To be "in the eye of the storm" is to enter, imaginatively and in practice, the space of these exchanges.

Entering this space involves more than having warm, positive feelings about the birth mother or pride in the birth nation of a child. These benevolent feelings evoke the sense that the eye of the storm is a site of calm but ignore the relationship of this center of calm to the chaos that produces it. To enter the eye of the storm is to take risks: that a background story will be too hard to bear, that the pull "back" will be too powerful, that we will lose our boundaries, the edges that make our families complete. The challenge for international (and other forms of) adoption today is in the ways it has opened a space that is structured, but cannot be fully contained, by adoption law. This space has revealed a kind of chaos, shaking up (and opening up) families, persons, and nations in the world that created international adoption and that international adoption helped to create. While adoption is the focus of this opening up, the questions it raises reminds us that we are all, in one way or another, close to the eye of the storm, which is where life is lived.

Notes

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1. As Strathern notes (1988, 158), there is no comfortable space for the presence of an "other" in this concept of identity except as supplanted authorship or proprietorship. See also Janet Farrell-Smith's (1983, 205, 208) discussion of the exclusion of others as fundamental to the idea of "proprietary or possessive control over another thing or person." For a discussion of the ways in which adoption policy and practice work to constitute adopted children as the adoptive parents' "own," see Ragoné 1996 (359); Hoelgaard 1998 (229–31); Yngvesson 1997 (67–76); and Yngvesson and Mahoney 2000.

2. The phrase "came home," or "will come home," is widespread in Internet chat groups for the parents of internationally adopted children and in magazines and brochures published by and for adoptive parents.

3. Interviews in this article were recorded either in Spanish or in Swedish and translated by the author.

4. The argument about the exchange value of a child is persuasively developed by Viviana Zelizer (1985) and by Igor Kopytoff (1986), both of whom build on Simmel's ([1908] 1978, 390–91) seminal insights about the complex relationship between desire for an object and the object being "set into motion" by money. As Zelizer (1985, 14) argues, the priceless child presents a legal quandary that is no less a cultural and social quandary: "How could value be assigned if price were absent?" Kopytoff (1986, 75) points to this same paradox, noting that to be "'priceless' in the full possible sense of the term" can as easily refer to the uniquely worthless as to the uniquely valuable. To acquire value, Kopytoff argues, the "patently singular" must become part of a "single universe of comparable values"—that is, it must be placed into circulation, made "common" (ibid., 68–72).

5. The quote is from Judith Butler (1993, 2). The argument here draws on my reading of a range of works relevant to this issue, including Strathern 1988 (135–59); Kopytoff 1986; and Žižek 1989. The crucial point is that entry into the symbolic order of culture and law is an arbitrary legal process on which our "naturalization" as whole persons (as civil subjects) is contingent.

6. Here I build on Lyotard's (1984, 22) insight about the "ephemeral temporality" that accompanies narrative knowledge. Lyotard argues, "The narratives' reference may seem to belong to the past, but in reality it is always contemporaneous with the act of recitation."

7. For a discussion of identity processes in adoption narratives, see Yngvesson and Mahoney 2000.

8. Drawing on the work of Gilles Deleuze, Nicolas Rose describes the "fold" as indicating "a relation without an essential interior, one in which what is 'inside' is merely an infolding of an exterior" (1996, 43).

9. See Walter Benjamin's (1969, 158) discussion of how "the past is 'somewhere beyond the reach of the intellect, and unmistakably present in some material object (or in the sensation which such an object arouses in us)'" (quoting Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu*). Similarly, Nicholas Rose (1996, 143) suggests, "Memory of one's biography is not a simple psychological capacity, but is organized through rituals of storytelling, supported by artefacts such as photograph albums and so forth."

10. Note here the stereotyped linking of Latin America more generally with the "indigenous" and the use of "Mapuche" as a trope for a person of color.

11. By contrast, see Swedish adoptee Astrid Trotzig's (1996) account of her trip alone to Pusan, South Korea, where her experience of not belonging there was no less intense than in Sweden.

12. These words were spoken by an Ethiopian woman as she smoothed the bedcovers over a friend of her birth daughter during a visit of the two Swedish women to Ethiopia. Both had been adopted by families in Sweden.

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