

*LIFE LINES: WRITING TRANSCULTURAL
ADOPTION.* JOHN MCLEOD.
LONDON: BLOOMSBURY, 2015. ISBN-13: 978-1-4725-
9038-1. 246 pp.

BEGOÑA SIMAL
Universidade da Coruña
begona.simal@uad.es

Received 13 February 2017

Accepted 8 April 2017

What do Jane Eyre, Tom Sawyer and Harry Potter have in common? As John McLeod tells us in his recently published *Life Lines: Writing Transcultural Adoption*, all three of them are famous fictional orphans who were raised by adoptive or foster parents (230). Foundlings like these prove that the presence of (in)formal adoption in literature, as in life, is neither exceptional nor new. Yet, since the 1990s there has been a significant change in adoption trends: a specific type of adoption that crosses national and/or ethno-racial frontiers adoption has become more and more common and conspicuous both in our societies and in the tales we tell ourselves. In one of the first surveys of adoption narratives, published in 2004, Barbara Melosh argues that “[a]doption stories offer evidence of dramatically changing views of the institution,” even as the texts themselves “shape, circulate and reframe ideas about adoption” (221). Although some the examples that Melosh gives of such reciprocal connection include the memoirs of “interracial” families (224), adoption that crosses ethnoracial boundaries is not her major concern. In fact, scholars of adoption literature have often explored stories of international and transracial adoption together with domestic and same-race adoption narratives, as is the case of Margaret Homans in *The Imprint of Another Life: Adoption Narratives and Human Possibility* (2013), where she tries to challenge different types of essentialism still present in adoption discourse. In contrast, only a few monographic volumes have restricted their focus to transcultural and transracial adoption, most notably Mark Jerng’s *Claiming Others: Transracial Adoption and National Belonging* (2010) and Cynthia Callahan’s *Kin of Another Kind: Transracial Adoption in*

American Literature (2011). This is one of the many reasons why John McLeod's new book, dealing as it does with the possibilities brokered by narratives that cross and problematize ethnoracial and national frontiers, constitutes a valuable addition to the field of adoption studies.

Yet, it is the theoretical premise underpinning McLeod's analysis of transcultural adoption narratives that makes *Life Lines* particularly interesting. In his introduction to the book, the critic posits the thesis that stories of transethnic and transnational adoption, be they memoirs or fiction, can open new paths of identity building, what he calls "adoptive being." Borrowing the concept of the singular plural from Jean-Luc Nancy, McLeod defines adoptive being as "the capacity to reconfigure the multidirectional material particulars offered by both biogenetic and adoptive attachments", which "can be a matter for public participation not just private self-constitution" (127). As Nancy cogently argues, Being is always "being-with" (Nancy 27); what is more, it is "the "with" that constitutes Being" (30). From Nancy's premise of the *singulier pluriel*, McLeod builds his theory of adoptive being. The critic stresses the potential for this project of those adoption stories that cross ethnoracial and/or national frontiers, and are thus expected to negotiate different affiliations and diverse cultural mandates. McLeod cleverly demonstrates that, while not all transcultural adoption narratives proffer the possibility of embracing adoptive being, those that do ingeniously weave the myriad strings that will provisionally constitute their personhood. It is important to highlight that, while Nancy critiques origins, he does not cancel them out; instead, he opts for the "proliferation" of strands in identity building: "Nancy's "being with" makes no distinction between consanguineous association and affiliative rapport" but admits both; thus "blood-lines can be rethought in much more imaginative and non-essentialized ways, as one filament of the polyform personhood that adoptive being proposes" (McLeod 25, 27).

Since being adopted is no guarantee for attaining the ideal state of adoptive being, McLeod painstakingly explores the pitfalls and stumbling blocks that people/characters encounter in that journey from the fact of "being adopted" to the feat of achieving

“adoptive being.” For this literary journey, he chooses narratives of transcultural adoption by authors from different backgrounds, genres and historical periods, from British film director Mike Leigh to the African American novelist Toni Morrison, and many other English-language writers in between: Andrea Levy, Mei-Ling Hopgood, E. R. Braithwaite, Sebastian Barry, Hannah Pool, Buchi Emecheta, Catherine McKinley, Caryl Phillips, Jackie Kay, and Barbara Kingsolver. McLeod identifies four key themes in adoption narratives—secrets, histories, traces and bearings—, and devotes one chapter to each of them.

The first chapter tackles the secrecy that was the norm in adoption procedures until quite recently, but it also teases out the way in which such secrecy permeates the narratives themselves, paying particular attention to Leigh’s film *Secrets and Lies*, Levy’s novel *Small Island* and Hopgood’s memoir *Lucy Girl*. Early in the chapter, McLeod insists on the need to put an end to secrets and lies, to echo Leigh’s film, not only in adoption procedures but also in adoption stories, for “[s]ecrecy ... amplifies feelings of fraudulence, powerlessness and insubstantiality” (43). In the analysis that follows, the author takes Leigh’s film to task precisely because it does not tell the entire truth, because it blurs “the material conditions which produce adaptability” and, more specifically, the racist “constraints which circumscribed adoptive arrangements” in England still in the 1960s (43, 49).

The second chapter looks at the import of socio-historical circumstances that both allow transethnic and transnational adoption to exist, and pervert the adoption system. In order to illustrate his point, McLeod chooses Braithwaite’s autobiographical *Paid Servant*, and two novels, Morrison’s *Jazz* and Barry’s *The Secret Scripture*. Even though the discussion of *Jazz* in terms of transcultural adoption is not so convincing as the other analyses, McLeod succeeds in showing how these texts compound “the mimetic and the symbolic, [...] the historical incidences of transcultural adoption and what can be made from them imaginatively” (89).

The third chapter focuses on the adopted child’s need to “trace” her/his birth parents, driven by a sense of “genealogical bewilderment” (Sants) that has also been critiqued by adoption experts as perpetuating the centrality of blood-lines in the construction of identity, a discourse that “would have us believe that each of us should be ever moored to a single, rather than singular plural, condition” (McLeod 210). As the author claims, race and

reunion texts like Emecheta's novel *The New Tribe*, or the autobiographical narratives penned by Pool (*My Fathers' Daughter*) and McKinley (*The Book of Sarahs; Indigo*), can open up venues for attaining "adoptive being through reconditioning narrative and figurative modes" (36). More often than not, however, the reunion that follows is not always as fulfilling as originally envisioned and does not necessarily "empower new possibilities of adoptive being" (36).

As the title of the chapter anticipates, in this last section of *Life Lines* McLeod postulates the possible "new bearings" that can help articulate "adoptive being" (36). The author explains the harmful consequences suffered by adoptees who try to adhere to conventional ways of identity-building along the lines of "race, nation, birth-place, "birth culture," consanguinity, biogenetics, heritage, resemblance, distinctive sameness" in an exclusive manner (180). In this final chapter, McLeod chooses to discuss four adoption narratives that either suggest or fully embrace the "multidirectional attachment" (224) characteristic of adoptive being: Kingsolver's *Pigs in Heaven* and *The Bean Trees*, where she puts forward "a new ecology of human relations that are post-anthropocentric and organically sanctioned" (182); Phillips's *Crossing the River*, whose "post-racial vision" stresses "the potential fecundity of transcultural crossing, connection and contact" (198); and, Kay's *Red Dust Road*, an adoption memoir that "leaves behind the split selfhood of being adopted, ever conscious of the road not travelled," and, instead embraces the multidirectionality of adoptive being, whereby "all roads are taken" (224).

"Victoria Station, 1969/2015," the title of the coda with which John McLeod closes *Life Lines*, is an apt site—or rather non-site—for a story of movements across cultural, national and, more often than not, ethno-racial demarcations. Having introduced Maria, a young mother who surrenders her child to adoption, at the beginning of the book, in the last page McLeod fittingly closes the circle with this Everywoman and her child. However, before that narrative resolution—for which I will provide no spoiler—the author has managed to cover an impressive number and range of adoption stories, both autobiographical and fictional, in a cogent and thought-

provoking manner. All in all, McLeod's latest book constitutes an indispensable contribution to the incipient but growing field of adoption literary studies.

WORKS CITED

CALLAHAN, Cynthia. *Kin of Another Kind: Transracial Adoption in American Literature*. Michigan UP, 2011.

HOMANS, Margaret. *The Imprint of Another Life: Adoption Narratives and Human Possibility*. 2013. Michigan UP, 2015.

JERNG, Mark. *Claiming Others: Transracial Adoption and National Belonging*. Minnesota UP, 2010.

MELOSH, Barbara. "Adoption Stories: Autobiographical Narrative and the Politics of Identity." *Adoption in America: Historical Perspectives*, edited by E. Wayne Carp, University of Michigan Press, 2004, pp. 218-47.

NANCY, Jean-Luc. *Being Singular Plural*. Stanford UP, 2000.

SANTS, H. J. "Genealogical Bewilderment in Children with Substitute Parents." *British Journal of Medical Psychology* 37, 1964, pp. 133-141.