

Public Mothering

How Celebrity Mediascapes Shape Public Understandings of Transnationally Adopted Families

Transnational adoption is a unique site in which to explore changing ideas and attitudes about kinship, womanhood and motherhood in Canada. This paper combines media analysis and ethnographic research with Canadian adoptive mothers who went to China to adopt children. It examines how ideas about transnational adoption are shaped in the media and in our communities. The celebrity provides a privileged site for contesting and negotiating how transnational adoption is understood by the general public. The media representations of transnationally adoptive motherhood are reflected back in the everyday interactions of adoptive mothers in their communities. Mothers who participate in transnational adoptions are constructed as either 'good' or 'bad,' both through the media and in everyday social interaction. Mothers are either perceived as 'saints' who save children from unfortunate circumstances or 'villains' who purchase children. This research points out how women will justify their decision to adopt by aligning their adoption stories with the discourse of 'good' adoption or 'saving' children. Transnational adoption is immersed in a complicated discourse of critique and praise creating a dichotomy of reactions to these public families. Families with transnationally adopted children become public families because the children do not look like biological kin. The media and the communities keep watch on these families, particularly the mothers and judge their reproductive choices.

Based on media analysis and ethnographic fieldwork with Canadian women, this paper examines transnational adoption practices between Canada and China. Specifically, I explore how transnational adoptions shape North American ideas about the family, motherhood and womanhood and how these ideas are characterized in the media. Adopting children from China is

a unique cultural phenomenon because the parents and children most often cannot be mistaken for biological kin. The media provide privileged sites for contesting and negotiating how transnational adoption is understood by the general public. Following Foucault, media productions can also be interpreted as serving to discipline women and their reproductive behaviors. By presenting models of ideal or vilified mothers, the media serves as a space for the cultural critique of the maternal choices made by women, particularly those who opt for transnational adoption.

This paper examines public reactions in the media to mothers who have adopted transnationally. In addition, drawing from my interviews with thirty Canadian women who had adopted children from China, I explore adoptive mothers' perspectives on media portrayals of transnational adoption. I also discuss reactions toward the mothers that I interviewed in their respective communities. As I demonstrate, mothers who participate in transnational adoptions are constructed as either 'good' or 'bad,' both through the media and in everyday social interaction. Mothers are either perceived as 'saints' who save children from unfortunate circumstances or 'villains' who purchase children. In the latter characterization, adoptive mothers are portrayed as benefitting from the unequal power relations between the global north and south or acquiring their children through corruption. This paper highlights the complexity of the public discourse on transnational adoption which straddles uncomfortably between tropes of child rescue and child kidnap (Briggs 2012; Dubinsky). Adoption scholars have astutely complicated the dichotomy between excessively positive and negative representations of transnational adoption. Historian Karen Dubinsky incisively notes that "adoption of whatever sort, works better in miniature than it does on the big screen. In the abstract it is hideous, but individually it can sometimes—even often—make sense" (cited in Seabrook 4). Similarly, sociologist Sara Dorow juxtaposes the different lenses through which transnational adoption may be viewed: "the joyful intimacy of the family next to the unjust history that it might recall" (3). The media representation of transnational adoption, however, is less nuanced, dividing adoption into representations that are either exceptionally 'good' or strikingly 'bad'. In this paper, I explore various representations of adoption in the media and examine how these images shape public understandings as exemplified in everyday interactions between adoptive mothers and people they encounter who react either positively or negatively to transnational and transracial families. This paper explores a number of themes related to the representation of transnational adoption in the media such as; the surveillance of women's reproductive choices, the construction of 'good' and 'bad' mothers, celebrity activism and the reverberation of these images into the lives of adoptive parents.

History

Transnational adoption has entered the North American collective imagination more profoundly in the contemporary era than in the past, due to the increase in numbers of such adoptions since the 1990s (Selman). The visibility of transnational adoption has corresponded with and contributed to a historical shift in domestic adoption, a shift toward open adoption in which children know that they are adopted and sometimes know the identity of their biological parent(s). Domestic adoption, historically, was a source of shame for both relinquishing and adopting mothers. The birth mothers were shamed for having given birth to illegitimate children and adoptive mothers were shamed for their infertility because having children was a means to affirm their femininity. As a result, adoptees were closed off from extended contact with their relinquishing parents and efforts were made to erase the child's past entirely (Strong-Boag). In the 1960s, adoption law moved away from matching relinquishing and adopting parents by religious affiliation. In the late 1970s and 1980s the rise in abortion, birth control and greater acceptance of single motherhood in North America resulted in a shortage of children available for adoption inside Western industrialized countries, a situation that has been named "the white baby famine" (Briggs 2012: 6). Also, increasing ideas about pluralism and multiculturalism, as well as reduced shame for adopting parents lead many couples to consider adoption more broadly to include trans-racial adoption.

The first overseas adoptions by North Americans came after World War II in the 1940s, when dislocated German and other European war orphans were relocated into the U.S. and New Zealand, mostly into military families. To a lesser extent, there were also placements of Japanese war orphans (Gailey 2010, 2006; Weil; Lovelock; Balcom). The first continuous flow of transnational adoption into North America began in the wake of the Cold War. These adoptions were motivated by anti-communist interventionist strategies and Christianity with a focus on 'saving' vulnerable Korean children in 1953 (Briggs 2012). The Cold War rhetoric of saving children has had a lasting legacy contributing to contemporary understandings of transnational adoption.

During the Cold War the visual culture of needy children was an important tool for shaping the Western desire to 'save' these children through adoption. The ethos of saving children was fostered during the Cold War by UNICEF and the Christian Children's Fund, organizations that encouraged North American families to rescue East Asian children in the ideological battle against Communism (Klein; Brookfield; Cartwright). In contemporary times, when transnational adoption is becoming more common and visible in North American communities, the media are an important space for contesting, and

negotiating, how transnational adoption is understood in the general public.

For Arjun Appadurai a ‘mediascape’ is the production and dissemination of imagery that influences the way people perceive reality. In this paper, one of the focal points of analysis is the celebrity. The creation of the figure of ‘the celebrity’ has been shaped by celebrity weeklies, tabloids and gossip magazines showcasing the personal lives of actors, musicians, models or anyone who participates in media culture and has come to the interest of the general public (Turner). In cultural studies, some scholars argue that celebrities offer a democratic space because broad public access to the personal lives of stars shapes them as ordinary people. Celebrities are jointly owned by the people who consume their images and in this way the public has greater access to media representations (Turner; Boorstin; Marshall). “The celebrity is usually nothing more than a more publicized version of us” (Boorstin 89). Celebrities provide a platform for discussing the interests and the fears or concerns of the general public about multiple issues, including transnational adoption. These popular icons and their fans actively engage in “the commodification of the self,” a democratic process in which the audience determines which icons matter, and who can stand as a reflection of their fantasies (Marshall 26). With respect to transnational adoption, the celebrity icon serves as a locus for negotiating and contesting how we understand non-biological families, adopting children from abroad and the relationship/responsibility between the Global North and South.

A useful framework for exploring the media portrayals of adoptive mothering comes from the research of Christine Ward Gailey (2006). Gailey argues that adopted children are usually depicted in one of two ways that is “the cheerful orphan or the delinquent” (83). She describes the orphan characters in film as either “passive and loveable,” or “active and evil” (85). Although my research focuses on adoptive mothers rather than adopted children, this dichotomy between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ is clearly apparent. In the next section, I discuss how the media exercise a form of social surveillance over women and their reproductive behavior, by presenting images of celebrity mothers who are either constructed as “saints” or “villains.”

Surveillance

Media scrutiny over transnational motherhood is yet another version of the surveillance of women’s lives and reproductive choices/behaviors. Feminist literature contends that the state keeps a careful watch over pregnant bodies, often referred to as “public pregnancies” (Berlant 1997: 80). Cultural studies scholar Anne Balsamo argues that women have become a “biological spectacle” and their wombs operate as a metonym, not only for the family, but also for

the state (1995: 80). This argument can be extended to include all reproductive choices, not just pregnancy. Lauren Berlant's (1997) work provides a detailed discussion of what she calls the "intimate public sphere," where private matters of sexuality and reproduction become public issues and subject to national debate. She contends that heterosexuality is central to American ideas of citizenship as "only for members of families" (1997:3). Therefore, achieving motherhood is an essential criterion for women to secure membership in mainstream American society and it becomes their duty as citizens reproduce the next generation. Berlant also explains how personal sexual activity and reproduction, once reserved for private life, have become symbols of what "America" stands for and therefore serves to outline how its citizens 'should' behave.

Just as family types that deviate from the heterosexual norm are subject to cultural critique, so too is the emerging phenomenon of transnational adoption. Like families constituted through surrogacy or through in vitro fertilization by gay and lesbian couples, families constituted through transnational adoption are being contested in North America because they stretch traditional ideas of the family. Moreover, the dramatic appearance of international adoption in celebrity culture as well as in the popular and news media signifies the movement of reproductive choices into the public sphere. Sociologist Deborah Chambers examines the transformation of fertility into a media spectacle. She writes that "the display of the pregnant celebrity, flaunting her 'ornamental bump', forms a powerful visual iconography of maternal beauty" (Chambers 1). Fertility becomes a gender performance, as these role models become "signifiers of woman" and solidify gender expectations that reside in motherhood (Chambers 2). The glamorization of motherhood, it is argued, can limit rather than liberate women with respect to socially acceptable choices concerning motherhood (Pitt 4).

Media surveillance extends to these celebrities who are scrutinized for how they look after giving birth. How quickly did they lose the baby weight? Are they wearing the latest fashions? The physical appearance of these celebrities has become associated with their maternal abilities. Britney Spears, for example, took a long time to regain her pre-pregnancy figure, and was shown in paparazzi photographs looking disheveled with messy hair, wearing track pants. Subsequently, Britney Spears was cast in the media as a 'bad mother'. A 'good mother' on the other hand, is a woman "who appears to be successfully juggling motherhood, career and sexuality, as well as looking stylish and trendy *all the time*" (Pitt 8). The images and reputations of celebrities can sometimes be dynamic and shift over time. For example, Angelina Jolie who was once a Hollywood "wild child," but has transformed her image to become a philanthropist, a good mother and a symbol of heteronormativity. Likewise, Britney Spears is "now a paragon of poise and responsibility" according to a

recent editorial in *The Globe and Mail*. Spears has changed her appearance and actions and is presented as a picture perfect mother in the media.

Celebrity Activism

The media representation of transnational adoption is also a space to explore the elements of philanthropy embedded in transnational adoption narratives. There is a long history of celebrity activism. In the 1960s and '70s several musicians and actors such as Marlon Brando and George Harrison were involved in setting up charities and organizing concerts to raise money and awareness for famine relief and refugees (West). Jane Fonda was an active spokesperson during the Vietnam War. Stevie Wonder lent his voice to the battle against apartheid in South Africa in the 1980s while Irish rocker Bob Geldof organized 'Live Aid' concerts to raise money for starving people in Ethiopia. More recently celebrities have been advocates and spokespersons for medical causes. Michael J. Fox advocates for stem cell research and Bono for AIDS research. The line between politics and entertainment is blurred. Well-known media figures are often considered by the public to be more trustworthy than politicians, thus when celebrities lend their names to a cause broader citizen participation can be engaged. The authenticity of celebrity philanthropy, however, is often questioned by the public because celebrities are perceived as needing to keep their name in the headlines between films or the release of new albums (West).

Female celebrities such as Angelina Jolie participate in philanthropy in specific ways. Jolie's activities are family-oriented and intimate, granting the public emotional access to her personal life. Angelina Jolie completely transformed her public image from a Hollywood wild child to a humanitarian and a doting mother (Littler). Media analyses of celebrity philanthropy conducted by political studies scholars, Jemina Repo and Riina Yrjola, discuss how celebrity participation in philanthropy is a highly gendered activity. Male celebrities such as Bob Geldof and Bono engage in international politics in very masculine ways. They meet with government representatives and have become spokespersons for the relief of Third World debt. Female celebrities such as Angelina Jolie are known for their engagement with women and children in areas of crisis. Repo and Yrjola argue that, "such depictions comply with beliefs about how 'rational' men act and understand politics while 'emotional' women care for society" (45).

'Good' and 'Bad' Mothers

The media also reflect the dichotomy between 'good' and 'bad' adoption through the public interpretation of celebrity participation in global affairs. Currently, the two most famous celebrity adoptions across borders have been

those by Angelina Jolie and Madonna. These celebrity adoptions embody opposite representations of transnational adoption similar to the dichotomy introduced earlier in this paper between kidnap and rescue (Strong-Boag). Repo and Yrjola explain why the two celebrities are perceived in such drastically different ways even though both women adopted children from other countries who turned out to have living parents. In these instances where the children were not orphaned, the rescue discourse became “problematic, untidy and confused” (Chambers 15). However, unlike Madonna, Angelina Jolie has not been depicted as having obtained her adopted child through shady or illegal actions. Interestingly Angelina Jolie’s image is depicted in the media as gentle, and she is portrayed as having a ‘big heart.’ Jolie has achieved this image through specific performances of femininity. Her philanthropic work is intertwined with her personal life and expressed through discourses of motherhood. Jolie’s wealth is not conspicuously displayed and symbols of class privilege are absent from media text and images of Jolie with her adopted children. In contrast, Madonna does not seem to embody the right kind of heterosexuality or conform to gender expectations. Madonna’s goodwill in adopting a child from Africa was questioned, with the public wondering whether the adoption was sincerely a humanitarian act or rather a “fashionable philanthropic whim” (Repo and Yrjola 55). Madonna was criticized for fast-tracking the adoption process and her behavior was presented in the media as unfeminine. Popular culture consumers found that she flaunted her wealth unbecomingly.

Angelina Jolie was interviewed for a seven page piece published in *Marie Claire* in 2007 entitled “Angelina Jolie Unbound” which is confessional and intimate, making her adoption of children abroad stand out as authentic (Littler; Connelly). During my fieldwork in Ontario and in China I met and interviewed thirty Canadian women who adopted from China. My discussions with Canadian adoptive mothers, I found that many of these women expressed positive views of Angelina Jolie. Kate, a 35-year-old married woman from suburban Ottawa, who had adopted in 2003 for example, stated: “I think she [Angelina Jolie] and I would be great friends, we have so much in common” (Kate Interview, May 19, 2009). Kate has a master’s degree and works for the national government. She married late in life and had troubling conceiving; moving her to chose transnational adoption as a means to complete her family. Later she explained:

Well, I think Angelina Jolie is great [laughs]. I love her! When I was a massage therapist we always had a subscription for People magazine, so I always knew everything happening with celebrities. But now I just get it when I go grocery shopping—I pick the long line up for that purpose.

She [Angelina Jolie] was doing it before anyone was doing it. I think she's great! (Kate, Interview, May 19, 2009).

However, adoption of children from abroad by other celebrities were criticized by many of my research participants because they felt that celebrities used their privilege to circumvent the difficulties and bureaucracy of the adoption process. Several participants expressed approval of celebrity adoptions so long as the celebrities went through the same procedures as any other family, rather than using their celebrity status to skip the queue or expedite the process. Kathryn Heigl, for example, was celebrated positively by adoptive mothers I interviewed. Kathryn Heigl adopted a little girl from Korea in 2009; she grew up with an adopted sister, inspiring her to adopt her own child. Korea has a well-established adoption program and Heigl went through the process with her husband just like any other potential adopter (Chambers). According to the adoptive mothers I interviewed, Madonna adopted from a country without an established international adoption program, did not wait in queue, instead using her celebrity status to proceed with the adoption and lastly, did not spend enough time in the country as per official adoption protocol. This dichotomy of reactions from adoptive mothers represents their internalization of the distinction between 'good' and 'bad' adoption. Adoptive mothers justify their reproductive choices by aligning themselves with good adopters. Many of my participants chose the China adoption program because it had a good, clean reputation for being free of corruption. Adoptive mothers seem to justify the adoption of children from China through colonial scripts that suggest that these children's lives will be better outside of an institution and in a 'modern' country. The ends seem to justify the means for these women because the adopted children are well-loved, educated and healthy in their adoptive families.

Transnational adoption is of great interest to the public because it challenges conventional ideas about kinship and reproduction. The presence of transnational adoption in the media provides a forum for contesting conventional ideas of the family and shaping the way transnational adoption is perceived in local communities. Since kinship is usually determined automatically at birth, and children adopted from China look different from their Western adoptive parents, it becomes necessary to 'do kinship' and create meaningful kinship connections (Thompson 176). The media serves as a space to untangle these connections. This process unfolds publicly through the media for celebrity and non-celebrity adoptive mothers alike. The media and celebrity culture have become spaces to negotiate changing conceptions of the North American family that extend beyond biology. Significantly, several of the participants in my research have taken an active role themselves in contributing to the public perception of transnational adoption through the media. One of these adoptive mothers,

Heather, is married to a professional writer. Heather is a 48-year-old woman and a teacher living in Toronto. She and her husband adopted a little girl from China in 2007. Heather's husband profiled their family in a piece written in a popular Canadian parenting magazine. Similarly, Kate wrote her Master's thesis in education on transnational adoption in her community, detailing some of the public responses to her transnational family. These examples demonstrate how the media can be a democratic force, enabling citizens to craft their own public representations. Clearly, Kate, Heather, and her husband have a strong interest in how transnational adoption is represented in the public. Several families outside the scope of my research also participate in media culture in similar ways, writing about their kind of families in the lifestyle section of their local newspaper or in national public interest magazines or blogs. These lifestyle pieces are light and written as one person's narrative. For example, in 2009, *The Globe and Mail* published a story coinciding with Mother's Day entitled, "I Became a Mother on Mother's Day" (De Vries). The article exposed one woman's struggle with infertility and the pain she had experienced for thirteen years on Mother's Day because she did not have a child. "But this story had a happy ending. It began with our decision finally to terminate the voodoo magic and adopt a child from China" (De Vries 1).

Community Reactions to Adopted Families

The public nature of adoption is revealed in my participants' narratives about how people in their lives and communities have reacted to their transnational families. Just as celebrity reproduction is monitored, transnational adoption at the grassroots level is also very much in the public view, and the adoptive mothers I interviewed experienced close surveillance for their reproductive choices. Significantly, public analysis of celebrity adoptions shapes the way that members of the general public respond to "ordinary" families who adopt from abroad. During my interviews, adoptive mothers frequently and sometimes feverishly discussed their community's responses to their families. Many interview participants described their encounters with strangers in public places such as grocery stores and restaurants. These encounters tended to be either outrageously positive or intrusive and somewhat inappropriate, mirroring the dichotomy between 'good' and 'bad' adoptions expressed in the media coverage of celebrity overseas adoptions.

Positive encounters with strangers included overzealous comments such as: "You've done a really good thing!" (Mary, Interview, August 18, 2009), "Those are lucky girls!" (Anne, Interview, May 20, 2009), "You're an angel! (Anne, Interview, May 20, 2009). Melissa, an adoptive mother in Ottawa reflected, "It's like the baby had won the lotto, when they see us they act as though the

baby had won the lottery, lucky, lucky, lucky!” (Melissa, Interview, August 23, 2010). Another woman I met who was a single mother to an adopted child and living in China, Stephanie recalls strangers saying, “Oh, it’s so good, you’ve got such a good heart, you’ve given this child a home and she’s so lucky” (Stephanie, Interview, March 18, 2010). Likewise, Michelle, a 43-year-old woman from Guelph, Ontario, gave a little more detail about these kinds of encounters, stating:

Everywhere that we went [as a family] people were thrilled that we adopted a baby from China. For example, last summer we were on our way to the beach—we were in a restaurant with the girls—[my husband] took them outside because they were acting up and I was paying the bill—someone stopped me on the way out. He said: “Are your girls adopted?” I said, “Yeah, they are from China,” and he said, “I can’t tell you what a lovely thing that you did.” We get this a lot, but we feel that we are the lucky ones—these girls are really precious, and special. (Michelle, Interview, March 3, 2009)

Other people in public spaces tend to respond less enthusiastically to these families and ask intrusive questions such as “Is she *really* yours?” (Jane, Interview, May 5, 2009), “What do you know about her *real* family?” (Kate, Interview, May 19, 2009) or “Are they *really* sisters?” (Liz, Interview, February 8, 2009; Anne, Interview, May 20, 2009). These kinds of questions are particularly frustrating for adoptive mothers because they undermine families’ attempts to construct kinship relationships that are based on adoption rather than blood. The mothers I interviewed recounted how they would respond to such questions indignantly saying “She is my daughter” (Jane, Interview, May 5, 2009), “We are her real parents” (Kate, Interview, May 19, 2009), or “Of course they are sisters” (Michelle Interview, March 3rd 2009; Anne, Interview, May 20, 2009). Michelle is a 35-year-old woman from Guelph, Ontario, who adopted two girls from China over the course of several years. Exasperated by these invasive types of questions from the general public, Michelle said to me: “Well they are sisters, not biological sisters, but why would anyone want to differentiate?” (Michelle, Interview, March 3, 2009).

In addition to responses that question the authenticity of their kinship relations, some adoptive families encounter comments that are mean spirited and accusatory. Some of the adoptive mothers have been denounced, in public, as “baby buyers” (Anne, Interview, May 20, 2009). Kate recounted having been asked, “How much did you pay?” and “What’s wrong with you? Why don’t you have your own babies?” She reflected, “You know these are the [kinds of comments] that you feel in your heart a bit” (Kate, Interview, May 19, 2009). Interestingly this kind of social scrutiny is not only performed by

strangers. Many of my research participants recalled that in fact, some of the most insensitive comments had come from people in their own close social networks. For example, some of my participants recalled hurtful questions from acquaintances or family members such as “You couldn’t take time out for your own pregnancy?” (Mary, Interview, August 18, 2009), or “Were you afraid of losing your figure?” (Kate, Interview, May 19, 2009). Jane described these kinds of comments as more awkward than intrusive, explaining:

It’s just odd—you don’t have norms for that or social context for that. And people also don’t have normative things to say back to us. I remember when we were telling people that we were adopting—I call it the 24 hour call back—did I tell you this already? That whenever I would tell people they’d say: oh, okay, so wow—and then they wouldn’t say anything. And then I would get a call 24 hours later saying—I want you to know that I have been thinking about you and I am just so excited, and so happy for you. So it took people—to go away and to think about it and go, “oh, that’s a good thing right?” You know they just don’t know what to say in the moment. And I had a lot of people say stupid things to me. I remember when we were at a party and some woman was saying to me, “well that is really creepy”—and then later at the party she said to me: “I just want you to know that I am really happy for you.” I think she was just like, “what the hell did I just say, what is wrong with me?” And she didn’t know what to say. If someone says, “oh I am expecting,” there is a whole list of questions you know you are allowed to ask such as: “when are you due?” “Are you going to find out what the sex is?” Blah blah blah. There is set normative questions that you are allowed to ask, but with adoption people are like: “uhhhhh. What do I say, what do I say?” You can see through their eyes that they are thinking, “okay, don’t be inappropriate, don’t be inappropriate.” There are just not enough norms, so I try, when I can, to help people out. I say, “Oh, okay, yes it’s a good thing.” Or if [my daughter] is with me I say, “yes she’s adopted” and I introduce it so that it drops the wall a bit and people realize, “Oh, I am allowed to ask here. (Jane, Interview, May 5, 2009)

Most of the women I interviewed are from the Greater Toronto Area, which is ethnically diverse; they found that if they were in public places alone with their children, people would often assume they had Chinese husbands. This phenomenon was especially pronounced for Cynthia, a 39 year old woman who has one daughter she adopted in 2006. She and her family live in Mississauga and her adopted daughter has a fair complexion. Echoing the sentiments of many of the women I met, Cynthia explained:

If I go out with [my daughter], because she is fair, her hair color is quite fair, I think people assume my husband is Chinese. And when [my husband] goes out with her they must assume his wife is Chinese. But when we all go out together there is that little triangular look from the mom- to the dad to the kid. You can see people try and figure it out- and sometimes they say something stupid.... (Cynthia, Interview, July 21, 2009)

Anne, who is a mother of three girls adopted from China at different times pointed out that it was not only difficult for herself, but that her daughters also had a difficult time dealing with intrusive questions and comments from their peers. She thoughtfully commented:

It effects everything—everything! We have become a very public family. At the beginning it's kind of exciting because you're so proud and happy and it had been a long struggle for us to get there. So but then it becomes invasive. But you learn how to deal with that and teach the children how to deal with that. The hardest thing is for them and now they are away from me during the day and have to deal with these things on their own. What kids can say can be absolutely brutal, brutal. And they will say it. Kids don't have that filter and they are nasty on purpose sometimes. It's—you can't erase the losses that my children have, I can't erase that, I think I have come to realize that it is very difficult to take a child out of their home country—any country. (Anne, Interview, May 20, 2009)

Similarly, Michelle, a 35-year-old woman living in Guelph with two adopted daughters, expressed concern about the impact these kinds of invasive questions have had on her daughters. Such comments and questions challenge the kinship relationships she has built with her children and undermine her identity as a legitimate mother. Instead, strangers' comments depict other woman in China as her daughters' *real* mothers.

When they are with me, I find, more so now because the girls are older—that people are pretty nosey. Now if I don't know them and people ask if they are sisters, I just say yes. That's it. But then of course people say, "So you got them at the same time then?" I don't want to talk about it in front of the girls because they are sisters as far as we're concerned; they fight like sisters, they are just not from the same area of China nor the same orphanage. But that's one question that is tough and irritating. [My daughter] will pipe up and say, "No, Mom, we are not sisters." You know what? That's what these nosey people have done to her. I spend time trying to correct this saying, "yeah, you are, yeah you are." (Michelle, Interview, March 3, 2009)

The visual iconography of helpless children in developing countries has provided powerful images since the Cold War era that have been influential in shaping Western ideas about saving a child through international adoption (Klein 2000, Brookfield 2012, Cartwright 2002). Popular culture can be celebrated for creating a democratic space where the general public influences who and what matters (Turner; Boorstin; Marshall). However, the media also acts as a space to monitor the reproductive choices of North American women (Berlant 1997; Balsamo). Celebrities involved in transnational adoptions who have public images aligning with gender ideals are celebrated and adored by the general public (like Angelina Jolie). Those celebrities whose public images clash with normative gender ideals are reviled (Madonna, for example). These value judgments then, in turn, shape everyday social interaction to non-celebrity women who adopt transnationally. Transnational adoption is constructed as a choice for the modern North American woman among many options for having children at an advanced maternal age. Yet, as this paper emphasizes, these ‘choices’ are subject to close social monitoring and are critiqued if they do not fit particular gender ideals (Solinger). The media also highlights, reinforces, and sometimes contests the distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ adoptions and adopters. Moreover, the media often presents adoption as a “second best” choice relative to biological kinship. Monitoring and surveillance do not only occur through the media; however. The same kinds of public debates reflected in media portrayals of celebrity adoptions play out on the local scene at the level of particular families’ experiences in their communities. The comments of strangers to Canadian parents with adopted Chinese children send public messages of approval or disapproval to those parents, and construct them as either “good” or “bad” adopters. Sometimes transnational adoption is linked too closely to consumerism and people feel that families *should* adopt locally. This perspective categorically defines all transnational adoptions as “bad” or “baby buying.” Likewise, the negotiation of appropriate kinship ties and gender expectations takes place both in the media and in everyday social interactions. The negative portrayals of adoption crystallize around three issues. First of all, ‘bad’ adoption is portrayed as a consumer activity, highlighting the exchange of money as a form of ‘baby buying.’ Older women delaying motherhood until “it is too late” are criticized in popular discourse for being selfish or for prioritizing career before family in a way that is considered unfeminine. Lastly, the power relationship between the Global North and South are considered problematic as people imagine well-off middle class white women outsourcing their pregnancies to women in less fortunate social and geographic positions (Goodwin).

The media, as a democratic space both shapes and reflects public reactions to transnational adoption practices. Media representations are in Geertz’s terms symbols that both show the public how to act or how not to act, and

also reflect changing public conceptions of how to act and not to act. Once an idea becomes familiar and it is assigned cultural meaning, it becomes part of our collective imagination (Geertz). The media are important spaces for untangling the new ideas about motherhood, womanhood and kinship brought to our attention through transnational adoption. My interview transcripts with adoptive mothers highlight the awareness of some of the tensions between these tropes, for example:

We [my husband and I] often talk about whether this is something we feel we are doing to help a child, to help a little girl and give her a better chance. It's really something that is difficult to get a grip on because actually we do a lot of work for charity. Five percent of our business profit goes to a children's charity and that helps more children than just one child. So when you weigh up the numbers—if you raise one child and put her through school in China and just the basic costs of raising a child—actually we could help a lot of children for that price—so that's when my husband and I are sitting up thinking, “well is this really selfish? What are we actually doing?” Because we are not infertile—we could have another child right away—I don't have an age problem right now with having another child. We have every possible option available to us to have another child and that's the one that we chose. So in a way it is a bit selfish, we do want another child to call our own. And we feel very happy about it—it feels right for us. (Janine, Interview, April 6, 2010)

Highly publicized cases of celebrities adopting children from abroad such as Angelina Jolie and Madonna highlight that in our collective imagination there are two kinds of adopters: good adopters and bad adopters, “child rescuers and child stealers” (Briggs 2012: 3). Good adoptions are philanthropic, magical and a product of fate, while bad adoptions are wrought with theft or the purchase of children. Both of these celebrities adopted children under similar conditions where living parents were easy to track-down and yet Jolie has been construed as a hero while Madonna is widely viewed as a villain. Adoption scholar Laura Briggs deconstructs this dichotomy between good and bad adoptions showing how transnational adoption is “simultaneously, an act of love and an act of violence” (Briggs and Marre 1). Couples, sometimes desperate for children, adopt internationally in a complex and flawed system but they bring these children up in loving families. The end result of well-loved children seems to overshadow the shaky beginnings. Moreover, the current and widespread idea about adoption is that a home, at all costs, is *always* better than an institution (Strong-Boag 2006). Briggs writes that adoption is popularly conceived as such that “while there might be fraudulent or coercive practices in adoption,

these exist only in some (bad) adoptions, preserving a space where adoption is an uncomplicated good thing” (Briggs 2012: 3).

The dichotomy between kidnap and rescue is false since the wide range of transnational adoption experiences tell us that it is simultaneously ‘good’ and ‘bad.’ It is such a complex phenomenon containing elements of love, care, consumerism and global flows of inequality. The transnational adoption narrative is simplified into popular tropes of ‘heroes’ and ‘villains,’ ‘good’ and ‘bad’ practices. This dichotomy, however, is created and perpetuated both inside and outside of the media. It is a useful tool for adoptive parents to separate themselves from certain elements of adoption which do not fit their ideology of child-saving. Some children, legitimately need parents, but there are so many complexities connected to the issue of transnational adoption to ever make a conclusion that adoption is a positive or negative practice (people consistently ask me, as an adoption researcher, to take a stand for or against adoption). Transnational adoption is a complex cultural phenomenon that blurs the dichotomy between kidnap and rescue. Cold war rhetoric has shaped the public to believe in adoption as a child-saving measure, yet in a new decade and a new cultural climate where women are heavily scrutinized for stepping outside of particular gender roles, overseas adoption of children is not so clearly about ‘saving’ children. It is uncomfortable and messy to conceptualize and not as straightforward as the Cold War images of poverty and child-rescue. This tension is reconciled into popular tropes about ‘good’ and ‘bad’ adoptions because, I believe, it is too uncomfortable to recognize that it is both. With so many couples desperately seeking to add children to their families, we want to believe that it can be a good practice.

References

- Appadurai, Arjun. “Disjuncture and Difference in Global Cultural Economy.” *Public Culture* 2.2 (1990): 1-24. Print.
- Balcom, Karen. “Early Days: Private Immigration Bills and Transnational Adoption into the United States.” Conference paper delivered at: The Canadian Historical Association conference, University of Waterloo, 2012. Print.
- Berlant Lauren. “The Subject of True Feeling: Pain, Privacy and Politics.” *Transformations: Thinking about Feminism*. Ed. Maureen Mcneil, Celia Lury and Sarah Ahmed. New York: Routledge, 2000. 33-47. Print.
- Berlant Lauren. *Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1997. Print.
- Boorstin, Daniel. “From Hero to Celebrity.” *Celebrity Culture Reader*. Ed. P. David Marshall. New York: Routledge, 2005. 72-90. Print.

- Briggs, Laura. *Somebody's Children: The Politics of Transracial and Transnational Adoption*. London: Duke University Press, 2012. Print.
- Briggs, Laura. "Mother, Child, Race, Nation: The Visual Iconography of Rescue and the Politics of Transnational and Transracial Adoption." *Gender & History* 15.2 (2003): 179-200. Print.
- Brookfield, Tarah. *Cold War Comforts: Canadian Women, Child Safety and Global Insecurity 1945-1975*. Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2012. Print.
- Cartwright, Lisa. Photographs of 'Waiting Children' in the Transnational Adoption Market, Special Theme Issue: "Transnational Adoption." *Social Text* 74 Vol. 21.1(2002): 83-109.. Print.
- Chambers, Deborah. "The Flaunting of Fertility: Popular Media Representations of the Maternal." 2009. MaMSIE.org. Web. Accessed June 1, 2013.
- Connelly, Chris. "Angelina Jolie Unbound." *Marie Claire Magazine* June 8, 2007: 125-132. Print.
- Dorow, Sara. *Transnational Adoption: A Cultural Economy of Race, Gender and Kinship*. New York: New York University Press, 2006. Print.
- De Vries, Glenda. "I Became A Mother on Mother's Day." *The Globe and Mail* May 8, 2009. Web. Accessed 08/23/12.
- Gailey, Christine Ward. *Blue Ribbon Babies and Labors of Love*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010. Print.
- Gailey, Christine Ward. "Urchins, Orphans, Monsters and Victims; Images of Adoptive Families in U.S. Commercial Films, 1950-2000." *In Adoptive Families in a Diverse Society*. Ed. Katarina Weegar. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006. 71-90. Print.
- Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books Inc., 1973. Print.
- Goodwin, Michele Bratcher. *Baby Markets: Money and the New Politics of Creating Families*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Print.
- Klein, Christina. "Family Ties and Political Obligation: The Discourse of Adoption and the Cold War Commitment to Asia." *Cold War Constructions: The Political Culture of United States Imperialism 1945-1966*. Ed. Christian G. Appy. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000. 35-66. Print.
- Littler, Jo. "I Feel Your Pain': Cosmopolitan Charity and the Public Fashioning of the Celebrity Soul." *Social Semiotics* 18.2 (2008): 237-251. Print.
- Lovelock, Kirsten. "Intercountry Adoption as a Migratory Practice: a Comparative Analysis of Intercountry Adoption Policy and Practice in the United States and New Zealand in the Post World War II Period." *International Migration Review* 34.3 (2000): 907-949. Print.
- Marshall, P. David. *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. Print.

- Pitt, Nicola. "Yummy Mummies': Angelina Jolie and Early 21st Century Representations of Mothering." *Re-Imagining Sociology: The Annual Conference of the Australian Sociological Association*. Conference Proceedings: Australian Sociological Association 2008. 1-13. Print.
- Repo, Jemina and Riina Yrjola. "The Gender Politics of Celebrity Humanitarianism in Africa." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 13.1 (2011): 44-62. Print.
- Seabrook, John. "A Child from Haiti." *The New Yorker*, January 11th, 2011. Web. Accessed April 17, 2012.
- Selman, Peter. "The Rise and Fall of Intercountry Adoption in the 21st Century." *International Social Work* 52.5 (2009): 575-594. Print.
- Solinger, Rickie. *Beggars and Choosers: How the Politics of Choice Shapes Adoption, Abortion and Welfare in the United States*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2001.
- Strong-Boag, Veronica. *Finding Families, Finding Ourselves: English Canada Encounters Adoption from the Nineteenth Century to the 1990's*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. Print.
- Thompson, Charis. "Strategic Naturalizing: Kinship in an Infertility Clinic." *Relative Values: Reconfiguring Kinship Studies*. Ed. Sarah Franklin and Susan McKinnon. Durham: Duke University Press, 2001. 175-202. Print.
- Turner, Graeme. *Understanding Celebrity*. London: Sage Publications, 2004. Print.
- Weil, Richard H. "International Adoptions: The Quiet Migration." *International Migration Review* 18.2 (1984): 276-293. Print.
- West, Darrell M. "Angelina, Mia and Bono: Celebrities and International Development." *Development* 2 (2007): 1-9. Print.