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## Mirror, Mirror

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### Adoption and Mothering in Film

*What narratives are being told about adoption, by whom and for whom, and what consequences do they have? How might my birthmother, adoptive mother or I have received and internalized messages about adoption and mothering transmitted via the pervasive medium of film? Barbara Estrin notes in her review of Marianne Novy's Reading Adoption how all of us are shaped, consciously or unconsciously by "the anxieties that cultural influences instill (217)." These anxieties, Novy suggests, must have shaped those women who have had to make difficult decisions regarding their desire, or lack of desire, to raise a child. Film, as one of the most pervasive and accessible cultural products, can serve as a mirror to the zeitgeist of the times in which it was produced, allowing viewers to think critically about the messages of such narratives and how, or whether, they have changed over time.*

*Adoption and illegitimacy remain primarily a marginal plot device in film. Those films that do make these themes central may have influence on how those inside and outside the adoption triangle view themselves. I look at a selection of films created over a period of seventy years about unplanned pregnancy and adoption. I hope to measure the shift in cultural images of adoption and mothering in film, or lack thereof, to gauge whether the anxieties that Novy mentions have been exposed or whether gaps, omissions and misconstructions remain.*

#### Introduction

*How adoption is represented in the literature and media people see affects how they will answer these questions [the meaning of heredity, the meaning of family, the role of identity, the role of culture, the rights of various parties, the role of the state]: even if they experience adoption in their own*

*lives, the way they experience it and the ways they imagine the experience of those at other positions in the adoption triad ... may be shaped in part by the cultural images of adoption they know.*

—Marianne Novy, *Imagining Adoption* 7

What narratives are being told about adoption, by whom and for whom, and what consequences do they have? How might my birthmother, adoptive mother, or I have received and internalized messages about adoption and mothering transmitted via the pervasive medium of film? Barbara Estrin notes in her review of *Reading Adoption* how all of us are shaped, consciously or unconsciously by “the anxieties that cultural influences instill” (217). These anxieties, Novy suggests, must have shaped those women who have had to make difficult decisions regarding their desire, or lack of desire, to raise a child. Film, as one of the most pervasive and accessible cultural products, can serve as a mirror to the zeitgeist of the times in which it was produced, allowing viewers to think critically about the messages of such narratives and how, or whether, they have changed over time. As with other forms of artistic and cultural representation, films are narrative constructions with visual and organizational conventions and stylistic devices that acquire meaning as social commentary only if understood as aesthetic creations rather than unequivocal markers of reality. Nonetheless, they form a part of common social interaction and, as such, have the ability to influence the construction of a particular view of reality. And if done well, they portray complex subject matter with nuance and avoid the binary oppositions found in most morality tales.

I look at a selection of films created over a period of seventy years that pertain to unplanned pregnancy and adoption, a topic I am close to as an adoptee, a girl privately adopted in the era of sealed records, who internalized the messages about secrecy and shame of the period. The films are roughly divided into two groups. The first group contains films from around the 1960s and earlier, which my adoptive mother and birthmother would have watched, and whose mores they would have, at least partially, adopted. I then look to films about adoption from the years when my mothers would have been living with the effects of their decisions about mothering and when I would have been growing up as a product of those choices. Through this analysis, I hope to measure the shift in cultural images of adoption and mothering in film, or lack thereof, to gauge whether the anxieties that Novy mentions have been exposed or whether gaps, omissions, and misconstructions remain.

## Historical Overview

Origins Canada and ParentFinders, two of the larger Canadian adoption support

agencies, provide recommended lists of adoption literature and cultural products for those wanting to know more about adoption, or issues for adoptees and birthparents. Although the list of recommended films is plentiful for releases in the 1990s through the 2000s, the offerings are slim for films made before this. The only suggestion from ParentFinders is *Delinquent Parents* (1938). The intervening time gap provides a space for investigating what might have been produced as cultural representation and why these works were omitted from agency recommended viewing.

In Hollywood in the 1940s and early 1950s, postwar patriotism and a desire to return to domesticity and normalcy led to a predominance of films featuring narratives about rescue and family building through adoption. Several films use adoption as a plot device for the star actor, whose selfless act is the only focus of the movie. Betsy Drake and Cary Grant's characters in *Room for One More* (1952) for example, already parents, visit an orphanage, which causes them to foster, then adopt, two more children. Other films are about the trials of infertile couples who struggle with the decision to adopt and, sometimes, find themselves pregnant after completing the adoption—such as Gene Kelly's comic farce *Tunnel of Love* (1950), or the musical comedy *My Blue Heaven* (1950). Some films examine the societal ill of illegitimacy, such the melodrama *Our Very Own* (1950), in which the plot about keeping the eighteen-year-old daughter's adoption a secret flies in the face of even adoption practice of the time. As Julie Berebitsky asks, "What is there so disturbing about the knowledge of being an adopted child? All that [*Our Very Own*] arbitrarily does is assume that the knowledge would be upsetting and then proceeds from there" (28). Adoption activist Penny Callan Partridge notes how such adoption secrets are a variation of "the Pandora story [which] dramatizes fear of the unknown, guarding of the unknown, and opening to the unknown, all central to adoption experience." Alternatively, films such as *Bundle of Joy* (1956) offer a comedic lens as it depicts an unmarried salesgirl who finds a so-called foundling on the steps of an orphanage and takes care of the abandoned child. Rather than delving into the issues of child abandonment or the lack of support systems for single women, the film aims for laughs.

Academic and educational films of the period fare no better. In schools at this time, the topic of adoption was still presented only as an offshoot of the sex education curriculum, such as it was, in which women are warned of the evils of sexuality and of their moral responsibility to prepare for marriage and procreation. For example *The American Catholic Sociological Review* printed a filmography in 1957 titled "Audio-Visual Aids on Marriage for Catholic Schools" so that teachers would have resources to promote Catholic doctrine and stability in future marriages. Few titles in the list suggest adoption or

unplanned pregnancy was discussed with other than shameful implications, and all films had a stated criteria of “developing insight, morale, emotional response and attributes that will make future adjustments in marriage less difficult” (Leila 46). A 1973 study of the most frequently used sex education guides over the preceding two decades in American schools reveals that only two of the listed films focus on the potential consequences of premarital sex (Maslinoff). *Phoebe: Story of a Pre-Marital Pregnancy* (1964) is told from Phoebe’s point of view as she imagines the possible reactions of her parents and her boyfriend discovering her pregnancy, which allows the viewers to make their own inferences as to what may be the real outcome. However, with her mother being portrayed as an ineffectual and lonely middle-class mother and her father, a tyrant, by implication, the viewers are invited to place blame solely on the family unit. The second filmstrip, *Sex: A Moral Dilemma for Teenagers* (1966), portrays similarly inept parents, who are censured for propelling teens into premarital sex. In neither film is there any indication of alternatives or next steps for the adolescents who find themselves in such situations; moreover, it appears the films blame individual or familial responsibility for the burden of illegitimacy, without acknowledging the greater systemic shortcomings or societal responsibility.

Several decades later, commercial films expanded the narrative focus of unplanned pregnancy and adoption. *Mighty Aphrodite* (1995), for example, tackles a variety of topics: the commodification of children in the adoption market, the question of primacy of nature versus nurture in identity formation, and the desire of adoptive parents for biological continuity. In this film, the adoptive father Lenny cannot fathom that his child, who has many talents and is intelligent, is not genetically related to him. Lenny seeks to reconcile the sublimated notion that “if adoption is second best, why is this child so wonderful?” However, the adopted child himself is neglected as a presence onscreen or “as a fully realized person with a right to know his origins ... he is a puzzle for Lenny to solve at a time when Lenny’s own life is in crisis” (Berebitsky 3). The child’s needs to understand his own origins or his conflicts surrounding identity and belonging are never pursued.

Other films are more assured in their handling of issues with nonbinary solutions, if indeed there are solutions at all. *Losing Isaiah* (1995) invokes questions about transracial adoption and the right to mother, and whose mothering claim—as a birthmother or adoptive mother—should supersede the other. It seems that the adults involved in the custody battle over a black baby fostered by a white mother are trying to serve the child’s best interests, but this appears questionable when the child is wrenched from one mother to live with a stranger whose only link is biological. *Secrets and Lies* (1996) explores the search and reunion of a birthmother and daughter, who were separated by

economics and ethnicity, and the complexities of such relationship building. *Juno* (2008) contemplates motherhood and illegitimacy, and the systemic and personal problems of both young unwed mothers and prospective adoptive parents. *Philomena* (2013), loosely biographical, also examines the common narrative of the unwed mother pressured to give up her child, but it also focuses on the effect of having to keep such a secret for fifty years. These films offer audiences a way to experience adoption and mothering in a richer, more vibrant, and less one-dimensional way, rather than merely as a narrative about societal ills or moral transgression.

The negative adoption subtext and suspicions about nonconsanguineous relationships, however, have not been entirely erased. In the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, the role of genetic predisposition played a dominant part in discussions of the perils of adoption. Some argued that not only physical characteristics but those such as “poverty or laziness could be inherited” (Berebitsky 28). As Berebitsky argues, “some also believed a person’s future lay at the moment of their conception [and that] taking an unrelated child into the home was taking step into the unknown” (28). The 2009 horror release *Orphan* still accesses these biases. The film features an adopted child from Eastern Europe as homicidal maniac, whose characterization outraged many advocacy groups, such the National Council of Adoption. *Orphan* was universally condemned for its violence and for implying that adopting can ruin the adopter’s life.

In contemporary times academic and artist-generated films, documentaries and exposés have proliferated, as the portrayal of adoption has shifted from fiction, sensationalism, and one-dimensionality to centring the voices of those who actually have experienced an aspect of adoption or relinquishment in their lives. In *Finding Christa* (1991) a mother confronts the daughter she gave up for adoption twenty-five years prior. *The Passionate Eye—40 Year Secret* (2010), a Canadian documentary, shows the difficulties experienced by birthmothers who were part of the 1960s sexual revolution in spirit but who were also trapped by the unavailability of birth control and abortion and by the prevailing social mores. The documentary *A Girl Like Her* (2011) juxtaposes educational footage of the early 1960s discussing sexual mores for women with the voiceovers of women of the period who had unplanned pregnancies and had to relinquish their babies. Unfortunately all of these films are not available except through select screenings, online purchase, or to accommodate academic audiences; the general public may not even be aware of their existence, which limits the efficacy of their analysis and their narrative influence.

This article, therefore, has taken the opportunity to examine some of the cultural anxieties about unplanned pregnancy and adoption in these academic and commercial films. It specifically asks how these films address unplanned

pregnancy and adoption over time and considers what issues are neglected or discussed, and in what manner.

### Sexual Impropriety and Illegitimacy

According to filmmaker Ann Fessler, by the 1950s, about 39 percent of unmarried girls had “gone all the way” and by 1973, it was 78 percent (*A Girl Like Her*). The crime, therefore, of most women over fifty today was not so much being a sexual being but getting caught. In the late 1960s sex was still being referred to as “the marriage act,” and if sex education was provided in schools, it was often cursory and limited, offering information on the mechanics of impregnation and perhaps advice on the rhythm method. Acquiring birth control, if and when decriminalized, was difficult and embarrassing. The pill and IUD were not usually accessible to single women; obtaining the most popular device, the diaphragm, required a doctor’s visit. Condoms were dispensed behind counters. Abortion was a crime. It is no wonder so many women lost the pregnancy lottery.

Such shaming over what was then considered sexual impropriety is demonstrated in *A Girl Like Her*, where clips from educational films of the 1950s and 1960s are played, which argue “all things considered, it’s the girl who sets the level of conduct on a date: [she] create[s] or prevent situations of sexual arousal or demand.” In the film, voiceovers from present-day birthmothers relate that if a woman became pregnant, she “brought terrible shame to [her] family or anyone [she] knew” and that if she had a child out of wedlock, she was not seen as “a good person.” One mother in the film notes that in 1972, if a girl was pregnant in high school or college, she was immediately expelled, and if she kept the child, she could not return.

Historically, illegitimate pregnancy was demonized, and the birthmother was punished for her social transgression. In the film *Delinquent Parents*, the mayor’s son secretly marries a young woman of a lower social class to legitimize their unplanned pregnancy; however, the mayor’s wife insists on her son leaving his wife and unborn child. The abandoned single mother wishes to keep her child but is pressured to relinquish and to keep the relinquishment a secret. She never marries again or has a child. Perhaps, this is a bit of moral punishment for her sin. In the spirit of the times, she is made to suffer for both her secret keeping and premarital sexual relations. Similarly, in *Philomena*, a Catholic teenager in the early 1950s becomes pregnant and is shamed and abandoned. Her father feels so ashamed that he tells everyone that she died and sends her to a convent; in this case, it is one of the infamous Magdalene laundries. The teenage Philomena delivers a breach birth, with no aid or medical support. According to the Mother Superior, “the pain is her penance.” After

three years of trying to care for her son, Philomena is forced to surrender all rights to, and knowledge of, her child. She carries this secret with her for fifty years, believing in her own culpability, as her faith and cultural milieu have indoctrinated her to believe.

Contemporary films, such as *Juno*, provide rare counter-narratives to depictions of unplanned pregnancy as shameful and of the mothers as lacking agency. The sixteen-year-old protagonist becomes pregnant after her first sexual encounter with a boyfriend, an encounter engineered and initiated by Juno herself: this is young woman in control of her sexuality, despite the subsequent consequences of an illegitimate pregnancy. The onscreen presentation of such an empowered character may demonstrate a greater respect for women who claim their right to be sexual beings and to have the right to make choices that work for themselves and their baby, whatever that choice may be.

### Relinquishment and Repercussions

The films examined herein depict the act of relinquishment with veracity. In the real Philomena's words, for example, the film carrying her name is about "the undying bond that exists between mothers and their children, something that I've found time and distance has no bearing on ... [the film] is a testament to the willingness to never give up on keeping that bond alive, even if all odds are pointing you against it" (Fleming). The entire film revolves around her courage and strength, and her ability to find out the truth of her son's existence despite the church's attempts to dismiss her claims. The success of her quest has reactivated a political awareness, called "the Philomena effect," in which the coercive relinquishment practices perpetrated by the state and church have been investigated, with adoptees and birthmothers seeking apology or redress.

Yet relinquishment and its consequences remain idealized and simplistically portrayed in most films. *Juno*, for example, glosses over two key adoption issues. First, Juno confidently waives her rights to further contact with her baby, a decision her adult self will likely regret. This critical, life-altering choice does not look as if it will come with any consequences. And second, she resumes her life exactly as it was before the pregnancy: she will continue high school without being outcast; her boyfriend will establish an even closer relationship with her; and her family will put all this behind them. No trauma or emotional aftermath over actually giving birth or relinquishing the baby is apparent. Such a portrayal could, seemingly, be a throwback to the older sentiments of social workers and other experts who said that giving up a child would be a small blip in an otherwise well-planned path to the normalcy of a legitimate marriage and future children. In contrast, in *A Girl Like Her*, many birthmothers comment on their lack of agency and the absence of compassion by

attending nurses or physicians. Several note that it was mere hours after birth that a social worker came to make her sign adoption papers, and anyone who did not was declared incompetent and might be held in a mental institution until she signed. Numerous mothers reiterate that the child was not always unwanted, but they had no knowledge of the options available to them. Many women might have kept their children had they had any relational, familial, societal or financial support, but according to Ann Fessler, from 1945 to 1973 in America, 1.5 million children were “lost to adoption” (*A Girl Like Her*). The lasting devastation of relinquishment is clear: of the one hundred women who were interviewed for the film, thirty never had another child.

In *Finding Christa* a birthmother operates with some agency despite the historical period in which her pregnancy occurs. The film features an older birthmother, Camille Billops, creating her own autobiographical documentary using film, interview, and old home video as a method of self-discovery and a means to confront the daughter she gave up for adoption in 1961. The mother explains that she is “sorry about her hurt, not sorry about the act.” There is a definite psychic split in mother and daughter: Billops “emphasizes the distance she keeps between herself and her subject while Christa expresses a longing to connect as a daughter and artist as well” (Deans 250). The most intriguing thing about the film is that Billops asks cousins, aunts and sisters, “Do you think I was justified in giving her up?” Many of the family members are unconvinced, which prompts Billops to notice, “When women want to change their lives it’s unacceptable, but when men leave....” As demonstrated in *Finding Christa*, agency is one of the key anxieties for those in the adoption triangle. How does one choice, or lack of choice, affect other lives so deeply? For many, this painful question has yet to be answered.

### **The Real Mother. The Real Family. The Real Me**

Another cultural anxiety of adoption is that of authenticity in motherhood. Berebitsky argues that in the nineteenth century, “middle class ideology held that all women possessed an innate maternal instinct and that this instinct was the essence of woman” (9). Motherhood, then, was a woman’s highest calling and pinnacle of achievement; social pressure forced women to fulfill these expectations. Those women who could not be mothers biologically were viewed suspiciously. “An unspoken hierarchy existed within the ideological system of motherhood. The apex of motherhood depended on successful passage through the perils of childbirth. Adoptive mothers were placed on the edges of this ideal—their maternity was based on nurture” (Berebitsky 9). The film *Tunnel of Love* is illustrative of such baby hunger and the desire to be part of an authentic family. In the film, a couple tries to obtain a child by any means



necessary. But when natural conception fails, they pursue what is clearly a last resort— adoption. The film contrasts this couple with the neighbours, the apparently fertile couple next door, who are visibly taken aback that their friends will pursue adoption. The couple who cannot conceive deliver the shamed admission that “We’re still trying to have one of our own,” which sets up the immediate distinction between types of child—biological and adopted, one being “ours” and one being “other.” The musical comedy *My Blue Heaven* also romanticizes the notion that all women wish to become pregnant and a woman’s destiny must be childrearing. The societal imperative to build a family by any means necessary is clear, and adoption was one viable option. “Films like these celebrated adoption” though, as Leslie Lindenauer notes, “it cannot have been lost on the audience, that worth it though adoption might be, there was no substitute for the real thing” (134).

Because of cultural anxieties, those affected by adoption must often discuss the meaning of family itself. “Representing adoption is a way of thinking about the family, exploring what a family is, that is at the same time a way of thinking about the self, exploring distance from the family” (Novy, *Reading Adoption* 2). This pull is part of the quotidian experience of adoptees, who may be told that the past does not matter, yet they know that it does in some measure. As Berebitsky notes, “the cultural discourse about adoption, especially since 1920, has been about the future, meaning and social function of the family” (3). The very titles of such adoption books as *Thicker Than Water* and *Like Our Very Own* point to the tacit understanding of the biological underpinnings of family, which appear to be one of the standards by which so-called normative families have been and are measured—a surprisingly insidious and conservative ideal that adoptive families must still emulate. As Sally Sales observes, “Adoption had always worked to simultaneously install a new family origin whilst sustaining the centrality of the previous kinship history [and] is constituted through a paralyzing paradox” (195). Consider a pronouncement on family and deviance in a 1966 manual on social policy titled *The Unwed Mother*: “the most important moral and legal rule ... is that no child should be brought into the world without a man.... the group consisting of a woman and her offspring is sociologically incomplete and illegitimate” (Roberts 35). Even now “white, Western two-parent families have generally been regarded, explicitly or implicitly, as the model or template against which we compare all families, regardless of culture, ethnicity, race or class” (Erera 2). Psychotherapist Sally Sales labels this model as “the hegemony of the traditional family” (7) and describes two broad stereotypical categories into which others who do not fit this model fall: the *deviant*, those far from the supposed norm, such as same-sex couples or teen parents, and the *variant*, such as adoptive and stepfamilies, who more closely emulate the model. Both groups still find they have to prove

their legitimacy, measured by a template against which they must, of necessity, always fall short, and, therefore, carry with them conscious or unconscious feelings of inferiority. The advance of new reproductive technologies has further reinforced old notions of the importance of biological reproduction in the creation of family, relegating adoption to an inferior position, desirable only when such technologies fail.

Another anxiety those in adoptive circumstances experience is their fractured and incomplete identity as individuals, and within the family unit. Andrew Harnack explains it in the following way: “Adoptees are more susceptible than non-adoptees to identity conflicts in their late adolescence and young adulthood; many seem preoccupied with existential concerns and have feelings of alienation and isolation resulting from the breaks in the continuity of life through the generations that their adoption represents” (256). Adoptees must integrate their social and biological worlds in ways that others do not, which may affect them to varying degrees. Hortense, the protagonist in the film *Secrets and Lies* has, for example, known she was adopted since she was seven years old. When her mother tells her on a plane voyage, her reaction is to stare at the clouds, which is, perhaps, a symbol for the ambivalence that she experiences—a surreal, ungrounded feeling. She feels that she is no longer a true part of the family and, thus, her very sense of identity is in question. In the case of birthmothers in maternity homes in the 1950s and 1960s, identity was also at stake. As Ann Fessler notes in *The Girls Who Went Away*, “girls were usually asked to take an assumed name when they entered the maternity home and used this fake name with the other girls, separating the pregnant identity from the identity she would resume when she went home” (139). It is unclear whether this psychic split was intended to actually help the young pregnant woman—who might have been able to distance her trauma by relegating it to this fictional other self—or whether it provided a modicum of comfort to the girl or her family with an extra layer of anonymity. Practically, it meant in later years that women trying to trace fellow women from the institute or children trying to seek information about birthmothers would be frustrated.

Recent film narratives continue to explore questions of authenticity, family, and belonging. *Losing Isaiah's* (1995) marketing campaign shows a white mother holding a black baby, with the tag line, “Who decides what makes a mother?” As Drucilla Cornell writes, “the custody battle between birth and adoptive mothers challenge one of our cultures deepest fantasies: that there can only be one mother and therefore we have to pick the ‘real’ one” (208). Unfortunately, the film falls into melodrama and manipulation, with a tidy shared mothering solution in which, as Roger Ebert writes, “No matter what side you are on, you will find your viewpoint expressed.” Moreover, Janet

Maslin of *The New York Times* notes the “impossibility of a viable ending to this story.” The audience is left contemplating how to implement a practical and equitable solution, one that honours the motherwork of both women, and the needs of a child who has had little voice in his own inclusion into either family. *Juno* calls into question another difficult conundrum: who may qualify as the real family or the real mother in adoptive circumstances. Although the film deconstructs some of the assumptions about the lack of power held by a young birthmother, Juno, nonetheless, adheres to a fantasy of who a good mother is; perhaps, it is a figure that Juno feels she lacks, since her first mother abandoned her and she has some relationship problems with her stepmother. In relinquishing her baby, Juno tries to ensure that the child will have a loving and stable home, which, for her, consists of a heterosexual married couple—a view that seems astonishing for a film made so recently and featuring a worldly, smart, and independent young woman. When the intended adoptive couple divorce, Juno questions whether the now single woman—one as close to the normative model of mother as Juno feels possible—is still the best mother she could choose. While the film leaves this unexamined, the assumption regarding the primacy of an intact nuclear biological family is clear. Juno, however, does change her mind when she spies the intended adoptive mother shopping for the baby that she still hopes will come. Love and suitability are subsumed to the material things that this mother can provide, and financial security, appropriate social status, and privilege outweigh any trepidations Juno might have held about what makes a good mother. In *Finding Christa*, Billops also questions who is suitable to mother. She reflects, “You know, I just wasn’t a very good mother.” She acknowledges that she exchanged motherhood for the freedom to travel and to develop herself as an artist, and alludes to her lack of a maternal instinct, which prompts criticism from her family and, possibly, the viewer. She commits a further transgression by giving up her daughter as a child rather than at birth. Yet rather than being condemned for relinquishing her child, perhaps she should be appreciated for trying to make her mothering and her career goals coincide for so long before realizing that the situation was not working for mother or daughter. Navigating authenticity in all cases is presented as complex, and these narratives may open doors for thinking about often overlooked issues of family and belonging, which are so central to people’s experience in the adoption triangle.

### Reunion and Return

Contemporary reports show an increase in those adult adoptees desiring to search for biological family, suggesting changing public opinion about searches, and the cohort effects of those born later when adoption did not hold as

a great a stigma (Muller and Perry). This is not to suggest, unlike general perceptions of adoptee search behaviour, that all adoptees or birthmothers wish to search or that searching will solve problems in the searcher's life. A 1983 study by William Feigelman and Arnold Silverman shows that actual searching and contact with birth relatives remains relatively rare (224). Yet Beth Waggenspack's research notes "unfortunately, large parts of the media and a few vocal adoptees have fallen victim to the assumption that all adopted persons must be deeply committed to serious searching." She goes on to say that "the assumption continues that those who are not now actively searching are just people who haven't yet started or who have repressed the desire" (78). Such fantasies still need to be unpacked.

Paris de Soto explains the motivation behind the adoptee's urge: "although an adoptee's search for origins may start out as a search for identity it ultimately becomes a search for narrative" (195). Novy, however, cautions against this reductionism of the adoption plot, a binary tale of adoptive identity-seeking and family. She explains that the two myths of family operate at two different poles: reunion or return is apparently the only goal. Either the adoptee finds the original mother and resolves that sense of fragmented identity, or returns after searching and after the potential reunion to see the adoptive mother as real, with no further desire to contact the original parent. *Secrets and Lies* demonstrates this struggle to find belonging through searching for origins and reunion. When her adoptive mother dies, adoptee Hortense decides to search for her birthmother and discovers that her birthmother is white—an unexpected shock for this young black woman who grew up believing she was part of a different race and heritage. The birthmother is an uneducated factory worker of low socioeconomic status; she is also an alcoholic and emotionally unstable, which are other marked contrasts with the affluence, stability, and privilege of Hortense. This collision of worlds suggests but does not further investigate the politics of privilege and power implicit in the adoptive transaction: women of little means providing babies for women with access to resources and support, one mother as privileged over another. Interestingly, the systemic abuse of black unwed mothers in providing affluent white women with babies is here turned on its head, although this is not highlighted in the film.

The subsequent reunion of birthmother and daughter is at first refused by the birthmother, and later grudgingly accepted as only a singular meeting. This reaction depicts the difficulty in establishing a long-term relationship with a birthmother, as the first meeting only represents one part of the interaction. As Muller et al. explain, "this process is rather complex because there are no social guidelines, scripts, or norms for the development of a relationship between adults who were adopted and their birthmother ... [they] must negotiate a mutual

comfort zone and make accommodations to each other's lives in order for a relationship to develop" (9). Secrecy, pain, and anger may remain inhibitors to success, no matter how invested each party might be. Unfortunately, the term "reunion" falsely implies a kind of mutual tie or bond previously established, when in practical terms, the two parties are strangers to each other, despite having met in utero. The reunion in the film is grudgingly accepted, but then follows Novy's cautionary fairy tale romance plot, as both birthmother and relinquished daughter are able to find much common ground in likes, habits, and aptitudes. Merry Bloch Jones writes that even reunions that appear successful at first may temporarily or permanently fizzle, once the need for answers has been fulfilled and once participants find that little actually holds them together. The reunion myth of adoptees finding their true family in the genetically related parent or sibling is just that, a myth, and the film manages to depict some of these fallacies, as the secrets and lies of the title are revealed in the denouement.

These more complicated filmic portrayals of reunion concur with the results of multiple researchers. Karen Rosenberg and Victor Groze argue that the past cannot be reconstructed or lived over again for adoptees, and Kyle Weir finds that adults in reunion spoke of how difficult it was to reengage with a birth family in adulthood, how shared genes made them feel at home, and how a lack of shared history made them feel like an outsider. In reunion, outcomes remain variable and unpredictable. Weir writes that "one or a few meetings might be enough ... facts are obtained, curiosity is satisfied" (79) and the birthmother may no longer be considered a mother but friend or acquaintance. Michelle McColm suggests that "an adoptee may to some degree continue to feel angry she was denied the right to know her birthmother as she grew up. A birthmother may never recover from the pain of separation and the loss of enjoying her child's infancy and youth even though she met them in adulthood" (200). Reunion is not the stuff of Oprah-style television specials. It is a non-negotiable relationship between parties who have much to lose and who may not be psychologically able to deal with the implications of a multilayered history and fragmented past.

Such lack of romance is displayed in more realistic reunion narratives. In *Philomena*, the majority of the film is about the painful search for a long-lost son by a birthmother who "only wants to know if [her baby's] alright." *Philomena* justifies her search as follows: "I'd like to know if Anthony ever thought of me, because I thought of him every day." In this film, there is no resolution. In *Finding Christa*, on one level, both mother and daughter appear to have gained a degree of comfort and closure in the reunion: in Christa's words, "Now that I know where I've come from, it's so much easier to see where I'm going." Daughter Camille estimates that in her mother giving her up, "She did better

and I did better.” Interestingly, on the other hand, there is a clear sense that the film *is* the reunion and will not continue once the lights come on. Reunion is not the panacea that dominant narratives suggest it is.

## Conclusion

Much of my own ingrained sensitivity about portrayals of adoption is a result of the cultural forces that have constructed, interpreted, and mediated my adoptive experience. Films that do make these themes central may have influence on how those inside and outside the adoption triangle view themselves. Many of the discussed films reinforce the hegemony of the nuclear family and the moral order that punishes deviation from the norm. In several of the films, those involved in the adoption triangle were marginalized, pitied, condemned, or “othered” by depictions that may have borne little semblance to the complexity of mothering in adoptive circumstances. Only recently has some shift in representation happened. The stigma and pain of the choices faced by birthmothers in the past linger to the present day. This is clear even in the credits of *A Girl Like Her*, where many women interviewed about incidents that occurred fifty years ago refused to be identified other than by their first names. Such a refusal indicates that adoption continues to be a traumatic event for those who lived under the prevailing norms of shame and secrecy, and the relaxing of such norms does nothing to alleviate the weight of what has been carried through the years.

The films discussed do not simply reproduce the social, nor are they are a “mirror held up to nature,” but they do interact with current and previous discourses, and may privilege some discourses over others: however, at the same time, they cannot be reduced to influencers of homogenous audience opinion. As cultural studies expert Juan Antonio Tarancón notes, “films enter into and fuel discussion and dialogue about those challenges that social transformation poses for the audience by constantly adapting—narratively and aesthetically—to changing social conditions” (455). In this way, these films are valuable forms of scholarship. Carefully constructed cultural products have the potential to help tell my adoption story and the stories of adoptive mothers and birthmothers. They have the power to evoke awareness and expose questionable practices, to emotionally engage, and also to shine a light on new truths from the past and from the present. Yet these products appear to be scarce. We need more films that engage deeply with the adoption story, expose ingrained beliefs held over from earlier times, and reject fantasies and binaries. We need films that do not shy away from complexity. Films then become not reflective mirrors but windows *through* which we can experience a more realistic, honest, and complicated portrayal of adoption and mothering.

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