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The ambivalence of adoption: adoptive families' stories

Abstract

The making of family through adoption is an emotionally and politically charged legal and social process. Both its historical and contemporary manifestations are characterised by ambivalence. Contemporary domestic adoption in the UK is at a point of profound reflection, as many of its ambivalent features are articulated at the levels of national policy making as well as within the micro political sphere of family life. Drawing on an online archive of adoption stories, in particular blogs written by adoptive parents, this paper attends to the affective ways in which this ambivalence manifests within adoptive families. Queer theoretical resources are used to engage with themes of haunting, absence and loss, the strange temporalities of adoptive kinship, and the complex politics of undoing at the heart of adoption.

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Introduction

> These stories are hard to tell for the same reasons they are compelling: they are part of relatively new, not fully apprehended social changes; they are politically and ethically charged; they involve stigma, power, longing, defiance, fear, and the will to love; they involve complex relationships to normalcy; they feature children (Gamson, 2015: 15).

This paper takes a close sociological look at contemporary adoption in the UK. Adoption, in whatever time and place, is always complex, contested, emotive. The specific context for the discussion here is the critical debates swirling around and within adoption in the 21st

century. Whilst these debates have wide reach, the empirical focus of this paper concentrates on stories produced by adoptive parents in the UK. The analysis, I suggest, has broader application. It is impossible to generalise about practices of adoption as they differ widely historically and geographically (see O'Halloran, 2015). However, summarising the International Conference of Adoption Research in 2018, Simmons and Dibben (2018: 417) noted that despite differences in uses of, and approaches to, adoption across the twenty countries represented, one commonality was 'the ambivalence that exists in most countries to the use of adoption for children in care where this involves the legal termination of the link with the birth parents against their wishes'. I suggest that this ambivalence lies at the heart of adoption, played out on an international scale with distinct geopolitical resonances, and also keenly felt at the level of community, family or individual.

This paper engages with ambivalence(s) by attending to an online archive of adoption stories, in particular blogs produced by adoptive parents in the UK. Blogs provide a space and form for telling stories and generating community around the sharing of and responding to those tales. They also provide an archived account of family life. Adoptive parents rarely tell anything like 'whole' or even coherent stories, and certainly not in public, partly because those stories are not theirs to tell, and partly because they are untellable (too complicated, hurtful, dangerous, partial) (Treacher and Katz, 2001). Instead, I work with the fragments those authors share. As the methods section details, blogs posts were collated and analysed, and later discussion draws on data from this process. However, many of these bloggers are experts in contemporary adoption, sometimes producing research-based outputs alongside their blogs. Their voices are therefore drawn upon throughout this paper, together with academic literature, to evidence points about adoption itself as well as to comment methodologically on the use of blogs as a means to communicate about adoptive family life.

Adoption itself is arguably at a moment of profound reflection, if not crisis, with several voices, including those of adopters, indicating that it is time for a radical rethink of what adoption is and means (Featherstone *et al*, 2018). Blogger Al Coates writes: 'I'm not sure where adoption will be in ten or twenty years. As an adopter will I become an ugly manifestation of a then unacceptable practice … the future of adoption seems

uncertain' (*Together*, 28 December 2018)'.[1] Possible reasons for these voices speaking out and/or being heard now might include increased openness with regards to the past and greater legitimacy around seeking and knowing family genealogies (Kramer, 2011). Challenges and possibilities afforded by the digital world are also changing the landscape of family relationships (Coates, 2019; Greenhow *et al.*, 2017; Neil *et al.*, 2015; Samuels, 2018), leading Simmons and Dibben (2018: 417) to ask 'whether adoption can continue in its present form in this era of the internet and social media'. Amidst these speculations, I argue that ambivalence surrounding adoption at inter/national policy levels, as well in in the intimate fabric of family lives, is a key analytic concept as well as a generative force in enacting social change.

In seeking to understand and mobilise the ways in which ambivalence is lived and felt by adoptive parents, I draw on the resources of queer theory, in particular queer theory's approach to temporality and navigating loss and trauma. A queer conceptual frame also informs the development of methods attuned to ambivalence and affect. My own (ambivalent) feelings as an adoptive parent and sociologist are key to this methodology. I am an insider/outsider to the world of adoption: my emic standpoint as an adoptive parent brought me to these debates in the first place and informs the discussion. I return to this in more detail in the methods section.

In the next section, I summarise the landscape of contemporary adoption in the UK before turning to present the theoretical and methodological approach I have taken in seeking to understanding how ambivalence characterises and shapes adoption. An account is given of methods used to generate the online archive. I then utilise material from the blogs, considering firstly the ways in which adoptive children's histories and birth family 'haunt' the present of their adoptive family life before attending more closely to the queer temporalities of adoption which defy linear and progressive logics. Finally, I consider the ways in which paradoxes at the heart of adoption require adopters to be 'against themselves' as they simultaneously critique and enact adoptive parenting.

Contemporary domestic adoption in the UK

Adoption is uncomfortable. It's an imperfect solution to a tragedy. Adoption only happens when a family has fallen apart. It's rooted in pain. It raises questions about identity and family. It's awkward to live with and to talk about. (Frogotter, *Should You Adopt*, 16 October, 2017)[2]

Adoption in the UK is a legal solution for children whose birth families are deemed unable to care adequately for them. The decision to place a child permanently with a family with whom they have no existing kinship[3] is arrived at through a series of complex and often lengthy social and legal interventions and is seen as a case of last resort 'when nothing else will do' (McFarlane, 2016: np). The nature of this definition and process means that new-born or very young babies are not placed with an adoptive family[4]: the average age of adoption in the UK in 2017 was 3 years 4 months (DfE, 2017:13). In the UK's relatively politically and socially liberal context, access to contraceptives and abortion means few babies are 'relinquished' as 'unwanted' by birth parents. More often, children are removed from birth parents against the parent's (or parents') wishes, and in the deeply unequal relationship between birth parent and state representatives, 'consent' can be a fraught and contested concept (Featherstone *et al.*, 2018). Birth parents who have their children removed by the state are themselves routinely dealing with hardships such as mental, cognitive and physical illness/ disability, abusive relationships, drug and alcohol addictions, and the effects of poverty and social exclusion (Gupta, 2018; Tepe-Belfrage and Wallin, 2016; Welch, 2018). Such parents, in particular birth mothers, are subject to discourses of individualisation and blame (Edwards *et al.,* 2016) and provision for supporting birth parents to care for their children can be inadequate (Featherstone *et al.*, 2019; Neil 2007; White *et al.*, 2019). In this context, most children who are placed for adoption have experienced difficult and often damaging in-vitro and/or early life experiences such as exposure to drugs and alcohol, witnessing or being subject to violence, and various forms of severe neglect (Gupta, 2018; Narey, 2013). Their age at adoption can mean they have experienced multiple moves and different caregivers before being placed with their 'forever family'.[5] Such factors can have consequences for the developmental and social experiences of children who are adopted (see Hughes and Baylin, 2012).

Notwithstanding the complexity of these arguments, and the valid critiques of an oversimplified deployment of 'brain science' by policy makers (Edwards *et al.,* 2015; Gillies *et al.,* 2017; Wastell and White, 2017), children's early experiences of trauma and neglect necessarily play out in their later lives, often in the form of attachment difficulties resulting in 'challenging' behaviours (Elliot, 2013). In anticipation of these behaviours, adoptive parents are routinely steered towards 'therapeutic parenting' approaches based on attachment and neuro-scientific understandings of children's emotional and cognitive development (Mackenzie and Roberts, 2017). Increasing media and policy attention is being paid to the common and often serious difficulties faced by adoptive families, including Child to Parent Violence (Thorley and Coates, 2018) and a rise in adoption breakdowns where the child is no longer able to live with their adoptive family (Selwyn *et al.,* 2015). There has been targeted funding (in England only) enabling adopters to access therapeutic support for their children in the form of a national Adoption Support Fund, though many see this as barely scratching the surface of the problem and its future is uncertain (Harte, 2017).

Another important feature of contemporary UK adoptions is that they are (or should be) 'open'[6] in the sense that adoptive parents are expected to share their adoptive children's life-story with them as they grow up, and in most cases to maintain some contact with birth family, whether direct (e.g. meeting up) or indirect (e.g. regular letters exchanged via social services) (see Neil *et al.,* 2015). Sales (2012: 4) notes that 'The clean break with the past approach has been replaced with an adoption experience that far from deleting the past endorses and provides continuity with it … adopted children live their histories differently in the contemporary era'. The extent to which this openness and continuity works in practice varies enormously (Neil, 2018). However, even at its most indirect and limited, it requires that families shift their conceptualisations and narratives of past, present and future in order to accommodate other kin in their adoptive child's life. This occurs in material ways, such as forging and sustaining relationships with birth family members through encounters, letters, photographs and gifts (Holmes, 2019) as well as discursively and affectively through the child's memories and imaginings of birth family.

Whilst all adoptive families are different, they have all, to greater or lesser degrees, come into existence through loss and trauma, and must forge attachments through and against

these relational uncertainties and complexities. As Frogotter's blog post observes, 'Adoption only happens when a family has fallen apart. It's rooted in pain'. An adopted child has lost their birth parent/s (as active parent/s) and must undergo a fundamental separation from, at a minimum, their birth mother. This trauma is noted in psychological accounts of adoption as 'the primal wound' (Verrier, 2009) and marks a profound psychic injury which in the lives of many adopted children will be compounded by subsequent moves between foster carers and further losses of these temporary (but often significant) attachment figures.

This brief summary highlights a number of the paradoxical and ambivalent features of adoption. Questions regarding the justification for removing children permanently from their birth families may be silenced or hidden beneath the weight of evidence and concern about children's welfare and a political and moral discourse of positivity around adoption (Featherstone *et al.*, 2018). Despite the absolute nature of this removal in legal terms, birth family retain a presence (often an absent-presence) in the adoptive family, with the nature and effects of this presence changing over time. The making of family through adoption involves the breaking of relationships with birth family and the happiness, security and belonging evoked by becoming a 'forever family' sits alongside the grief and loss that precipitated it.[7] In the next section, I consider the theoretical resources necessary to access and make sense of these ambivalences and their manifestations before presenting the methods used.

Feeling ambivalence: queer theory and methodology

> … ambivalence is in fact fundamental to both the past and the present. It animates political struggles over and with precisely those objects we imagine we inherit as knowable, and it runs back and forth across time to challenge progress or loss narratives about where we come from and what political terrain we occupy now (Hemmings, 2018: 5).

Hemmings (2018) is writing here in relation to our contemporary knowledges around gendered, racial and sexual inequalities; however, the work of ambivalence as she

6

articulates it describes perfectly the political terrain of adoption and the temporalities of 'adoption knowledge' at both abstract and empirical levels of analysis. Arguably, ambivalence is rooted in all understandings of 'family', adoptive or not. Ribbens McCarthy (2012: 70) notes that the language of 'family' is powerful 'precisely because it does act as a repository and expression for deep but ambivalent desires for – and, sometimes, fears of – belonging and connection'. Ambivalence and affect are intertwined here, and as I go on to discuss, in the online archive of adoption stories multiple ambivalences are articulated through affective means. In making sense of the ways in which ambivalence is lived and felt by adoptive parents, I draw on conceptual resources offered by queer theory.

Queer theory evades concrete definition, but I use queer here in its expansive mode as an interdisciplinary, troublesome form of enquiry. Although the core work of queer theory has been in the service of challenging and deconstructing sex and gender formations, since its inception queer has had wider remit. Sedgwick (1994: xii) famously defined queer as 'a continuing moment, movement, motive-recurrent, eddying, troublant. The word "queer" itself means across – it comes from the Indo-European root – twerkw, which also yields the German quer (transverse), Latin torquere (to twist), English athwart' and she notes that 'a lot of the most exciting recent work around "queer" spins the term outward along dimensions that can't be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all' (Sedgwick, 1994: 8-9). Similarly, for Halperin (1997:23) queer is '… whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant'. It is this capacity to operate 'at odds with the normal', troubling, transversing, twisting and thwarting which makes queer a powerful resource for understanding adoptive families. These disruptive and oppositional features of queer theorising emerge from its origins in radical activism against LGBT oppression and the AIDS crisis (Amin, 2016). Loss, trauma and shame haunt queer narratives and the affective energies generated by such experiences are a mobilising force in contemporary queer politics (Gould, 2009; Munoz, 2009). This recognition that affective engagement with the past informs the present and future guides queer theory's approach to working with non-linear and complex temporalities (Love, 2007; Munoz, 2009; Halberstam, 2005). These accounts provide useful resources for understanding the experiences of adoptive families, whose non-biological becomings and routine experiences of dealing relationally with the

effects of loss, trauma and biographical disruption present (as we shall see) challenges to linear and progressive accounts of time.

Integral to queer theory's temporal interventions is a queer understanding of archive. Methodologically, it is useful thinking with and about adoption in archival terms. Blogging engenders a digital archive of adoption stories, and I suggest that the ambivalent archive I consider here works against the grain of authorised and hegemonic knowledge production about adoption, families and parenting, in keeping with queer archives and archival practices (Cvetkovich, 2003; Lauzon, 2015; Muñoz, 1996). The blogs themselves serve as a reverse-chronology of a family's stories (Hookway, 2008), often going back over many years to when the author was at the 'beginning' of their adoption 'journey'. One blogger puts it as follows: 'I … hope that, one day, this blog will serve as the story of Katie and Pip's life so I can offer them memories and a sense of their childhoods' (Gem, *The Lady Behind the Stork*, 15 March 2012).[8] In Derrida's (1996: 91) classic account of the archive he describes 'archive fever' as 'A compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire … an irresponsible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement'. Such compulsion is integral to adoption at both policy and experiential levels. Official adoption archives, as held by Local Authorities and Regional Adoption Agencies, document and authorise the legal transfer of family and parental responsibility, whilst paradoxically preserving the facts of children's origins (see Sales, 2012: 51). Compulsion is also evident in stories in the online archive, as parents and children return to memories, places, stories of origin, telling and re/telling aspects of family life. My use of archive to describe working with these online resources draws on Cvetkovich (2003), Ahmed (2010, 2012), Halberstam (2005, 2011) and Hemmings (2018) who in different ways generate and celebrate archival processes as alternative modes of knowledge production, resisting dominant and authoritative accounts in favour of active, collaborative and affective live resources. Following Ahmed (2010) this assemblage of materials could be considered an 'unhappy archive'. Unhappy archives emerge from feminist, queer, antiracist and politically revolutionary histories: movements whose urgency and momentum come from injustice and trauma and are fuelled by negative affects such as anger, sadness and shame where the 'unhappiness' is *generative*. The adoption archive I consider operates on a similar 'double-edge', documenting tales of sorrow but simultaneously full of hope, reflecting the funny

possibilities of trauma and the momentous significance of banal events and interactions. The adoption archive thus presents a diverse, messy, conflicted, affective and often reflexive space. It holds and enables ambivalences around adoption at both the micro political detail of family life and wider discourses circulating around adoption.

Methods

My experiences as an adoptive parent initially led me to adoption blogs as a source of support and community. Locating yourself as a researcher and accounting for the partial perspective such a stance provides is standard practice for feminist scholars (Haraway, 1991). There is also a tradition of this methodological approach within sociological and queer accounts of family (see Gabb, 2018; Gamson, 2015; Mackenzie and Roberts, 2017; Nelson, 2015; Park, 2013; Paechter 2013). Although I do not present my own experiences of parenting, these provided the knowledge that there is something very interesting and complicated going on in contemporary adoptive families, and a hunch that those things – understood sociologically – have much to contribute to wider debates around family and kinship.

In practical terms, the research proceeded as follows. Having decided to use the online adoption community as a research site I began with resources suggested by two peer communities of which I am a member: Adoption UK (AUK) and New Family Social (NFS).[9] Both these agencies offer online forums for members to engage in discussion. The extensive and diverse information from these forums informs my analysis but I do not use material from them directly: NFS is a 'members' only site' and although AUK's is publicly accessible, and people use pseudonyms when they post, there is nonetheless a 'private' feel to the space with an attendant ethics of participation. Both sites provide lists of members' blogs, which offer more 'crafted' and public-facing narratives. Many blogs link to each other via explicit cross-referencing facilitated by 'The Adoption Social'[10] which hosts 'The Weekly Adoption Shout Out': 'the most comprehensive collection of adoption related blogs in the UK'. Once connected to this network, new blog alerts appeared in my inbox and the archive assembled itself. Although publicly available, where material from the blogs has been directly cited, I have sought permission from the author to use their words in this new

context. Overall, I read forty blogs, dating from 2010 to 2019. I analysed the postings, attending to online texts, images and audio/visual recordings. I followed links as they occurred, clicking through from twitter to blogs, from podcasts to research findings, media articles and so on. Whilst reading and listening to the adopters' texts and voices, I noted common themes. I narrowed my analysis to focus on blog posts which were commenting directly on adoption itself or on the specific experiences of adoptive families (rather than for example sharing recipes or craft activities).

Blogs provide a useful way to access people's own accounts of their experiences, unmediated by researcher questions or prompts. Blogs provide authors a space in which to tell their stories in a public forum and to capture and archive the activities, experiences, emotions of the present. It is not unusual for a blog post to recount what happened that day. This not to suggest that the writing and publishing of blog posts is not a careful and performative process, but to recognise that blogs provide the authors with a way of sharing their experiences soon after they occur and whilst memories and emotions of the events being described are still 'live'. In this way they provide relative 'immediacy' in accessing people's thoughts and feelings (Knudsen and Stage, 2015: 12). As one blogger puts it, 'Blogging … can reveal the subjects that are still fully taboo – or at least too scary – to talk about, and lay bare the things I'm just not ready or equipped to talk about fluently' (Mumdrah, *Blogging*, 6 January 2018).[11] Although dominated by the author's self-narrative, most blogs enable readers' comments, providing a dialogic element to the story-telling, and posts are routinely shared publicly via social media platforms in the form of other blogs, videos, twitter and discussion groups. Such materials constitute an online assemblage of texts, images and spoken word. This dynamic and dialogic space generates and sustains an online adoption/fostering community, functioning as what Berlant (Berlant and Prosser 2011: 180) might call an 'intimate public' of 'strangers formed into communities by affective ties'. This is evidenced by Mumdrah's reflections that blogging

> … helps me feel connected. It helps me rally and collect my own thoughts. It helps me feel stronger about my parenting … Blogging helps me feel less alone in the wee hours of the night after a day that has taken me to the very brink of despair …

> Blogging helps me take a place amongst my peers in this fraught and flawed community made up of adopters and adoptees.
>
> (*Blogging*, 6 January 2018)[12]

The remainder of the paper now turns to consideration adopters' blogs through the lens of ambivalence.

Ambivalent histories: ghostly families

In the extract below, Blogfox recounts her son's experience of how his pet hen dying and then his dad going away for three days triggered a deeper sense of loss:

> Its times like this when being adopted is different. For children who have not lost an entire previous life, losing a pet does not spiral into wondering whether daddy really will come back ... It doesn't make them think about the mysterious woman who gave birth to them or the family they never see. It doesn't make them fearful of losing everything all over again ... The threat of real loss is never too far away when you're adopted ... I wonder whether that will fade over time or whether the threat of loss will always haunt him like this.
>
> (*Fear of Loss,* 14 June 2018)[13]

Blogfox uses the metaphor of 'haunting' to express the very real and present feeling of past loss. Birth family are often missed and mourned in this difficult way. In adoption commentary it is widely recognised that 'birth parents ... often occupy a significant place in the thoughts and emotions of adoptive parents and adopted children ... regardless of the form or extent of contact the family had with birth relatives' (McDonald, 2016: 52, see also Fravel *et al.,* 2000; MacDonald and McSherry, 2011). Writing about post-war adoption practices, where secrecy surrounded the process and foreclosed mourning for birth and adoptive families and their children, lost attachments 'sustained a ghostly and enduring presence within the adoptive family' (Sales, 2012: 72). Despite the legislative shift to 'openness', references to ghosts and haunting still pervade the online adoption archive. Mumdrah asks in her blog:

Will we simply leave out all the trauma from every tale, or dare to open Pandora's Box on the pain we invoked in each other? Will our memories of events always be tormented by shame (and will our retelling always reopen old wounds, unearth new ones, or create new layers of pain)? Will these ghosts of our past and our present inform the way we can look back on our lives in the future … forever?

When every story we have comes with a dark side of trauma, will we dare to look back to the future at all?

And perhaps worse; in the future, will we even be together to reflect at all?

(*Back to the future*, 28 November 2017)[14]

Here we see the complexity of family life: the shame of which Mumdrah speaks is not (just) the 'primal loss' but the sedimented traumas of 'the pain we invoked in each other', the ways difficult family relationships, arguments, impasses, overlay like 'wounds' and shape future possibilities. The ghosts are not just spirits 'of our past' but are 'live' in the present, and the 'perhaps worse' speculation, emphasised in italics, considers the potential of no future as a family. In adoptive parent Matthew Blythe's poetic account of Christmas-induced trauma, the idyll of family captured in the still snow globe is exploded by 'the ghost of Christmas past', coming in the form of some sensory trigger: 'A sight, a sound, a smell. You are dragged right back in time' (*Snow Globe*, 22 December 2017).[15]

Adopted children's birth relatives linger in a time and space between life and death/ absence and presence. Often they cannot be mourned with the finality of death but their loss is experienced as an ongoing event, with no knowledge as to when and if it will 'end'. Such a time/space resonates with Eng's (2010: 183) idea of the 'nonvisible':

Emerging in between the dialectic of visibility and invisibility, the non-visible indexes the realm of forgetting, which demands its own epistemological coordinates and ontological consistency. An in-between thus marks losses that can only be indexed by acts of haunting and imagination.

Of course, such hauntings affect birth families too (see Morriss, 2017). They are also evoked on an international scale: Simmons and Dibben (2018:417) note that 'historical evidence of forcible removal of babies … haunts many countries'. Queer theorists, such as Love (2007) and Eng (2010) cited above, have much to bring to sociological understandings of haunting and imagination as socially significance occurrences. Despite a revival of interest in 'hauntology' (Blackman, 2015; Derrida, 1994; Fisher, 2014; Gordon, 1997) offering rich conceptual resources, there is scope for more work to be done on the empirical implications of researching non-visible and untimely phenomena. I suggest here that adoptive families are an important site for such investigation, bringing questions of the ghostly into sociological debates on kinship.

Ambivalent temporalities: feeling backwards

Within adoption and fostering studies, attempts to account psychologically and narratively for 'holding in mind' absent family have used the concept of 'boundary ambiguity' (Boss and Greenberg, 1984; Fravel *et al.*, 2000; Rustin, 2008): this captures the spatiality but not the temporality of the affective equivocality of adoption. Queer theory provides rich resources for understanding and feeling the past, present and future in ways that defy normative and progressive accounts. Attention to the ordinary detail of adoptive family lives reveals alternative temporalities through which kinship is enacted and inhabited. Such temporalities align with definitions of 'queer time': for many queer subjects, the temporalities of life are often seen as running counter to the normative markers of 'reproductive time': birth, marriage, reproduction, death (Halberstam, 2005:2). Similarly, adoptive families do not always keep reproductive time and their stories reflect a temporality of loss rather than progress. Coates recounts in his blog how

> I … feel a deep sadness for the lost days. I didn't make a panic dash to hospital, or get a call to come now. That I didn't walk nervously out of hospital with them, hold them close in the first hours of life, nervously worrying about what lay ahead. Those joys and fears belong to strangers, they're all lost to us, they're lost to them …

> A missing story seems sadder than a sad story.

Like words in Blackpool rock there sometimes seems to be sadness running through our lives that cannot be extracted. (*Blackpool Rock*, 16 February 2017)[16]

Coates captures here the loss of ordinary experiences and memories, both his own and his children's. The ways in which such losses are viscerally marked as 'absence' rather than 'sad presence' is significant. Many queer subjects, however positive the present and future may feel, are haunted by the conditions of their (queer) becoming: shame, rejection, abjection. As Love (2007) puts it, queers must 'feel backwards' in order to find (politically, socially, emotionally) acceptable ways of inhabiting the present. So it is for adopted children and their adoptive families: family scripts need to be constructed out of these affects. It is hard to mourn something that is simply missing and perhaps it is this inability to mourn that makes the sadness unextractable from their lives, echoing Freud's concept of melancholia as 'unresolved grief' (Eng, 2010: 115).

Telling family stories is central to becoming and doing family and sharing memories is key to identity and belonging (Davies, 2015; Miszal, 2003; Smart, 2011). Misztal (2003) notes that families are collections of memories as much as actual people and Smart (2011: 543) emphasises the normative linear temporalities of belonging to family:

Being part of a lineage carries with it echoes of the past, plus an embeddedness in what went (or who went) before. The past and the present are therefore entwined and each give meaning to the other … it is the ability to remember one's past that gives a person a sense of self which continues even though everything else changes.

What does this mean for adopted children and their families, for whom lineage may be fragmented, missing, or unreliable: not a 'line' at all?[17] This lack of linearity is apparent in the stories in the archive. In Matthew Blythe's blogs, images of reflection and refraction reoccur in the form of the snow globe, a broken mirror, a camera; devices which connect temporalities or look at the present and future through the (often fragmented) lens of the past (for example Blythe, *Reflections,* 20 January 2018).[18]

Adoption stories and memories are not only messy and muddled through fading memories, lack of knowledge and access to information, but of course the stories themselves emerge, change and develop over time. However open adoptive parents wish to be with their child/ren, it is rarely possible or desirable to tell 'the facts' of their early years and separation from their birth parents as a single and complete story: instead it is an unfolding account shaped by questionings and re/telling in age-appropriate ways over many years. Coates describes himself as 'the guardian of my children's stories':

> Complicated, painful and wonderful stories … This guardian role hangs heavy, so easy to slip, so easy to say too soon or too late. We peel back the layers of the same story. We make sense of the same events with a four year old, then a six, nine, thirteen and sixteen year old. Gently we peel back the nuance as these little people grow and begin to understand, 'could not' keep you safe becomes 'did not', becomes 'would not' keep you safe. It's a cup of heartache we return to again and again. (*Cup of Sadness*, 28 June 2018)[19]

Coates here indicates the affective costs of the compulsion to return to the story: there is nothing here to reveal the drama of the children's loss but instead his description captures the ordinary, repetitive task of returning to that same 'cup of heartache'.

Ambivalent politics: athwart adoption?

The ambivalent nature of adoption can be seen in all these accounts, often manifesting in the details of quotidian family life. It is articulated metaphorically in blogs that describe adoption as a 'dodecahedron' with 'many sides … contradictions and opposites' (Blogfox, 2019)[20] or as a 'tardis':

> To those on the outside, perhaps our family looks to have 'normal' dimensions – the stereotypical nuclear family of two parents and two children. Step over the threshold, though, and it's 'bigger on the inside': more challenges, more stress, more professional involvement, more overwhelm, more baggage. All because of our children's trauma and the legacy it has left.

(Hannah Meadows, *Why adoptive families are like the tardis*, April 2018).[21]

However, ambivalence is most clearly articulated at the moments when adopters reflect on adoption itself as a social and political phenomenon. Of course, adopters are all different in terms of the stance they take towards adoption as a legal procedure. Although many voices in the archive work hard to 'normalise' adoption and in so doing often re/produce dichotomous notions of birth family as failed and bad and adoption as a fresh start, there are a significant number who articulate the political and emotional 'wrongness' of adoption. Blogger JayJayell writes that

> The role of National Adoption Week[22] should be to bring about its own elimination … We should campaign to help birth families break the cycle of violence, abuse, neglect and poverty, we should campaign to get families the help they need, and against the demonization of the poor and against injustices within the child protection system … We should campaign against *ourselves* and against the myth of "breaking the cycle" …
> (*Why I hate adoption (and my very mixed feelings on National Adoption Week),* 18 October 2017)[23]

This post captures some of the paradoxes that demarcate contemporary adoption and force it into crisis. Critique is not enough: rather a permanent sense of undoing characterises adoptive family-making. The notion that adoptive parents should be 'against *ourselves'* is, I suggest, at the heart of adoption's queerness. Like queer theory itself, the restless logic of adoption is such that it can never just 'be' but must always change, reassess, undo itself again and again whilst adopters get on with the daily business of parenting with its often grinding, tedious normality. Earlier in this paper I drew attention to Sedgwick's (1994: xii) definitional of queer deriving from 'athwart'.[24] Athwart is a useful term in relation to understanding the adoption archive: it has oppositional qualities that capture how adoption twists or frustrates normative features of family such as the passing on of genes via a blood lineage and progressive temporalities with concomitant coherent narratives of past, present and future. Adoption is perverse and adverse in that it needs to exist, highlighting as it does the radical social and political failure JayJayell speaks of above. Being athwart adoption can

be deeply uncomfortable (especially for an adoptive parent), but is a generative stance from which to enact social change from within.

Ambivalent conclusions for uncertain times

> While I'm here writing the autumn has brought other things, thoughts that about where adoption sits in the world of permanence, I fear we're living in uncertain times with the us, adopters, losing perspective and context and wondering if we've ever really had it. Thoughts that don't want to be marshalled into a blog quite yet but are floating uncomfortably around waiting to be articulated. We'll see.
> (Coates, *Clear Blue Sky*, 9 December 2018)[25]

This paper brings a sociological perspective to adoption at a critical time, focusing on ambivalence(s) that constitute, and are invoked by, contemporary adoption in the UK. My empirical focus has been the realm of adoptive family life, glimpsed at here through online blogs produced by adoptive parents. As the extract from Coates' (2018) blog post above illustrates, blogs can provide their authors (and readers) with a space for not only telling stories and sharing ideas and opinions, but also for trying out thoughts which are still in a process of becoming, 'floating uncomfortably around waiting to be articulated'. This affective immanence makes them a rich resource for sociological investigation, providing insight into some of the ways in which adoption can be understood as a personal and emotional as well as social and political phenomenon.

As a unique process of family-making, adoption receives relatively scant direct attention in sociological debates, whether those relating to families and kinship or policy-oriented studies around family interventions. I hope that the discussion here has demonstrated the sociological value of focusing on adoption, whilst foregrounding the multiple, fluid, contradictory resources necessary to address its inherent paradoxes. Rather than attempting to resolve the ambivalences adoption presents, I have sought to use ambivalence analytically, deploying theory and methods adept at recognising and making sense of the contradictory emotions and perspectives adoption engenders. Whilst the blogs have provided fragments of adoptive parents' stories and access to their authors' thoughtful

reflections, queer theoretical resources have shed some light on the formative influences of haunting, absence and loss, the strange temporalities of adoptive kinship, and the ambivalent politics of undoing at the heart of adoption.

A queer sociological imagination provides resources for challenging dominant narratives about adoption at the same time as attending closely and carefully to the affective contours of how it is lived and shapes lives over time and space. Just as ambivalence and uncertainty characterise those contours, my own insights and conclusions do not seek to make certain or comprehensive claims but rather to emphasise the state and role of ambivalence as generative. As Hemmings (2018: 18) notes, 'A sustained focus on ambivalence helps us to engage past politics and theory as complex or contradictory, and to foreground the importance of current complexity, despite our desire to have resolved both past and present paradoxes'. Such a sustained focus is uncomfortable but, I suggest, necessary. It enables us to both better understand adoption in its localised context(s) and have some voice in what it might become in the future, as well as benefitting from the insights adoptive families provide into our wider understandings of family, attachment and belonging in uncertain times.

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[1] See http://www.alcoates.co.uk/2018/12/together.html

[2] See https://frogotter.wordpress.com/2017/10/16/should-you-adopt/

[3] Extended family are assessed prior to adoption and where possible children are placed with people they know. This can lead to kinship adoption or other forms of kinship care (see https://corambaaf.org.uk/fostering-adoption/kinship-care-and-private-fostering/kinship-care).

[4] Although they may be placed with a family on an 'early permanence' basis, with the expectation of being adopted by them at a later stage (https://earlypermanence.org.uk/faqs/).

[5] For discussion about this phrase and other phrases specific to fostering and adoption, see Clapton (2018).

[6] The principle of openness in adoption was established by the Adoption Act 1976.

[7] Although it is outwith the scope of this paper, relevant here is the significant number of adopters whose decision to adopt follows losses of infertility, failed pregnancies and/or unsuccessful fertility treatment.

[8] See http://www.lifewithkatie.co.uk/2012/03/lady-behind-stork.html

[9] AUK is a charity run by and for adopters: see https://www.adoptionuk.org/. NFS is a charity run by and for LGBT adopters and foster carers: see http://www.newfamilysocial.org.uk/.

[10] https://www.theopennest.co.uk/adoption-social

[11] See http://mumdrah.co.uk/blogging/

[12] See http://mumdrah.co.uk/blogging/

[13] See https://adoptionthebearfacts.wordpress.com/2018/06/23/fear-of-loss/

[14] See http://mumdrah.co.uk/back-to-the-future/

[15] See https://meandminimees.wordpress.com/2017/12/22/snow-globe/#more-1852.

[16] See http://www.alcoates.co.uk/2018/02/blackpool-rock.html

[17] Sara Ahmed (2006: 83) addresses the work of the 'straight line' in relation to the vertical and horizontal axes of the family tree, and the queer implications of being 'out of line'

[18] See https://meandminimees.wordpress.com/2018/01/20/reflections/

[19] See http://www.alcoates.co.uk/2018/06/cup-of-sadness.html

[20] See https://adoptionthebearfacts.wordpress.com/2019/02/15/adoption-is-a-dodecahedron/

[21] See https://hannahmeadows.com/2018/04/13/why-adoptive-families-are-like-the-tardis/

[22] National Adoption Week UK is dedicated to raising awareness around adoption and finding families for 'hard to place' children.

[23] See https://nomorethantwenty.wordpress.com/2017/10/18/why-i-hate-adoption-and-my-very-mixed-feelings-on-national-adoption-week/

[24] See Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology for derivations and usages of athwart

[25] See http://www.alcoates.co.uk/2018/12/clear-blue-sky.html