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**Citation:**

Cuthbert, D, Murphy, K and Quartly, M 2009, 'Adoption and feminism: Towards framing a feminist response to contemporary developments in adoption', *Australian Feminist Studies*, vol. 24, no. 62, pp. 395-419.

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Link to Published Version:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08164640903289302>

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## Adoption and Feminism: Towards Framing a Feminist Response to Contemporary Developments in Adoption

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Adoption is not about unwanted babies—it is about unwanted mothers. (Exiled Mothers n.d.)<sup>1</sup>

Adoption is an emotional issue. (Blair in Secretary of State for Health 2000)

### Introduction

In 2004 the sociologist Rosemary Pringle remarked that the ‘climate of apology’ surrounding adoption in Australia, linked with understandable shame regarding past adoption practices and the ‘stolen generation’ of Aboriginal children, meant that it had become ‘almost impossible’ to endorse adoption as a policy option (Pringle 2004, 225). In 2004, this was an apt call for all the reasons outlined astutely by Pringle. Then in 2005 and 2007 two reports of the Australian House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services, the first on inter-country adoption (*Overseas Adoption in Australia: Report on the Inquiry into the Adoption of Children from Overseas*) and the second on the impact of illicit drug use on families (*The Winnable War on Drugs: The Impact of Illicit Drug Use on Families*), challenged Pringle's position. The two inquiries, both chaired by the Honourable Bronwyn Bishop MP, advocated adoption not only as a viable social policy option but also as the preferred or ‘default’ placement option for certain children; and both reports attempted to reverse what they described as an entrenched anti-adoption bias in Australian child welfare and placement policy.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This epithet is the motto of the pro-birth mothers and anti-adoption support and lobby group Exiled Mothers, and is posted on their website.

<sup>2</sup> The Inquiry into the Adoption of Children from Overseas noted that Australia currently had one of the lowest rates of adoption in the Western world. Numbers of adoptions stood at about 500 annually in the first years of the twenty-first century, representing a dramatic decline from the peak of nearly 10,000 a year in the early 1970s. Reasons given included the combination of a decline in the numbers of infants available for adoption since the early 1970s owing to the advent of the contraceptive pill and a federally funded supporting mothers’ pension; changing community attitudes to single parenthood and children born outside conventional marriage; and changes in community attitudes and in policy, law and practice in welfare administration which actively discouraged people from adoption (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2005).

In this paper, we examine these recent developments in Australia with some regard to parallel developments in adoption legislation and policy in the United Kingdom and the United States, and we describe these developments as ‘new adoption’. By this, we do not mean the reform movement pushing for open modes of adoption which emerged in the 1980s and which, in many jurisdictions, including several states in the United States and in the Australian State of Queensland, is still underway.<sup>3</sup> By ‘new adoption’, we refer to more recent developments in adoption policy and practice, appearing most notably in the United States through the Adoption and Safe Families Act (1997), and in the United Kingdom as initially framed in the paper *Adoption: A New Approach* (Secretary of State for Health 2000) and enacted in the 2002 Adoption and Children Act (ACA). In both administrations, adoption is reframed actively by the state as a solution to the chronic problem of children in long-term state or ‘out-of-home’ care.

‘New adoption’ is marked, amongst other things, by vigorous action on the part of the state and its agents in seeking ‘permanency’ through adoption for such children, and by terminating parental rights under certain circumstances. Notably, ‘new adoption’ retains many elements of post-reform-era adoption, such as degrees of openness and contact with birth families. In other respects, it can be seen to manifest revisionist elements alongside more progressive ones which, in part, return or align ‘new adoption’ to the practices and discourses of earlier pre-reform-era adoption. These revisionist aspects include the pursuit of ‘permanency’ for children through adoption even against the wishes of birth parents whose parental rights may be extinguished through court orders; and, along with this, the resurgence of salvation and rescue narratives and old binary formations as the state and its agents ‘rescue’ needy children from ‘bad’ birth families and place them with ‘good’ adoptive families. Further, as in the heyday of pre-reform-era adoption during the 1950s and 1960s, the discourses of ‘new adoption’ exhibit great faith in the social constructivist capacities of adoption to overturn the misfortunes of ‘bad blood’ by installing children in suitable, and that frequently means middle-class, families.

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<sup>3</sup> In March 2008, Queensland Premier Anna Bligh announced an inquiry and community consultation process on the subject of adoption law reform, entitled ‘Balancing Privacy and Access’. For the consultation process and the final report of the inquiry, see Department of Child Safety, Government of Queensland (2008), available from <http://www.childsafety.qld.gov.au/consultations/balancing-privacy-access.html> [cited 30 July 2009]. The inquiry led to the Adoption Bill 2009, see <http://www.childsafety.qld.gov.au/legislation/adoption/review.html> [cited 30 July 2009]. Passage of this bill through parliament was stalled when an election was called early in 2009, but at present (July 2009), the bill is again scheduled for passage through parliament.

How have feminists responded to adoption, to its policy and practice in the shifting formations of old, reformed, and emergent ‘new adoption’? In order to begin to approach this question, we briefly review the relationship between feminism and adoption in the past and then shift our focus to more contemporary feminist engagements with the issue of adoption, focusing on a small body of contemporary feminist theorisations of adoption emerging from the United States. In this recent feminist work, the constructivist faith of contemporary legislators in adoption is mirrored somewhat problematically, with serious implications for the positioning of birth parents, which mostly means birth mothers.<sup>4</sup> Adoption is singled out as an exemplary site for an embodied critique of essentialised motherhood, pro-natalism and biologism, which persist as stock-in-trade of dominant family ideology, and what is termed in queer theory hegemonic ‘reprosexuality’.<sup>5</sup> Adoption is extolled as a unique, even preferred, site for a radical, de-essentialised feminist motherhood, with uncertain theoretical implications for the status of biological maternity in this anti-essentialist maternal praxis. Of concern to us in this feminist recuperation of the adoptive mother is the relative lack of attention provided to the poor and disadvantaged women and girls whose babies and children are among the ‘targets’ of new adoption policy. In this, both ‘new adoption’ and the new feminist politics of adoption appear to run the risk of repeating some of the of the old occlusions—particularly of birth mothers who are frequently poor, very young and of non-European background—which marked adoption policies and practices in the past. As we critically examine this recent writing, we ask how should an Australian feminist response to adoption be framed, and how can feminists participate usefully in adoption reform discussions that are now unfolding in Australia?

### **Out with the Old, in with the New: The Emergence of ‘New Adoption’**

The developments in adoption policy we call ‘new adoption’ represent the most recent in the series of unfolding developments which characterise the history of formal legal adoption over the course of the twentieth century to the present. For the purposes of this discussion, formal

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<sup>4</sup> Terminology in adoption discourse is problematic. In order to avoid the terms ‘natural’ mothers or ‘relinquishing’ mothers (both of which are problematic, implying respectively that adoptive mothers are ‘unnatural’ and that the process of having a child adopted out was willingly entered into by the mothers giving birth to these babies), we have chosen the term ‘birth’ mothers as the least problematic term. For a note on the politics of terminology from a birth mother's point of view, see Christine Cole's ‘Language’ in her *Releasing the Past: Mothers' Stories of their Stolen Babies* (2008, 248).

<sup>5</sup> The term is Michael Warner's (1991). It is also deployed by Park (2006).

legal adoption (as distinct from more informal arrangements that both pre-date and in some cases occur in parallel with legal arrangements) may be said to have passed through at least three broad phases since it was first introduced in jurisdictions across America, Europe and Australasia in the period between the mid-nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> The first of these phases lasted into the middle of the twentieth century and generated adoptions of children of a range of ages, not simply neonates, and were in most cases quite open, with adoptive families frequently being known to the birth families.

As the century progressed, adoption became more 'scientific' and 'modern', as informed by the burgeoning child- and family-focused social sciences that also increasingly informed family life in non-adoptive families. In the period following the Second World War, the adoptive family mimicked in many particulars the nuclear family.<sup>7</sup> This second phase in the history of modern adoption saw the rise of 'sealed and secret' adoption, enabled by the 'legal fiction' which created the appearance that the adoptive parents who by law were granted the same legal status as biological parents were, in fact, the biological parents of a given child. This legal fiction was achieved through processes which saw original birth certificates either destroyed or closed and new certificates drawn up to include the names of the adopted parents along with the (often new) name of the child (Carp 1998, 102ff.).<sup>8</sup> During this period, the preference for the adoption of children of 'serviceable' years gave way to a preference for the adoption of infants, perhaps reflecting shifts in the evaluation and meaning of children from primarily economic to sentimental acquisitions (Zelizer 1985).

As a social policy option, adoption enjoyed a high degree of consensus and confidence as a self-evidently good option for all concerned through the middle decades of the twentieth century. The adoptee gained a family, the frequently childless couple gained a much wanted child, and the mother, if she could ensure that she did not lapse again, could gain by adoption an opportunity to redeem herself and move forward in her life. This confidence is evinced in words from New Zealand's Deputy Superintendent of Social Welfare in 1950: 'I am assuming that all who read this [...] think as I do that, in principle, adoptions are a good thing [...] We

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<sup>6</sup> The first modern adoption legislation was enacted in the State of Massachusetts in 1851.

<sup>7</sup> For 'scientific and modern' adoption, see Herman (2001, 2002, 2008). On the 'science' of family life, motherhood and child rearing, see Apple (2006).

<sup>8</sup> See also New Zealand Law Commission (2000, 17ff.) and Modell (1994, 1–13). For the Australian context, see Marshall and McDonald (2001).

will agree that adoption should be encouraged rather than discouraged' (New Zealand Law Commission 2000, 42).

The secret and closed mode of adoption gave way under pressure from adoptees, birth parents, and others from the 1970s and into the 1980s, a decade that saw the uneven emergence of adoption reform (Herman 2002, 340). Since the 1980s, a number of jurisdictions have reformed adoption to allow for 'open' forms of permanent child placement. While adoptive families' arrangements once mimicked the closed nuclear family, they now appear to emulate the slightly more open, blended families produced through higher rates of divorce and re-partnering, with children and step-children often co-habiting with combinations of birth and step-parents (Pringle 2004, 226). In Australia, the evolving politics of adoption was influenced strongly by the national Adoption Conferences, convened at regular intervals since the first conference in 1976.<sup>9</sup> The Australian Adoption Conferences provided an important forum in which a wide range of adoption stakeholders could exchange ideas and experiences. Further, the conferences coincided with, and facilitated, the politicisation of many of those caught up in adoption and provided a forum for activism and agitation on adoption law reform, particularly by, and on behalf of, adoptees and birth parents. Rights discourses, particularly women's rights and the emerging discourse on the rights of the child, provided adoptees, birth parents and others supporting their position with a lexicon in which to frame grievances and demands for reform (Marshall and McDonald 2001, 1–17).

In Australia, additional emotional weight is generated by the politicisation of adoption and adoption law reform. This derives from the profound impact of a series of harrowing revelations made from the 1990s to the present decade. These have exposed formerly hidden histories of the parlous treatment of groups of 'removed' children, including children from Indigenous, white Australian, and British and Maltese backgrounds (the latter groups having arrived in Australia through imperial forced-migration schemes well into the twentieth

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<sup>9</sup> The first of these national Conferences on Adoption was convened in Sydney from 15 to 20 February 1976 (Picton, 1976). Proceedings from the subsequent conferences were produced by Picton (1978) and Oxenberry (1982). The year 1976 was notably the same one in which Lee Campbell, a birth mothers' activist, established her CUB (Concerned United Birthparents) self-help, support and lobby organisation in Boston, which readily generated a wide network of branches across the United States. For details on Concerned United Birthparents and the work of Lee Campbell, see Modell (1994, 172–75).

century).<sup>10</sup> Great care must be taken not to erase the important differences between these historically and culturally distinct groups of ‘removed’ children. Nevertheless, the aggregated impact of the revelations of suffering of the stolen generations, the ‘Forgotten Australians’, the ‘Lost Innocents’, and other groups has had a profound impact on the Australian imaginary and popular sentiment, and professional practice in the fields of the care, welfare and placement of children. Notably, also, in the wake of the much delayed apology to the Indigenous stolen generations by Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in February 2008, other categories of removed children and their families have agitated for a comparable apology. The term ‘white stolen generations’ has emerged, being applied to adoptees, wards of the state, institutionalised Australians, and British and Maltese child migrants, respectively.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> In addition to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's (HREOC) inquiry report on Indigenous child removal, entitled *Bringing them Home* (1997), other inquiries include the Australian Senate's Community Affairs Reference Committee's inquiry into Australians who experienced institutional or out-of-home care as children, the first report of which is entitled *Forgotten Australians* (August 2004) and the second *Protecting Vulnerable Children: A National Challenge* (March 2005); and the inquiry of the New South Wales Legislative Council's Standing Committee on Social Issues into adoption practices of the past, *Releasing the Past: Adoption Practice 1950–1998. Final Report* (December 2000). Revelations about the suffering of children who migrated to Australia under imperial migration schemes include work by Bean and Melville (1989), Gill (1998) and the autobiographical work by David Hill (2007). Child migration was the subject of an inquiry by the Australian Senate's Community Affairs Reference Committee that reported in 2000 (see Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee, 2001).

<sup>11</sup> For example, adoption reform activist Christine Cole mobilised the term ‘Mothers of the While Stolen Generation’ in 1997 in her efforts to secure a parliamentary inquiry into past adoption practices in New South Wales; see Cole (2008). Reviewers of Alan Gill's *Orphans of the Empire* made the connection between the story it told and the revelations of the HREOC report into Indigenous child removal; see, for example, ‘Gill has befriended a lost tribe and given them a voice. His ... book gives a new edge of meaning to the phrase “stolen children”’ (Edmund Campion, cited on the back cover of Gill 1998). Many contributors to blogs in the period directly following the apology to the stolen generations in early 2008 drew attention to other groups of ‘removed’ children and identified them as ‘white stolen generations’. See, for example, the following comments which align non-Indigenous adoptees with the black stolen generations: ‘We insult white stolen generation people each and every day [...] [T]he number of white children effectively stolen was about the same as black children stolen. No apology for me and my parents, though’ (Edie2008). Other bloggers align State wards with the black stolen generations, as in this comment by Tracey Lee (2005): ‘I would like to see *Australian Story* give acknowledgment to Children in institutional care, “the white stolen generation”. Generations have been formed, however not informed on all history.’ Cuthbert and Murphy also examine the political and cultural implications of comparing black and white ‘stolen children’ in Australia (2009).

The revisionist approach we characterise as the ‘new adoption’ is in evidence in both the United Kingdom and the United States from the mid- to late 1990s, and now with the Bronwyn Bishop interventions in Australia from 2003 to 2005. In the United Kingdom and the United States, these developments have been described as the most significant policy and legislative changes in adoption in both jurisdictions in over 20 years (Welbourn 2002, 269).<sup>12</sup> In the United Kingdom, the cluster of discourses and approaches to the revised mode of adoption that we call ‘new adoption’ is articulated fully through the policy initiative *Adoption: A New Approach. A White Paper* (hereafter *A New Approach*) endorsed by the Labour government led by Prime Minister Tony Blair in 2000. This White Paper provided the master plan and rationale for the major legislative overhaul of adoption embodied in the ACA (2002) (Secretary of State for Health 2000). In the United States, ‘new adoption’ formally emerged through policy and legislative changes, namely the Adoption and Safe Families Act (hereafter ASFA) that was signed into law by President Bill Clinton in November 1997. This represented the culmination of work by Clinton, since at least 1994, to place adoption on the national agenda and to engineer a major re-conceptualisation of its role in social policy and child welfare. In each case, the reforms are cast in terms of providing better outcomes for children whose parents are unable, or *deemed* unable, to care for them. Another reading of these reforms sees state interests as predominant in the changes that increase the utility of adoption as a ‘cost effective means by which the [s]tate can relieve itself of financial responsibility for children for whom it has (or might otherwise have) financial responsibility’ (Ludbrook 2000, 37; Rushton 2003, 3).

A significant feature of ‘new adoption’ is its impact on the demographics of adoption. Potential adoptees can now include children from within a country's own borders (domestic children) who are neither infants nor ‘orphans’. Legislative changes in both the United States and the United Kingdom feature the capacity to expedite the processes by which children are made ‘legal orphans’. ‘New adoption’ actively creates a new or expanded demographic of domestic children available for adoption by turning to the many thousands of children currently in various forms of out-of-home, ‘looked after’, substitute, state-supported or foster care, and providing for the expeditious termination of parental rights to these children in certain circumstances. In this way, ‘new adoption’ provides an increased basis for state intervention in both making and unmaking families, making and unmaking orphans, and

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<sup>12</sup> For a useful discussion of US and UK developments, see O'Halloran (2006). For a discussion focused on the US, see Modell (2002, 77–78).



making certain ‘approved’ adults into parents and other non-approved parents into non-parents (Modell 2002, 78).

When these legislative changes are read in their necessary contexts of highly differentiated populations whose different accesses to resources, education and social power frequently correlate with racial and cultural difference, class and, of course, gender, it is not difficult to see how ostensibly ‘neutral’ and ‘child-focused’ social policy initiatives may have highly differential impacts on communities and the families within them. We do not seek to diminish the enormity of the social problem that sees over 105,000 children in New South Wales alone living subject to State intervention in 2005, with nearly 30,000 of these in out-of-home care arrangements, and nearly 600,000 children in foster care in the United States as of September 1999.<sup>13</sup> We recognise that large numbers of parents struggle to care for their children because of poverty, substance abuse, incarceration, or other problems, such that ‘a generation of children fails to thrive without the intervention of outsiders in their lives’ (Modell 2002, 78). The problems faced by families and children in impoverished circumstances have a disproportionate impact in communities marked by racial and cultural difference from the normative standards of middle-class whiteness. As Moye and Rinker write of the American situation:

a significant number of children in the foster care system come from families that live in poverty. Minorities constitute a vastly disproportionate share of those in the child welfare system. Even though African Americans comprise roughly 12.3% of the general population, they make up approximately 50% of the children in foster care. (2002, 376)<sup>14</sup>

As Antoinette Greenaway (2003) shows, the intersections of gender, class and race in the incarceration rates of African-American women increases their exposure to the permanent loss of parental rights under the operation of the Adoption and Safe Families Act.<sup>15</sup>

In Australia, the current push for adoption reform entails a refocusing on adoption with respect to its potential in the management and care of domestic children, as distinct from infants on the one hand, and children and infants sourced from overseas countries for

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<sup>13</sup> Australian figures cited in House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services (2007, 73; 2005, 93). For US figures, see Moye and Rinker (2002, 376).

<sup>14</sup> See also Curtis and Denby (2004).

<sup>15</sup> For further discussion of the incarceration of women, including women of colour, in the United States, and the impact of the ASFA, see Smith (n.d.).

adoption on the other. The agitation for revision of adoption law in Australia was driven with vigour from some quarters within the former Liberal-Coalition government led by John Howard, including individuals such as Tony Abbott and Bronwyn Bishop, although not by Howard himself.<sup>16</sup> A further important element in the re-emergence of adoption in domestic policy debate is inter-country adoption and the highly effective political advocacy it has received from adoptive parents' organisations across Australia; and more recently the celebrity advocacy of figures such as Debra Lee Furness, who has promulgated a vision of an underdeveloped world brimming with 'Orphan Angels' waiting to be rescued through adoption by Australian families. In Furness's vision, the 'salvation' of these 'orphans' is cruelly stymied by Australian red tape.<sup>17</sup> The histories and relationship between domestic and inter-country adoption in Australia are complex and bifurcated (Cuthbert and Spark 2009). They are well beyond the scope of this essay to explore, except to note that it is by way of a response to political agitation on inter-country adoption that the two committees chaired by Bronwyn Bishop came to address adoption more generally and attempted to force the issue of adoption reform onto the national political agenda.

With the defeat of the Howard government in December 2008, the mantle of adoption reform appears to have been taken up by the incoming Labor government of Kevin Rudd, at least with respect to the assumption of an enhanced and more active role in the management of inter-country adoption. It is yet to be seen how the Rudd government will respond to the calls for reform in the area of domestic adoption and action from the federal government in this area emerging from the 2007 inquiry chaired by Bishop. As of July 2009, the federal government is yet to respond to the second of Bishop's reports tabled in September 2007.

### **'Fresh Starts', 'Clean Breaks' and 'Safe Families': The Language of the 'New Adoption'**

*Overseas Adoption in Australia: Report on the Inquiry into Adoption of Children from Overseas* (hereafter *Overseas Adoption*) was prepared by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services in Australia, chaired by the Honourable Bronwyn Bishop MP, and tabled in November 2005. The report opens up an unashamedly pro-adoption discursive space, notably co-opting the socio-legal standard of the 'best interests

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<sup>16</sup> For a fuller discussion of this recent politics, see Murphy, Quartly, and Cuthbert (2009).

<sup>17</sup> See Furness's 'Orphan Angels' website for more on her stance.

of the child'<sup>18</sup> (previously the catch-cry of anti-adoption groups) to endorse not only inter-country adoption but, somewhat overstepping its terms of reference, to suggest that adoption might be 'in the best interests' of many Australian-born children. While falling just short of recommending an inquiry into domestic adoption practices, the committee stressed that the dominant anti-adoption culture prevailing in Australia must be changed so that adoption could be understood as a 'legitimate way to form or add to families' (*Overseas Adoption* 2005, 9).

In September 2007, a second report was released by Bronwyn Bishop's House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services, entitled *The Winnable War on Drugs: The Impact of Illicit Drug Use on Families* (hereafter *The Winnable War*). In this report, Bishop pursues her vision for a re-engineered conception of the role of adoption in Australian society as the 'default' (*The Winnable War* 2007, 83) policy outcome to be worked towards by child protection authorities faced with managing the placement of the children of drug-addicted parents. Recommendation 5 of the report proposes that '[the] Commonwealth Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, in conjunction with state and territory child protection ministers' will:

- develop a national adoption strategy which acknowledges that adoption is a legitimate way of forming or adding to a family and adoption is a desirable way of providing a stable life for a significant proportion of children with drug-addicted parents; and
- establish adoption as the 'default' care option for children aged 0–5 years where the child protection notification involved illicit drug use by the parent/s with the onus on child protection authorities to demonstrate that the other care options would result in superior outcomes for the child/ren. (*The Winnable War* 2007, xxii)

Bishop does not demur from the 'tough decisions that need to be made about the best interests of [children]' in the difficult circumstances created through the drug addiction of parent/s (*The Winnable War* 2007, 71). Bishop and her committee are aware of the controversial nature of the re-conceptualisation of adoption within a child protection framework being advocated. In *The Winnable War*, as in the earlier report, she directly addresses strong biases in the child welfare profession that privilege 'blood ties', and which

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<sup>18</sup> See Breen (2002).

counter-indicate adoption as a policy or placement option for such children. Bishop emphasises that in many cases blood alone does not suffice with respect to the raising of children, and that frequently kinship care is either out of the question or imposes unacceptable burdens on extended family. Notably, Bishop's view of adoption and its place as the *prime* policy option for the welfare of extremely disadvantaged children and as the 'default' option for child welfare professionals appears both to precede and exceed the terms of reference of both inquiries. Certainly, Bishop appears to have gone into the most recent inquiry with some pre-determined views; notably, Recommendation 5 (cited above) includes a form of words on adoption as 'a legitimate way of forming or adding to a family' that appears verbatim in the earlier report.<sup>19</sup>

The efforts in *Overseas Adoption*, and again in *The Winnable War*, to revise the meanings attached to adoption in Australia clearly participate in what is emerging as an international trend, in evidence in the both the United Kingdom and the United States. While in both of these jurisdictions adoption has never slumped to the low levels seen in Australia (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services 2005, 2007), researchers and commentators nonetheless agree that in the period from the 1970s adoption has for various reasons emerged as 'problematic', particularly as an approach to the care of domestic babies and children who otherwise find themselves in serial foster-, short-term and other care arrangements. Reflecting on what appears to be a bias against adoption in the research literature, the legal scholar Elizabeth Bartholet asks why, when 'available evidence shows that adoption works extremely well for all those immediately concerned', the 'success story' of many cases of adoption is 'suppressed' (1993, 165). Similarly, Wegar (2000) documents strong anti-adoption biases in both the professional literature and attitudes of child welfare and child placement professionals.

The ASFA in the United States, *A New Approach* (Secretary of State for Health 2000), and the ACA in the United Kingdom<sup>20</sup> reflect significant executive efforts to challenge pro-consanguinity assumptions in the child welfare field. In particular, they question the desirability of keeping children in a series of temporary placements with a view to ultimately returning them to their birth families, as opposed to expeditious and permanent adoption.

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<sup>19</sup> Some cited authorities do double duty in informing both inquiries; the work of both Judy Cashmore and that of Howard Bath on 'blood is thicker than water' biases in child placement policy and permanency planning, respectively, is cited in *Overseas Adoption* and *The Winnable War*.

<sup>20</sup> See also Harden, Wulczyn, and George (1999).

Both the UK and the US initiatives shift the focus away from ‘holding patterns’ of substitute care for children until they can return to their families, and onto pro-active efforts to clear administrative and legal obstacles to domestic adoption and the termination of parental rights. In both the US and the UK adoption initiatives, the principle of consanguinity is usurped by that of permanency in the formulation of the best interests of the child. In both jurisdictions, numerical targets are set for adoption of children out of foster and substitute care, and in the United States adoption ‘bonuses’ are paid to State governments which meet quotas set for adoption within a given period (Christian 1999).

In both jurisdictions, as in Bishop's rhetoric, adoption emerges as self-evidently the ‘best’ policy and management option for the majority of children who may otherwise spend their lives in a series of short-term foster and other care situations. In the US and UK enactments of ‘new adoption’, as with the Australian reports, attention is directed *away* from the birth families and onto smoothing the way for those willing to adopt. The aim is to reconfigure community and professional attitudes *towards* prospective adoptive parents, actively removing the ‘stigma’ that has accrued to this role, and returning it to something like the status it enjoyed in the pre-adoption reform period. While in the United Kingdom less emphasis is placed on the stigma of adoption among child welfare professionals, the need for education on adoption for professionals is identified as central to the implementation of the *New Approach* policy and legislation, and proposals are outlined for ongoing professional education in adoption placement as central to effective ‘permanency planning’ (Secretary of State for Health 2000, 9, 24–5).

*A New Approach* and the ACA aim to expedite the legal, administrative and welfare processes for adoption in the interests of securing ‘permanence’ for children whose birth parents are unable to care for them and, as assumed by the legislators, not ever likely to be in a position to do so. *Speed* and *permanence* are the overriding objectives of the UK policy model: with a timeframe for children in continuous substitute care for the development of an adoption or ‘permanence’ plan, which then must be ‘delivered promptly’, with a ‘best interest’ decision in each child's case made within six weeks. The framework allows a further six months for an adoptive family to be actively sought (Secretary of State for Health 2000, 9, 24–5). *A New Approach* consistently subordinates other considerations to the two objectives of permanence and expedition. Even the priority given to issues of safety, while not overturned, is moderated in such areas as the allocation of resources and staff time to the permanence objective: ‘[w]hile child safety must remain the overriding priority, the need to

find safe, permanent families for children is an intrinsic, long-term element in giving children a safe, fresh start and a new opportunity' (Secretary of State for Health 2000, 8).

Children, it is asserted throughout the document, need permanence as much as they need safety and more than they need other factors, such as consanguinity or cultural continuity, in order to grow well and whole. The 'new approach' to adoption actively promotes a 'new' beginning or a 'fresh' start for children whose families are unable to care for them. It cites the words of one adoptee, Ahmed: 'I felt like my life was starting anew' (Secretary of State for Health 2000, 6).

Similarly, the ASFA places emphasis on streamlining processes for placing into more permanent family situations those children deemed 'at risk' in their families of origin and in various forms of state-supported substitute care. The legislation requires state child welfare agencies to '[focus their] attention ... on the use of adoption as a route for children to leave state-supported substitute care' (Harden 1999, 1). As in the United Kingdom, *permanence* and *expedition* are key objectives of the US legislation, with a requirement that pre-adoption case planning—including legal action to terminate parental rights (TPR) and active recruitment of adoptive families—be initiated by state child welfare agencies as soon as a given child has lived in substitute care for 15 of the preceding 22 months (Harden 1999, 1).

There are key similarities between developments in the United States, the United Kingdom and those emerging in Australia, notwithstanding the different socio-cultural contexts and the different histories of adoption in each place. Notably, the socio-legal standard of the 'best interests' of the child, up until recently held to lie in consanguinity and in the maintenance of family and cultural connections, is being deployed in the interests of English and American revisions to adoption and in Australian aspirations to follow suit. Bishop is scathing of the promised benefits to a child's 'sense of identity' which may accrue from placement options influenced by the objectives of consanguinity and family preservation. Within the terms of *A New Approach*, one needs to find grounds for why adoption is not in the 'best interests' of the child. Given that 'permanence' is good for children (and all the authorities cited indicate that this is the case), and adoption offers the best hope of permanence, then adoption must be in the children's 'best interests'. Again, Bishop's thinking echoes this, with Recommendation 5 of *The Winnable War* seeking to place 'the onus on child protection authorities to demonstrate that the other care options would result in superior outcomes [to those provided by adoption] for the child/ren' (2007, xxii). In this, the mobilisation of the 'best interests' precept for particular policy outcomes closely parallels the effect of amendments to the

Australian Family Law Act (Family Law Amendment Act 2006) in its ‘rebuttable presumption’ on shared and equal parenting being in the best interests of all children unless the court is satisfied otherwise (Berns 2005, 78).

### **New Approaches to Adoption in Feminist Theory**

In 2005, the same year as Bronwyn Bishop's first impatient call for revision of the dominant anti-adoption culture in Australia, Susan Bordo published an essay entitled ‘Adoption’ in *Hypatia*, a specialist journal of feminist philosophy. The essay appeared in a section of the journal called ‘Musings’ which carries work of a less scholarly, more speculative, reflective and sometimes autobiographical nature than the remainder of the publication.<sup>21</sup> Bordo offers a challenging reading experience in ‘Adoption’. First of all, we must say that there are many strands in her musings on adoption which we endorse. Bordo's serious engagement with the subject, coming as it does from a feminist theorist of her stature, is a welcome addition to the debate on women, motherhood and family which, as Australian feminists Carole Ferrier (2006), Anne Summers (2003), Marion Maddox (2005), Maryanne Dever (2005) and others have recently argued, have been and remain vexed areas for women and for feminism. This is particularly the case, as Ferrier has recently argued (2006) in a political climate such as that created during the 11-year term of the Howard Liberal-Coalition government, in which regressive family ideology is a key constituent making the question of what is to be done about the family as pressing for feminists now as it has ever been. Viewed in the context of dominant and, arguably, resurgent conservative family ideology, the discourses of adoption, new or otherwise, require close scrutiny.

From very different political and theoretical positions and with different social objectives in mind, both Bronwyn Bishop in *Overseas Adoption and The Winnable War* and Bordo in ‘Adoption’ attempt to recuperate adoption as a legitimate way of making families. Both embrace—and in Bordo's case, celebrate—the social constructivism of adoption and dwell critically, albeit with differing degrees of theoretical sophistication, on the persistent dominance of a highly essentialised model of family which emphasises blood ties, biological reproduction, and genetic connection. The effect of this model on women who are not

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<sup>21</sup> Bordo needs little introduction to a feminist readership: her work includes *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (1993) and *The Male Body: A New Look at Men in Public and in Private* (1999b). Her edited collections include *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing* (with Alison M. Jaggar) (1989); and *Feminist interpretations of René Descartes* (1999a).

‘mothers’ at all or ‘not’ mothers under its strict pro-natal prescriptions, as is the case with adoptive mothers, is described by Bordo as the ‘tyranny’ of the ‘biologic paradigm’ (2005, 235). Bishop, who relies selectively on certain submissions to the inquiry and ignores others, documents the operation of this paradigm as the ‘“blood is thicker than water” mentality out there’. This informs the ‘blatantly anti-adoption or just pro blood relation’ biases skewing child welfare and placement policy through assumptions that children are better off amongst natal family where it ‘is thought’ they can be provided with ‘a strong sense of identity’ (*The Winnable War* 2007, 74). For Bishop, as for Bordo, making the case for adoption is making a case for the legitimacy of ways other than biological reproduction to make families, children and parents. Alignments between feminism and conservative politics are not unprecedented, as evidenced in various alignments in debates on pornography over several decades, but they do require reflection. What it might mean when one of Australia's leading conservative politicians and one of America's foremost feminist theorists appear to be occupying much of the same ground in relation to the issue of adoption and the dominance of biologism is a question that informs discussion in the remainder of this paper. In order to begin, some historical context of the relationship between feminism and adoption is needed.

### **Feminism and Adoption**

Feminism's assessment of adoption has been fluid and ambivalent, both in response to the vexed conflicts of interests inherent in adoption and post-adoption situations and in response to the changing status of adoption itself. In the late 1970s and 1980s, when agitation from adoptees and birth mothers for access to birth and adoption records escalated in places like Australia and the United States, feminists were amongst those who lent their voices to these campaigns, quite clearly sympathising with the plight of the many ‘unwed’ mothers who were forced to ‘give up’ their babies.<sup>22</sup> Birth mothers were grist to feminism's mill as victims of highly gendered sexual double standards, oppressive dominant family ideology, and inadequate social policy for the support of children born outside conventional family structures (Wegar 1997, 77). As Rosemary Pringle has insightfully pointed out, the sympathy of feminism for the plight of the birth mother was at odds with the problematic endorsement of an essentialised view of motherhood and the bond between the birth mother and the relinquished child (Pringle 2004, 232). For many this tension was, perhaps, overlooked in

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<sup>22</sup> See Pringle (2004, 229–30); Modell (1994, 169ff.); Wegar (1997, 77); and Lifton (1998, 191–97).



favour of what may be described as a specific social justice agenda in relation to the harm done to these women, and their children.

In the process, the position and experience of adoptive mothers was damagingly occluded, as much by feminists as by others. Effectively, much feminist commentary on adoption repeated through inversion the damaging binary of 'good' women and 'bad' women (Wegar 1997, 77) in evidence in other discourses. In dominant family ideology, the birth mother, frequently unwed or deemed otherwise unfit to tend to her child, was stigmatised in favour of the 'good' adoptive mothers whose role was to redeem these otherwise doomed infants and secure them within the embrace of good homes. In feminist critiques of this approach to adoption, the birth mother is endowed with the virtue that accrues to victimisation, and the adoptive mother, where she is registered at all, implicitly occupies a problematic position deeply implicated within dominant family ideology and conforming to regressive models of acceptable 'womanhood' and 'domesticity'. Wegar writes that: 'feminists have so far largely failed to acknowledge the problematic social position of adoptive mothers from a gender perspective' and have, in their attention to the plight of birth mothers, failed to recognise that the 'normative and constrictive definitions of true womanhood and good mothering' apply as invidiously to adoptive mothers as to birth mothers (1997, 77).

Addressing this failure, a number of feminists have provided alternative ways to read adoption and the adoptive mother, in particular through a feminist lens. For example, emphasising a nurturance model of maternity, as distinct from an ownership model driven by genetics and genetic inheritance, Joan Mahony (1995) argues that adoption may serve as a feminist alternative to other models of mothering through its very constitution in nurturing in the absence, in most cases, of genetic connection between mother and child. Elizabeth Bartholet (1993) speculates that one of the reasons for the persistence of biases against adoption and in favour of 'natural' or biological families lay in the threatening potential of adoption to de-stabilise dominant narratives of 'family' and 'motherhood', which are underwritten by a strong 'biologic bias'. Since 2000, a body of feminist work has emerged which takes up these lines of inquiry and analysis and extends them to elevate adoptive motherhood as not simply one site in which the dominant pro-natalist, biologic script of the normative reproximal family may be de-stabilised and indeed re-written, but as the key site for this feminist revision of motherhood and family. Work in this mode includes writing by Lisa Cassidy (2002), Margaret Homans (2002), Janet Beizer (2002), and two essays which

post-date Bordo's essay, by Park (2006) and by Brakman and Scholz (2006), also published in *Hypatia*.

For many feminists writing on adoption in this new, revisionist mode, their own experience as adoptive mothers—as is certainly the case with both Shelley Park and Susan Bordo—appears to provide some of the initial impetus to tackle this subject. Many of these women who, as Park writes, are slightly older, ‘having delayed childbirth until the establishment of their careers’ (2006, 215), or as Bordo writes, ‘have nontraditional profiles [...] older, single, gay’ (2005, 234), constitute what Pringle has described as a significant ‘new demographic’ of prospective and actual adoptive parents (2004, 232). Fairly typical of what we identify as the new feminist approach to adoption is the following passage from Shelley Park:

Adoptive mothers—like many other mothers—choose motherhood. However, we do so in a way that simultaneously rejects the idea that woman's anatomy is her destiny. Adoptive mothers make conscious choices whether to become a mother and how to become a mother. Motherhood does not just happen to us; no accidents befall our bodies, nor does anatomical destiny drive us. Motherhood here is a story of social agency. Adoptive maternal bodies are thus active, not passive bodies. (2006, 214)

Clearly, the wholly justifiable objective is to recuperate the figure of the adoptive mother from a complex of associations which see her playing the bad or ‘not as good as’, inauthentic, problematic ‘other’ to the discursive constructions of the good, whole, true birth mother whose status is elevated through suffering the loss and absence of her child. Yet Park's strategy here risks repeating, by inverting, this oppositional configuration of ‘good’ mother and ‘less than good’/bad/other mothers using new terms. In this heroic feminist recasting of the adoptive mother marked by Park as active, in possession of agency, and an embodiment of the anti-essentialist rejection of the idea that anatomy is destiny, the birth mother is relegated to the position of the ‘other’, and a very abject other at that. The birth mother in Park's formulation is body-bound, accident-prone, captive to anatomical destiny, passive, with limited capacity for agency or choice. It gets worse. Keen to recast the adoptive mother's body as ‘healthy and resistant’ and not marked by infertility that is frequently read as disease or deficiency, Park compounds the abjection of birth mothers by focusing on the physicality of birth and post-partum experiences (to which the anatomically bound, passive birth mother is wholly ‘captive’). Birth mothers are ‘physically exhausted or traumatized from childbirth’, frequently ‘depressed’, and further burdened with sore, swollen breasts ‘laden with milk’ (2006, 214). As such, they can achieve little ‘autonomy from their children’; and other

pleasures, it seems, are also beyond them. Unlike their active, heroic feminist sisters who adopt their children, they cannot readily ‘resist making sex into a procreative ritual’ (2006, 214).

Our objection here is *not* to the necessary attempt to recuperate the figure of adoptive and other non-biological mothers, nor to the necessary critique of the persistent pro-natalist discourse which creates a hierarchy of women (mothers, non-mothers) and mothers (birth mothers, other/lesser mothers) (Lifton 1998; Weger 1997; Pringle 2004, 229, 230). Our concern lies with the way in which Park's recuperative strategy inverts and thus repeats divisive and damaging binary oppositions and hierarchical orderings of women and mothers, and so participates in the serial ‘revisions’ of values ascribed to the roles of birth and adoptive mothers through the history of adoption. Our concern lies with an avowedly feminist position which perpetuates such hierarchies and oppositions rather than dismantling them.<sup>23</sup> Park's (2006) characterisation of the merits and qualities of birth vs adoptive mothers fails to interrogate the epistemological structures and discursive habits that continually seek to square one group of women, or one group of mothers, off against another in asymmetrical binary formations.

Notwithstanding the heroic feminist adoptive maternal praxis outlined by Park, babies still need to be borne in and through the bodies of some women. While this is nowhere argued by Park, her heroic vision of queered adoptive mothering extended and writ large potentially generates a class of superior, active, agentic, ‘feminist’ mothers who engage in a practice of progressive, anti-essentialist motherhood, mothering babies and children carried and borne by other women. These other women are, using Park's own account of birth mothers, ‘lesser’ mothers on the ‘feminist’ scale of values she outlines. They are, as we have seen, passive, anatomically bound, exhausted, frequently depressed and offer far less to their children by reason of being less likely than adoptive mothers to have ‘an identity and meaningful relationships for themselves outside the norms of compulsory motherhood’ (Park 2006, 215). Again stressing that this is not a step taken by Park in her discussion, if we were to imagine a legislative and policy regime which might provide a supply of babies and children sourced from ‘inferior’ (however determined) birth mothers to be adopted and raised by ‘superior’

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<sup>23</sup> Park (2006) uses a theorised feminist value system that privileges such values as agency and anti-essentialism to re-evaluate the adoptive mother, as distinct from a value system imbued with Christian morality, or ‘women's rights’ feminism, both of which have been used to describe and evaluate types of mothers in adoption discourses in the past.

(however determined) adoptive mothers, would it necessarily look very much different from the ASFA or ACA? Would the mechanism for the re-distribution of babies and children from 'bad' or 'less than good' birth mothers to desirable adoptive mothers need to depart substantially from those being projected by Bronwyn Bishop in both 2005 and 2007?

As stated above, while motivated by quite different social objectives, the politics of 'new adoption' aligns in some problematic ways with the politics of this recent feminist re-evaluation of adoption. Where one works to establish a new or expanded demographic of children available for adoption, the other promotes as purportedly superior mothers, a new demographic of women to mother them. For some aggrieved birth mothers who have lost their children under the provisions of the ASFA, there is no doubt in their minds that they form a class of 'breeders' producing children for other—more acceptable, more privileged—mothers to nurture and raise (Turski 2002).<sup>24</sup> We are troubled by a 'heroic' feminist vision that holds such potentially dystopic implications for some women.<sup>25</sup>

### **Theorising Susan Bordo's Beautiful Black Baby**

In 'Adoption' Bordo provides a significant contribution to recent efforts to recuperate and re-theorise the figure of the adoptive mother. Bordo, writing in the still early flushes of adoptive motherhood, is keen to counter damaging and limiting biases against adoptive mothers. In doing so, she, like Park, over-argues the case. There are points at which Bordo's necessary and corrective arguments in favour of the authenticity of adoptive motherhood do more than counter damaging biases about it as an inauthentic mode of maternity. Instead, she pursues the line that adoptive motherhood is not only *as good as* biological motherhood, it is *better than* it: 'Actually, I've come to believe that there are distinct advantages to children in not being related to their parents' (2005, 232). Far from being 'second-best', adoptive mothering is 'unique' and adoptive parenting has 'unique' qualities:

The 'other mother' may be unique to adoption [...] all children [...] are separate beings whose individuality must be respected and nurtured and whose love cannot simply be assumed. The difference is that the adoptive parent has a unique potential for consciousness of these facts. (Bordo 2005, 232–33)

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<sup>24</sup> Turski's essay is posted on "'birth-" Mothers Exploited by Adoption', a pro-birth mothers' and anti-adoption website; see [http://www.exiledmothers.com/adoption\\_facts/Why\\_Birthmother\\_Means\\_Breeder.html](http://www.exiledmothers.com/adoption_facts/Why_Birthmother_Means_Breeder.html) [cited 25 September 2007].

<sup>25</sup> The classic feminist dystopia along these lines is Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986).

Claims for the 'uniqueness' of the adoptive mother role, appearing twice in these sentences, recur throughout Bordo's essay and are made repeatedly in Park's essay (2006, 213, 218). Leaving to the side the argument that other forms of mothering not mentioned by Bordo share many of the features she extols in adoptive motherhood—for example formal step-motherhood or mothering in complex blended family situations in which different combinations of 'yours, mine and ours' children reside at various times with different mothers—the claim for the uniqueness of adoptive motherhood works further to elevate it above and beyond mere biological motherhood. Further, Bordo's claims about the 'uniqueness' of adoptive motherhood expose her uncritical acceptance of the mode of mothering and the mode of family life which is specific to white, middle-class cultures. 'Mothering' other people's children is far more common in non-white communities and cultures where family is understood as an inclusive, and not as an exclusive, concept; and mothering is a function, rather than an identity. Bordo's desire to extol the virtues of adoptive motherhood lead her throughout this essay to suspend her characteristic critical reflexiveness on her own locations within both an affluent (white) middle class and within white, Western feminism which lead to other problems in the essay discussed below. In Bordo's evaluation, adoptive motherhood has, it seems, political, moral, epistemological and *mothering* advantages over biological motherhood. Far from being second-best mothers, adoptive mothers are, especially if they are also feminist mothers, better mothers for they mother in ways that are non-essentialistic, non-egotistic (i.e. free of DNA transmission ambitions), non-possessive, and non-dynastic. Adoptive mothering is unique, privileged, special.

Bordo is correct in asserting that adoption and, we would add, a range of other ways of 'forming or adding to a family' (as Bishop puts it) and other forms of 'other' mothering such as step-mothering and 'mothering' within extended family formations have the powerful potential to re-write and revise the traditional nuclear family script and the prescriptive gender and sexual ideologies by which the nuclear family is regulated. At the same time, apparently alternative ways of making family or being a mother, father or parent may also rehearse and repeat old ways and old values in new guises. That is to say, just because a mode of mothering is pursued in ways which are 'outside' those prescribed within the dominant family ideology does not mean that they are necessarily politically oppositional, progressive or feminist. In advocating the thorough legitimisation of adoptive families, the politically and socially conservative Bronwyn Bishop surely imagines wholly legitimised adoptive parents to parent in wholly conventional ways. In fact, as outlined above, it is their

very failure to conform to the dominant expectations of appropriate parental care that leads some parents to face the termination of their parental rights under the provisions of the ACA and the ASFA, which actively address which adults can or cannot assume the role of parent (Modell 2002, 77). This is also the brave new world of adoption being envisaged by Bronwyn Bishop in her 2005 and 2007 reports.

### **Adoptive Maternal Embodiment and the ‘Mere Bodies’ of Biological Mothers**

There is a tendency in the writing on adoption of Bordo, Park, and to a lesser extent Brakman and Scholz, to attribute to adoptive mothering and the women who engage in it capacities for what Pringle (2004, 232) identifies as a reflexive modernity which sets them apart from, indeed, above (some) other women: biological mothers, for example. At the same time, there is a strong tendency in this writing to consign biological mothers to the essentialist bin. Birth mothers are distinguished from these other mothers by the performance of a role that, among other things, is distinctively bodily. As feminists have long recognised, this bodily function is one to which women's potential has been problematically reduced, and from which her identity and value have been essentialised, as the bodily functions of mothering are made normative for all women in dominant family ideology and its regulation of sexuality and gender roles.

There appears to be some slippage in the writings of Bordo et al. between the essentialism underpinning biological motherhood and birth in pro-natalist discourses, and the qualities manifest in birth mothers themselves. Further, it appears in this new feminist writing on adoption that birth mothers not only function as essences (a mere body, reduced to function), but that they are somehow responsible for generating damaging essentialism and the normative value of biological birth at the expense of non-mothers or non-birth mothers and, as we shall see, another group for whom Bordo feels growing sympathy, fathers. While this position is at odds with Park's valuable thesis that the ‘queering’ of adoptive motherhood can also usefully highlight the ‘constructedness’ of biological motherhood, it nonetheless emerges at several points in her paper, as we have seen. The construction of the birth mother herself as wholly essentialised and anatomically bound recurs repeatedly in the essays of Bordo and Park, producing a version of the birth mother as ‘mere body’: unthinking, unreflective, captive to anatomy. It is precisely this view of birth mothers which is highlighted for critique by Bordo in this passage published in 1993:

In this culture, the pregnant, poor, woman (especially if she is of non-European descent) comes as close as a human being can get to being regarded, medically and legally, as 'mere body', [as] her wishes, desires, dreams ... are of little consequence and easily ignored in (the doctor's or judge's estimation) the interests of fetal well-being. (1993, 76)

Bordo critically highlights here the particular, delimiting intersections of gender, class, and pregnancy; intersections which are all potentially further compounded by racial and/or cultural difference as most likely to reduce the particular woman (or just as likely, girl) concerned to the status of 'mere body'. It is difficult not to re-read this passage from *Unbearable Weight* (and others like it in the work of Bordo) in light of 'Adoption' and not think of Amy: the poor, black 15-year-old girl, heavily pregnant with, and ultimately to deliver, the infant daughter who will become Bordo's adopted child, Cassie. Before looking more closely at Amy and Cassie, we examine a further problematic dimension of Bordo's musings on adoption that relates to men as parents.

Where Bordo goes further than the other feminist theorists of adoption considered here in her musings on the anti-essentialist potentialities of adoption is in her consideration of the erasing of *difference* between men and women in respect of parenting: 'Adoption revises the traditional nuclear family in another way, too; it levels the biological playing field for male and female parents' (Bordo 2005, 233). This is a position explicitly anticipated by Park and others in their exploration of the de-essentialised adoptive mothering they advocate: if all biological processes are extraneous to the parenting process are, then, all differences between women as parents and men as parents erased? This view is rejected by Park, in particular, on the grounds that even where women do not bear children biologically, women still perform gender-specific labour as parents, which is quantitatively and qualitatively different from the ways in which men may parent, and these important differences warrant the continued use of the gender-specific term for parenting by women, which is mothering. Of course, Bordo's endorsement of adoptive parenting for its capacity to erase gender differences between men and women as parents may be seen as feeding into the broader issue of gender-neutral parenting. This has progressively transformed the legal frameworks for judicial decisions in the residency (or custody) of children in many jurisdictions, including most recently in Australia in 2006 in the reformed Family Law (Shared Parental Responsibility) Act (Family Law Amendment Act 2006). Except to say that this issue is highly politicised and of concern to feminism and will remain so while gender-neutral parenting and associated financial

supports are pursued with disregard to persistent gender inequality in the labour market and in the distribution of domestic labour between men and women, this is beyond the scope of the present essay to consider.<sup>26</sup>

For Bordo, her keenest sympathies, it seems, are felt not with other mothers, but with fathers and with men: ‘Trying to get pregnant, failing, and then adopting, has been a source of identification for me with those who lack an umbilical connection with a child but still feel very much like parents’ (Bordo 2005, 235). Men, she argues, are equally tyrannised by the ‘umbilical mythology’ to which non-birthing mothers are subject. To illustrate how the initial distance and dissociation she experienced through the process of the last weeks of Amy’s pregnancy with Cassie, and her delivery, gave way over time to an intense, physical experience of love and connection with the child she did not bear, Bordo turns to the character of Ted Kramer, the husband and father in Avery Corman’s 1977 novel *Kramer vs. Kramer*, adapted into an award-winning film of the same title in 1979.

As I watched a recent television series on adoption, I’m struck by how freely tears flow when adoptive fathers, both gay and straight, single and married, talk about receiving their adoptive children. Is it because of the often long struggle with infertility, the other numerous obstacles and disappointments that are so common in the adoption process, the almost religious gratitude many of us feel—particularly those with nontraditional profiles: those of us who are older, single, or gay—as we finally are granted parenthood? Perhaps. But maybe, too, adoptive fathers have not had to suffer the feeling, expressed by many biological fathers, that pregnancy and birth belong to their female partners. Avery Corman writes in *Kramer vs. Kramer*, describing Ted Kramer’s thoughts about the birth of his son, ‘It seemed to have little to do with him—her idea, her baby, her miracle.’ (Bordo 2005, 234)

In this passage, the initial expression of sympathy with adoptive fathers proceeds to become sympathy also with biological fathers who, as the reference to Ted Kramer signifies, are alienated even from the pregnancies of their own partners. The pain of exclusion from the processes of the gestation and birth of their own children is at least something adoptive fathers are spared, Bordo suggests. It is worth considering the categories of parents in sympathetic alignment in this passage: Bordo herself, an adoptive mother, in sympathy with

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<sup>26</sup> For the growing body of feminist work on the gender-neutral parenting movement and fathers’ rights (for which Ted Kramer, to whom Bordo refers twice in this essay, is poster boy), see Fineman (1995); Mason (1998/2002); and Collier and Sheldon (2006).



all sorts of adoptive fathers (straight, gay, married, single) *and* biological fathers, all distinguished from (or is that in opposition to?) the birth mother and ‘her’ possessions: her ‘idea’, her ‘baby’, her ‘miracle’. It is difficult not to read this passage and conclude that Bordo somehow feels that the tyranny of the umbilicus is wielded personally against those who cannot or have not given birth *by* women who have given birth themselves. And, that the ‘almost religious gratitude’ felt by adoptive parents for finally being allowed to parent is their response to being finally included in the experience of parenthood, the ‘miracle’ from which, it is made to seem, birth mothers themselves have excluded them.

Bordo's revisionist sympathy for men in relation to their exclusion from reproduction continues. Again, she turns to Avery Corman's Ted Kramer to account for her feelings: This sympathy extends to biological fathers who have been utterly ignored in decisions about abortion and adoption. (It does not extend to those who try to claim their ‘rights’ against the wishes of the mother, or without concern for the best interests of the child.) Last year, as I described my regrets (to my graduate course on the history of second-wave feminism) over how I had treated the biological father during my own abortion decision, I could see some of the women's mouths begin to open in protest—as mine would have too, when I was their age [...] At the same time, my intense love for my child has made me realize how ultimately irrelevant those privileges are to being a parent. From *Kramer vs. Kramer*, again: ‘In the beginning, when Joanna was first pregnant, the baby did not seem to have a connection to him, and now, the child was linked to his nervous system.’ That's the way I feel, too, about Cassie. (2005, 235)

While there is insufficient scope in the present essay to explore all of the implications of Bordo's position here, and the potential intersections between this position and the profoundly anti-feminine positions articulated by some father's rights activists, suffice to say that we are troubled by the degree to which Bordo's critique of pro-natalism appears to slip into a critique of the processes of pregnancy and birth and women who undergo them, and sees her forging sympathetic alliances with men and fathers *over* sympathies with other women. In Bordo's essay, this critical slippage finally amounts to a complete occlusion of the role of birth mothers. As we have discussed, whether through the process of the legal fiction of former adoption practices, or in the agitation for reform of these practices, the occlusion of one or other of birth mother or adoptive mother in favour of the other has historically characterised both adoption practices and the ways in which they have been represented, including many feminist treatments of them (Wegar 1997, 77).

Bordo's work is no less troubling when it settles on a consideration of her adopted daughter. Bordo extols and celebrates the beauty and the *difference* of Cassie, whose skin and corn-row plaits signify her cultural and racial difference in concrete terms, sharply and more distinctly than the abstract notions of difference with which Bordo confesses she dealt prior to mothering Cassie. As readers, we are struck by the *differences between* the two black girls in Bordo's essay in the schema which Bordo outlines but does not critically reflect on: Amy, Cassie's mother, and the daughter she bore. Cassie, Bordo tell us, is 'pretty' not merely 'in the way a pretty white child might provide pleasure to look at—but as a Black child, who carries history with her' (2005, 233). In the sort of discursive move which critics such as Stuart Hall (1993) and bell hooks (1992) have criticised as imposing on 'others' an insupportable burden of representation, the pretty black child is ascribed an immense representational burden, that of carrying history. While the pretty white child is just that, pretty in a decorative way, are we to conclude that white children have no history? Further, precisely what history does this pretty black child carry with her? Is it remote and distant history, does it connect with the history of another continent? Or is it history much, much closer to home, say in a place like Texas 'where poverty looks different' (Bordo 2005, 231); where childhood, it seems, is short; and where, calculated on the basis of the life and reproduction cycles of three generations of Cassie's birth family, a black woman of Bordo's age of 57 is likely to be a great-grandmother. Not that it is necessary to travel to Texas to find comparable poverty, historically marked by race and class. In all such places, there will be countless black children like Cassie. So many, in fact, that their presence, let alone their prettiness or the history that they carry with them, may not be noticed at all. *Difference*, it seems, looks different and has different values in different places.

Where Bordo writes of the silent, smiling endorsement from 'total strangers', the 'almost familial delight' with which she and her 'beautiful daughter' are greeted in public places (2005, 233), we wonder what greeting might await ViSue, Cassie's grandmother, and her daughter Amy in these same places; or Amy, the 15-year-old birth mother and Cassie; or Amy, now 20, and her new infant son? Cassie, as the daughter of Susan and her husband Edward, will live a life far different from that which she might have lived back in Abilene with her birth mother Amy. This difference, as we know, is the social constructivism whose potential is, and always has been, at the heart of adoption and which is revived explicitly in the legislative reforms outlined above. In particular cases such as that of Cassie and many children like her, adopted either through private arrangements as in Bordo's case, or

increasingly under the provisions of the ASFA or ACA, we can contemplate with confidence a future that will hold different, and in many cases better, prospects than those that face Cassie's young birth mother. As Bronwyn Bishop contends, outcomes in terms of access to tertiary education are much better for children adopted into middle-class families than they would be with their own birth families (*Overseas Adoption* 2005, 5). While adoption into a loving middle-class household may hold the key to securing (some) better outcomes for those disadvantaged children selected for adoption,<sup>27</sup> what does this policy approach do to address the conditions which lead to their disadvantage, and the disadvantage of the mothers who bore them, in the first place? Life for Amy and countless poor girls in Abilene, and in countless other towns across the United States, in the United Kingdom and in Australia will remain the same.

## Conclusion

In this consideration of adoption, we remain troubled by the question recently re-posed by Carole Ferrier (2006): what is to be done—by feminists—about the family? We take this question to mean: what is to be done about motherhood in all of its forms, and non-motherhood; about the bearing and rearing of all children, including the many thousands of children currently in substitute care of various kinds; and real equity for women who bear children, women who rear children and women who, for a number of reasons, do not. We agree with Ferrier that these problems are as urgent now as they ever were. We would add that they remain urgent for women whether or not they are mothers, as the controversial attack on Julia Gillard (then deputy leader of the Labor opposition to John Howard and now Deputy Prime Minister) by Bill Heffernan in 2007 on the grounds of her ‘deliberate barrenness’ brought to the surface shockingly (‘Heffernan's Gibe “Hurts Australian Women”’ 2007; Harrison 2007; Coorey 2007). To Ferrier's urgent question we have no definitive answers, but have provided some cautions with respect both to ‘new adoption’ and some recent feminist re-evaluations of adoption that highlight issues for feminists to grapple with. Some are, perhaps, new issues; but mostly they are issues that never seem to go away.

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<sup>27</sup> Predominantly middle-class families are identified as prospective adoptive families in the recent Australian reports. See Quartly, Murphy, and Cuthbert (forthcoming). Also, refer to Bill Clinton's speech announcing the ASFA in 1997 (in Modell 2002, 77).

We have argued that there is much in the new feminist writing on adoption to commend. This writing, including the work by Bordo, opens up a much needed critical space for thinking about the family and mothering in non-essentialist ways which challenge the dominant script of family and motherhood. But, as we have also argued, where the necessary and overdue recuperation of the figure of the adoptive mother comes at the expense of the birth mother, the job has not been done well enough. We need a thorough dismantling of sex/gender/reproduction systems to allow for all women and all reproductive status to be viewed and treated with equal respect. Further, we need to be alert to the intersections of gender, class and race in a complex politics of difference by which some groups of women stand more vulnerable to loss of control of their reproductive capacities and of any children they may bear than other women. A feminist theory and praxis which only see in adoption the opportunity for *some* women to engage in progressive adoptive mothering is not, in our view, seeing enough of the picture.

Finally, this analysis of the politics of 'new adoption', both feminist and otherwise, serves as a timely reminder to feminists in critical flight from essentialism and the celebratory embrace of the de-essentialising, constructivist potentialities of 'other' ways of doing family, to be very wary. There are other travellers on the road to social constructivism—and many of their objectives may be antithetical to feminism.

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