

The Birthmother Speaks

Birthmothers: Their Rightful Place in Critical Adoption Studies

As a birthmother and literary scholar, I have often written about my own experience as an unwed mother as well as analyzed representations of unwed mothers in mythology, literature, and film. But whenever adoption enters the story, as it did in my own, I find myself in problematic terrain. Although I can write with a certain theoretical detachment about the historical and contemporary penalties for unwed mothers, when adoption is involved I must first confront resentment and regret, sentiments that have not substantially subsided in over fifty years. When I was recently asked to make a brief statement on theorizing critical adoption studies, I again had to face my enduring emotional turmoil and the methodological dilemma it creates: how can I objectively “theorize” about a social practice that was for me coercive and exploitive? How can I navigate the turbulent waters where emotion and critical thinking collide? I was only sixteen when my parents shipped me from Southern California to an aunt in Cleveland and then, when my pregnancy could no longer be concealed, to Akron’s Florence Crittenton Home for Unwed Mothers. Like so many middle-class girls in the “baby scoop” era, I felt powerless to determine my fate and so “agreed” to all the arcane machinations that kept my pregnancy a secret. I was not pilloried like Hester Prynne, but I was coerced into believing I was unfit for motherhood, that I had no choice but to surrender the infant whom I loved instantly with a ferocity that still surprises.

If I’m to write truthfully, I must acknowledge: real harm was done. The existing social system not only felt no compunction about taking babies from unwed mothers, it was also adamant about closed adoptions. At some psychological level, those credentialed to remove babies and those receiving babies must have sensed that there was something humanely wrong about relentlessly feeding the adoption system. Why else coerce girls into signing away their parental rights? Why insist that they disappear from their children’s lives, even to the point of

erasing their names from birth certificates? Beyond all the glib rationalizations, they must have known, even then, that what they were condoning was deeply unjust.

Over the past twenty-five years, I anticipated with each finished manuscript some measure of ameliorative scriptotherapy, that I would finally be able to leave behind the shame, regret, and anger I had carried for so long. And, in fact, there has been therapeutic value in telling my story: thirty-five years after we were pitilessly separated, my writing led me to a joyful reunion with my daughter. Given this fortunate outcome, I was then certain that my deeply embedded resentment of adoption would evaporate. Our reunion would heal all wrongs. I would be transformed. But I have been disappointed both emotionally and analytically. I have not found representations of literary birthmothers who seize their rightful place as empowered heroes, nor can I claim to be one myself. My conflicted emotions endure. My enmity toward adoption still simmers, especially when I consider disadvantaged mothers who are still being exploited, not just as victims of coercive surrender but as paid surrogates.

Which leads me to the birthmothers I know, women like me who were exiled to the homes of distant relatives or maternity homes and were told that adoption was our only option. We surrendered our babies forever. We lived for years with regret, uncertainty, shame, and sorrow. We dreamed of our children: their first teeth, their first steps, their first day of kindergarten, their first illness, their first love. We cringed when we let ourselves imagine cruel, unloving adoptive parents and stinging slaps we could not prevent. We secretly acknowledged each birthday. We gazed surreptitiously at babies, children, teenagers, adults their age. We imagined their graduations and their weddings. We dreamed of the day they would somehow return to us. There would be a tentative knock on the door. We'd run to open it, and there they would stand with their shy, hopeful faces turned up to us. We waited. We believed there would be a happy ending.

For some of us, that day came. We gazed lovingly into our children's beautiful faces. We

were restored to one another. We were jubilant. We were forgiven. We thought we forgave ourselves. We thought we were healed. We thought the past was vanquished. We couldn't give enough, yet we asked for too much. We were unprepared when our longing resumed. We were frustrated when our regret persisted. We were shocked when our sorrow returned. Our happy ending dissolved. We still longed for the past. The deed could not be reversed. The baby could not be restored. The longing could not be assuaged. The adult child may have lovingly returned, but the first loss and the deep-seated sorrow would not be mollified. Thus, my conclusion: there can be no unequivocal happy ending for mothers who surrender.

Nonetheless, birthmothers are heroic. We bravely, resolutely lead productive lives. We struggle to define ourselves against demeaning stereotypes. We know all too well the coercive forces at play when it comes to "choosing" adoption. We have experienced firsthand the dramatic economic and racial inequalities that continue to compromise adoption practices. We work for a day when young, "unprepared" girls will never have to surrender their babies. We argue for family preservation and support rather than adoption. We envision kinship formations, families or villages or communal arrangements that nurture young unwed mothers, girls who can keep their babies because they have a safety net. Such villages include parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, social services, churches, educational institutions, and friends who come together to help them raise their children. Such villages will recognize maternal rights and encourage motherly responsibility. They will provide a nurturing home from which heroes can emerge. A critical agenda is not possible without a self-reflective scrutiny of responsibility. I urge those who are thinking critically about adoption to include birthmothers in their projects: unpack the psychological and emotional wrongs that were done and that continue; confront the exploitation of birthmothers; acknowledge the pain of those who paid too dearly for the happiness of others. Attention must be paid.

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