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## Critical Adoption Studies “at the very center”: A Conversation with John McLeod

By John McLeod, with Emily Hipchen

**Abstract:** In this conversation, John McLeod and Emily Hipchen discuss how adoption is to be found at the center of wider social and historical circumstances (and in literature, which represents them). Adoption exposes to critique assumptions about class, race, kinship, family-making, gender, and biocentric relations. Unfamilied and adoptable people are *not* historically exceptional and Critical Adoption Studies for the same reasons is not peripheral to the arts and humanities. We’ve never been niche. We’ve always been necessary.

**Keywords:** Windrush, Lemn Sissay, Jackie Kay, the Brontës, Charles Dickens, Critical Adoption Studies, immigration, postcolonialism, reunion

**Emily Hipchen:** We sort of take this up *in medias res*! But to orient people: we began thinking about reunion in the personal context of both of us having had reunion with our birth families, and both recently had experiences that reveal how those reunions can be complicated and upsetting. We began with noticing the violence of reunion. Because we’re both people involved in thinking about literature, we shifted out of the personal and began talking about Jackie Kay’s work, about the violence of reunion as she sees it, and how, at least at the beginning of *Red Dust Road*, you can watch this developing through vampiric imagery that, however much it might be played for laughs there, really isn’t funny.

**John McLeod:** I think it's a deliberately comic scene at the beginning of *Red Dust Road*. And I think Kay uses the comic and a witty mode of writing as a means of compassion, as a means of keeping open a benign relationship with people that might not be treating each other well. Kay's birth father treats her dreadfully. At the reunion meeting he asks her—during what is a three-hour prayer session—to pray to God for forgiveness because she is his sin. And then he refuses to meet her again, so she has to go and track down other kinds of biogenetic relations against his will. So it's a nasty business, isn't it? Potentially a very nasty business. But the way she writes up and frames it—I wish I had that level of compassion. I wish I could be that wonderful, but sadly, I don't quite have the stepladder to get up there.

**EH:** But there's something about the interjection of art—you're thinking with media, you're deliberately communicating, exteriorizing for an audience. You're not inside yourself, and you're not just talking to a friend. You have an audience who needs an intermediary in order to understand, in order to accept whatever's got to be accepted—the idea that reunions don't actually belong to the people who are being reunited. Not really, not the narrative anyway. They're somehow necessary in the wider public, or necessary for other agendas than the agenda of the adopting family or the adoptee or the originating family.

**JM:** I remember reading a review of some adoption writing by Caren Irr, which I cite in the coda to *Life Lines*, where Irr says we need to remember that just on numbers alone, on stats alone, the vast majority of the audience for adoption writing will be the non-adopted. What do they want? What is it about these stories that is so resonant? That's stayed with me for a long time. We have on TV over here—I'm sure you have a version of it over there— a reunion show called *Long Lost Family*. One always asks, well, what job is it doing? What service do these narratives perform, and for who? And why does everyone go on Twitter after the show has aired and talk about how many

tears they're shedding? Why this desire for the lachrymose that adoption reunions provide? Who are you crying for when you cry at the reunion scenes at the end of these things? Also, we need to wonder about the assumption that a reunion constitutes an ending. I think there's also something deeply problematic about that. To take this back to Jackie Kay and why I love *Red Dust Road* so much: the book begins with "Jonathan is suddenly there in the hotel corridor leading to the swimming-pool area." There's no build-up to the meeting of Kay and her birth father, there's no "what will he look like?" This is not chapter fifteen out of sixteen. There's a reunion right on page one, as if to say, "now, let's look at all the problems which follow."

**EH:** You know, the usual search narrative is—a search narrative. Like an Agatha Christie novel. There's a body, and the body has to be explained. And so the process, the end product of the process, is an explanation of that body. But Kay's book, at least, is not interested in that. It's an explanation that's fundamentally different than that. It's an explanation of what happens after reunion, it's unusual in reunion narratives to have that be what the story is.

**JM:** If reunion is a beginning—for adoptees possibly the beginning of a new adoptive self—then I don't think it delivers a kind of fully resolved self that can begin at last. It's certainly not the missing jigsaw piece, this is not the "Now I'm whole and know who I am because I've got Auntie Sheila's hands" version of the adoptive self. There's another adoptee personhood waiting there that can be as problematic as any other adoptive personhood existing prior to those kinds of conversations or meetings.

**EH:** I remember, after my own reunion—I've been in reunion now since 1999, which is such a long time—I remember going to take a shower after that first phone call and realizing in the shower that I had lost an entire section of my narrativized self. I had been narrating where I came from to myself for as long as I could remember. And now I couldn't imagine that anymore, I had facts.

And so that way of imagining who I was, was now walled off. I could no longer spend time creating myself from an origin that I could create for myself. I now had an origin that I knew or was going to know—that I could *know* rather than conceive of! Amazing. I was standing in the shower thinking holy cow, holy Jesus. I was stunned. I hadn't realized I had been doing that, I didn't know that I was that person, a person I had imagined at least partly into being. It became quite clear that I *was* that person, and that now that I *knew*, I no longer had access to that person. It was amazing, stunning.

**JM:** I'm really struck by what you're saying. I think these are potentially scandalous things to say, because there is a meta-narrative of what reunions should be. This is why I find some adoption conferences quite challenging. There's a narrative demanded by some adoptees, and they have a right to that demand, of course: that's not to belittle or dismiss that. But for me—I only met my birth mother once, and I found it imaginatively impoverishing. *Life Lines* was published just a few months before I met Noreen (as she was called), and that book begins and ends with this little figure called Maria, who, if you can get through two-hundred pages of an academic book, you discover is the imagined figure of my birth mother. I gave up Maria when I met Noreen—they weren't the same. I rather miss the Maria I invented. Her name combines Noreen's middle name, Mary, with a childhood memory: when I was a kid, my mum used to sing "how do you solve a problem like Maria," from the musical *The Sound of Music*. So I thought "Maria" was a nice amalgam; it brought the two mother figures together. I miss that figure whom I could imagine or wonder a little bit about, that I had only some information for, whom I could use to muse upon what life might have been like in the London of the late sixties and early seventies (where I was born). Noreen brought personality, identity, a set of facts which I was grateful for and lucky to

engage with at long last. But there was also a sense of loss in the reunion as well—a loss of being free from the facts.

**EH:** I keep thinking, when I think about this, of Carol Singley's *Adopting America*, which I know is playing with national rather than personal culture. One part of her thesis is fundamentally that America required the orphaning of its immigrants for its mythology: you would come to America to be orphaned and become free of your origins so you could become something entirely new. Once you're without your origins, freed from history, you get to become nearly anything you want—or at least that's the mythology. But I think that's extendable to us. In a sense to be adopted is to be freed imaginatively from a referential requirement, from believing you can only be the kinds of things that you come from. So I think it's bigger than just America, this observation. I think that there's a sense in which—and, like you, I don't want to say that people who experience this differently are experiencing it wrongly, but this is my experience and my sort of thinking about it—to allow adoption to be an imaginatively enriching thing. Margaret Homans talks about this in *The Imprint of Another Life*: you can come at adoption as a place of invention, a condition that allows you to become an inventive self or an invented self if you are sufficiently severed from the things that limit that. You can feel that disjunction, or you can feel that *possibility*, when the possibility is foreclosed in reunion. You have lived as an invented or an inventive self, or at least partially that way, until you don't have that material access anymore. What you have is facts. Especially if you had the kind of childhood I know a lot of people have and one of the comforts for you was to imagine a different set of parents, a better set, for you because you were “like” them. And then they show up and they're just human beings like the rest of us, and maybe particularly damaged human beings. You're left deeply unsettled because you don't have access to imaginative sources of comfort anymore.

**JM:** I absolutely recognize this. These might be rather obvious observations, but as regards that first point about Singley's work—orphanning as having a particular resonance in the US—the US is one of the few places I've been to in the world where people always want to give me their genealogy (I mean here the non-adopted). I've lost count of Americans who say to me things like, "Oh, oh, you're from Europe! I'm seventh generation Danish," or "I'm ninth generation German," or "I'm from a little village in Wales, which I've never been to, and in fact, my great, great, great, great, great, great, great grandparents have never been to either." I think it's the other side of that sense of being in many ways displaced from filial ties in the nativist sense. If, on the one hand, one is potentially free to reinvent—we are made again the United States!—on the other hand there emerge all kinds of anxieties about rootedness that can seem quite exaggerated to me from an Old World, European perspective. This might be me unhelpfully generalizing, but it has struck me on my trips to the US how often I hear that narrative, which rehearses such layers of rootedness.

A second point I'd like to make concerns that sense of what can be learned from or discovered as a consequence of an adopted life. Now, the bulk of my academic career to date has been in postcolonial studies—I'm a card-carrying postcolonialist. And what postcolonial literature has taught me over very many years—and this has helped me read adoption texts—has been that out of the catastrophe of colonialism, the catastrophe of exploitation, of disempowerment and disenfranchisement, can come significant new knowledges, new ways of thinking and imagining, which take us past the damaging coloniality of modernity. We can think here of the Caribbean poet Derek Walcott with his Joycean condemnation of history's nightmare from which we must awaken in order to discover a new Adamic environment, a second Eden beyond modernity's travails, sourced in the Antilles but readied for all. My training as a postcolonialist has helped me read adoption texts in a similar kind of vein. As we know, adoption is often created as a consequence

of inequality, whether of class, or gender, or culture, or race. Whenever these inequalities obtain, children get adopted or become adoptable. Unfamiliar people are often the consequence of these things. But out of those inequalities, out of those privations, opportunities to think again and think beyond how we understand relationality, how we understand personhood, how we comprehend what kinship actually means, what a family might be—all these new ways of imagining beyond the biocentric, if you like—are made possible. This is not, of course, ever to justify catastrophe and inequality or say that they're somehow “worth it,” but it is to try to think about what gets made out of adversity.

The point I would want to add to yours would be that in many ways this is the great gift of adoptive life and of Critical Adoption Studies, because it's a gift for everyone. Everybody—the adopted, the non-adopted, whoever we think we might be—has got something to learn about the real-time labor of relationality, of how we put ourselves together in the relationships that are possible for us in kinship terms. Adoption can defamiliarize kinship in a way that is actually productive for everybody. We all might realize how responsible we are for the happy families we might end up in. It's not the law of nature, that is, that puts these things together. I think this might take us right back to the beginning of our conversation, before this formal recording, the reason why this field cannot be a niche field, because it sits at the heart of how we live—and so has potential to resonate at the very center when it comes to how we compute and think about our very being.

**EH:** There's this book I read in graduate school by a theorist of fiction—Michael McKeon's *The Origins of the English Novel*. What I retained out of that discussion (the book is of course much more complex than this) was that McKeon suggests that the early novel acts out cultural anxieties as certainties: it insists on family, for instance, as a certain kind of stable foundation to society and



civilization, but that very insistence is a register of the way family was rapidly changing—like everything else—and failing to provide that stable foundation. It was a theoretical or historical position that I wasn't aware of at the time. But it doesn't surprise me at all that a nation that frames itself as the place that accepts anybody who's unfamilied and that unfamiliar—the US, as a nation of immigrants fundamentally—is obsessed with genealogy. I mean, we have at least three television shows that are roots-tracing. The Mormons are by theological necessity deeply, deeply, genealogically interested and Mormonism is a homegrown American. Thus this idea that we're all orphans and we're all freed—

**JM:** Freedom can look like anxiety when you start to think about it.

**EH:** Absolutely. Also? Social class. Only where there are hereditary aristocracies does a pedigree matter historically, whereas the “classless” masses, or the differently classed masses didn't particularly care about them. And so when you care about a pedigree in a place like America, that's a class move, I think.

**JM:** Your point immediately puts me in mind of European and British obsessions with blood. Who's proper nobility? Who's proper aristocracy? Who's the nouveau riche? These questions resonate over the centuries. I always think of Nancy Mitford's essay about U and non-U speech, about how the upper classes can always tell if you're posh or not by how you speak. Breeding isn't always enough; you've got to have a *bona fide*, almost a mystical understanding of what makes you a member of the quality. Origins can become quite complex here.

**EH:** It's funny and here I'll go sideways into another anecdote. One of the things that I discovered coming to the Northeastern part of the US from the South is the very different way in which class registers here: it's all about not showing that you have money, wearing old clothes that don't fit you, especially really expensive but worn-out clothes—with a string of emeralds in Peruvian gold

from the Conquistadors or some such—a family heirloom! I found it nearly impossible to read social class here the way I read it where I came from. It made no sense.

**JM:** There are British versions of this! You could tell a mile away that Margaret Thatcher was lower middle class, the grocer's daughter, because she was impeccably dressed, never a hair out of place, the handbag always swinging like a pendulum from her arm. Compare her appearance to Princess Anne's, often photographed in a pair of jodhpurs and a neckerchief around the head. Properly posh people don't need to dress properly—class fortifies them. It glows through the holes in the jumper and the farm clothing freshly soiled at the stables. That's very familiar to me.

And just to bring us back to now. When adoption was legalized in England and Wales in 1926, there were particular protocols for property and inheritance. An adoptee did not automatically inherit the estate of the parents, for example.

**EH:** Yeah, that happened here, too. As you reminded me, the 1851 Massachusetts Adoption of Children Act, the first of its kind in the US, stated that legally adopted persons were not “deemed capable of taking property” linked to their new parents. There were inheritance laws to protect, and that belongs partly to the eugenics movement, doesn't it?

**JM:** Most likely, as was that sense of what should be the proper place for capital and property in a very class-divided society.

**EH:** Well, I guess you could think of adoption as a great class project. Can you denaturalize class by adopting-in a suspect orphan and making them, legally at least if not affectively, family? Can you train up an unclassed or a classless or a lower-class person to whatever is your class? Is class learnable?

**JM:** Well, certainly in the UK adoption has been a classed activity. It's so often a middle-class project, with working-class kids moved into middle-class families. And just as we're speaking

here—are you doing this as well, Emily? How many canonical works of literature are going through your head right now?

**EH:** So many. So many.

**JM:** It's in the narrative. So many canonical texts seem to suggest that thanks to a bit of good breeding any kind of class origins can be productively negated, but a lot of that material remains also rather suspect. How often do we find in in Shakespeare and Dickens, for instance, orphans and waifs and strays who just happen to be actually *bona fide* members of the quality right when we get to the very end? So in a sense there's been, and there hasn't been, a migration of class in some respects.

**EH:** Dickens is fun to think about in this respect.

**JM:** I don't know what to make of Dickens. I've sometimes I get very angry at Dickens.

**EH:** It's alright to be angry at Dickens, I think. I mean, I don't know what to *do* with Esther Summerson or even Oliver Twist. Just to take Oliver Twist as an example: it is a renaturalization of class in the body—there isn't anything to be learned and nothing changes no matter what happens to you. He goes through these terrible things, he's an orphan, he's starving, he's nearly made a thief in a time when thievery is a capital offence. He's abused—and then he comes back to his origins, literally as an image in the flesh of his mother. The last drawing in the novel is of him and Rose, I think it is, looking at the picture of his mother that clued them all in to his “real” identity. The body carries with it the resistance to class change that adoption or relinquishment or both makes abundantly clear. Then there's Jo with no last name in *Bleak House*, never adopted, never familial, what happens to him is a result of his exile, his absolute relinquishment (death, abandonment, it's not entirely clear which came first, society of course following the lead of his unfamilying). Esther Summerson, who completely stymies me whenever I start thinking about

her—I so dislike her and her pathetic overcompliance. I don't know what to make of her except what has been—a Dickensian anti-feminist fantasy, but that seems so reductive if you begin to see her as one of us! And Lady Dedlock, who herself is a social climber but also a birth mother, also deluded about her child being dead, also a Dickensian anti-feminist fantasy—I don't know what to think. “You are your mother's shame.” Oh my.

**JM:** I've been rereading *Bleak House* recently for the first time in a long time. It's interesting how much reading lots of adoption texts, talking to adoptees and adoption scholars, has impacted upon my patience with some of these characters. So when at the beginning of *Bleak House*, you have Esther saying, “Well, no one would tell me my dark beginnings, and I clearly came from a terrible place, so I resolved to be an extra good person, and that my virtue would somehow compensate, and I decided never to ask my benefactor again about my origins,” I was shaking the book, thinking, “Stop this now. I mean, come on, this is beginning to anger me!”

**EH:** This is exactly the appropriate response to Esther Summerson, I think. And she has two marriage proposals! and so I'm supposed to think like, “Oh, Esther, such a good girl!” It's like Fanny Price for me, who's by the way, another adopted person. Fanny Price of Austen's *Mansfield Park*.

**JM:** Eric Walker has just explored Austen in *Haphazard Families*!

**EH:** Right! It's just one response, or at least one fictional response, to this dislocation from the original family is to become whatever the culture decides is virtuous. And it's gendered and classed. It's always gendered and classed. And it's particularly gendered when it's women. So then you get somebody like Esther Summerson, and then you have to do to Lady Dedlock what Dickens does to Lady Dedlock, which is horrific. But then of course we have to think of the Brontës—the

work Heathcliff does in particular, what Emily Brontë makes of him, too, what she does to him—as the adoptee from elsewhere, who knows where, who refuses.

**JM:** Much of my work of late has been about transcultural, diasporic, late-twentieth century and twenty-first century literature. But I do want to go back to the canon of British literature and think about the figurative uses of adoption over the last one hundred years at least—the figurative uses to which adoption, adoptees and unfamilied people have been put in these well-known texts. So as you're speaking about *Bleak House*, my mind is going back to the comments about novels as sites of articulating anxieties—as William Golding once said, I think, happy is the place with no story. This might be a bit of a risk, seeing as that meta-narrative is rightly fading. But I want just to try to trace some kind of cultural genealogy of how the adoptee or unfamilied person has been required—maybe still is required—to sustain other kinds of structures in which they find themselves not recognized or not required as legitimate beings.

**EH:** Sort of like a caryatid holding up a structure.

**JM:** Yes, exactly. Exactly. So adoption is legalized in England and Wales in 1926, in the US in 1851?

**EH:** The curious thing about the US is that most domestic law is issued state by state. So it's Massachusetts in 1851, that's where it starts and then rolls through the other states more or less.

**JM:** Here in England it's not the same as in Scotland and Northern Ireland; in England and Wales, it's legalized in 1926. So we're coming up to the hundredth anniversary. If I were to write another book, it would be about that one hundred years from 1926 through to the present.

**EH:** Not back as far as *Wuthering Heights* (1847)?

**JM:** Good question. I'm thinking I might start at 1926, that moment of legalization, and ask how adoption has resonated since in the literature of these islands, rather than accept the challenge of

following Marianne Novy and exploring the nineteenth century, the Renaissance, classical antiquity. But now you mention it, I think I would love to go think more about *Wuthering Heights*, because that's been much discussed and talked about in postcolonial literature of late as well. Have you ever read Caryl Phillips's 2015 novel, *The Lost Child*? It's absolutely brilliant. It does two things. First, it returns to and reimagines the *Wuthering Heights* story. Phillips grew up in Leeds, so like the Brontës he's from Yorkshire. He imagines Heathcliff as the child of Mr. Earnshaw, Hindley's and Catherine's father, and a former African slave living in destitution at the docks in Liverpool. Phillips contrasts this narrative thread with a story that's probably based on the Moors Murderers of the 1960s here in England, Ian Brady and Myra Hindley, two local people who abducted and killed children, and buried them on moorland between Yorkshire and Manchester. Both died in prison. The novel asks all kinds of questions about vulnerable children, about how we are unfamilied. One chapter also depicts Emily on her deathbed being cared for by her sister Charlotte.

**EH:** I think it's fascinating that we aren't, as a group of scholars, talking about *Jane Eyre*. We're talking about *Wuthering Heights*, but *Jane Eyre* is also an adopted orphan.

**JM:** But she's also the kind of beneficiary of empire, isn't she?

**EH:** Yes! The money that she inherits comes from an uncle who has money that's been made in plantations in the Americas.

**JM:** So she's legitimated by empire, freed from labor by empire.

**EH:** And of course St John, her cousin, becomes a missionary to India where he dies. So there's a whole lot of empire there. She gets twenty thousand pounds inheritance—the Internet tells me that's about three million pounds in today's money—from her uncle, and shares it with her cousins, which means that she never works for wages again. Before this legacy, she worked because she

had no money, she had to pay her own way. But that was not ideal. Exiting the labor force was always the goal. There's this passage in which she talks about it directly—St John comes to her as she's recovering—she's learning Hindi and German I think—and says, “We need a school mistress. Can you do this?” She responds, “Yes, of course,” and he reminds her that she has been well educated and has talents that won't be useful to the stupid, unthinking, untalented farmers' kids she'll be teaching. She says something like: my education will keep. But I think it's the narrator, a version of Charlotte Brontë who was herself a teacher often enough, who comes in, contemplating the sort of grunt work of educating people who will never have or need the sophistication or skills she might teach them. Never use, never appreciate, never even adequately learn. A job is a stop-gap, food and shelter, and not a calling. But indeed no labor outside the domestic for women is a calling. There's nothing beautiful about this kind of teaching. Somebody's probably written about this, but there's an interesting thread in *Jane Eyre* about educating and about what money frees you from having to do and about how life is more beautiful if you don't have to work and are adequately educated into appreciating literature, music, art, long strolls in beautiful places. Being educated as Jane is gets you—I don't know what you get to do. You get beauty and leisure, a kind of languishing lovely life. But that requires a kind of violence, a systematic violence—

**JM:** Jane gets reconstituted as a perfectly acceptable gendered subject. All her potential feistiness and transgression and agency is nicely dissipated and framed and contained within the dominant mode. I've always thought that novel was deeply conservative. And I mean this in terms of empire. It's about reorienting the imperial gaze from the Americas to India after the days of slavery, turning away from the west and heading east. The first Mrs. Rochester is a disruptive presence from the Caribbean who figures empire's ultimate failure of command there. But India offers fresh salvation: colonizing India will allow Britain to reconstitute itself as a powerful imperial presence

that can control the natives. There's a reimagining of the British imperial family at work here. Jane's shift away from Rochester towards St John Rivers captures, I think, a wider, imperial remapping and redrafting of the map of empire in the nineteenth century sounded in the muscular imperial travails of these two men—to which Jane, as a gendered image of both female domestication and English domesticity, if you will, is significantly hitched.

**EH:** So *Jane Eyre* does that through reinscribing orphanhood, orphanhood is then the opportunity for refamilying. I've taught with *Jane Eyre* several times, and I've always gotten to the end, and we've all had a good giggle, because it's clear the only way that Rochester is marriageable is if he's blind and maimed. He has to be significantly damaged. And it always felt like a gendered gesture to me, like this is how women find suitable husbands, the only kind of suitable husband being the one that needs your care, desperately needs care. But I wonder if there's something else there, too, which is that the only suitable husband for someone like Jane Eyre is a maimed false aristocrat who's lost his class status. His house is burned down, and he can't manage his own estate, and anyway he was compelled into marrying Bertha, he says, so what does that tell you about his power or how, in whatever case, he wants Jane Eyre to comprehend it? At the end he's living in the gatehouse with his servants, for Pete's sake. You can't get out of the class system far enough to find her kind of woman a husband. So let's nearly destroy him. Let's burn his house down and kill the crazy Creole wife he's polluted himself with and banish the bastard child of the opera singer to some far away boarding school (a version of an attic)—he has to be punished and contained, and she has to be rewarded. But only the kind of reward that someone like her could ever get...

**JM:** ... is the perverse joy of selfless domestic service.



**EH:** I wonder how much her orphanhood or adoptability is part of that equation. When my two remaining parents died last Spring two weeks apart—you get to this place where it becomes kind of ridiculous, a different kind of overkill—I wrote to my Chair to tell him that yet another parent had died and appended the Oscar Wilde quotation, “To lose one parent may be regarded as misfortune, but to lose both looks like carelessness.” I wonder sometimes about the responsibility of orphans for their orphaning—not actually, but in the feelings, it’s not intellectual, but it might be emotional, or metaphorical, or something at the level of not thinking about it or the not really tracing into facts by the orphan or the adoptee. But still *there*, perceptible: how are *you* to blame for the fact that you have no parents? How do you read your own agency in an identity category that’s this abjected, that’s almost illegible even if you’re one of us?

**JM:** Not just which people, but what narratives must we serve in order to become legible? Where must we turn up in order for us to have a place and meaning, especially if our presence is one which is potentially threatening to the dominant mode, because it scandalously suggests that not only is the parent perhaps a fallible subject, but we have the capacity to seek relations which might disarticulate and strike through things that might well have been regarded as unimpeachable. So our service is required.

**EH:** We are the good soldier, aren’t we?

**JM:** When I went to my late birth mother’s house and saw her photographs of me, that little shrine up there on the wall, what labor was my image doing? What service was I rendering to her very sense of being, especially as a regular, nice person? What had I caused?

**EH:** I fantasize about this sometimes when I think about my own reunion in my own biological family and adoptive family. What would’ve happened had I turned out to be a serial killer, or had I refused so many of the proscriptions that I’ve accepted mostly without thinking about it? What

if I had turned out *bad*. My adoptive parents fully expected this—that was the narrative of my childhood: you’ve inherited all of these bad qualities because your parents abandoned you in this institution, and so therefore you must be bad, and you’re going to become all your birth parents’ badness because you’ve inherited that badness. What if I had actually lived that particular narrative? My younger adopted brother did that, absolutely fulfilled all the negative expectations of our parents, everything society decided that the abandoned adoptee represents or could represent. Because there’s work to be done in supporting narratives of natural personality or natural destiny or natural—I don’t know what to call it—but a kind of naturalized trajectory, from the bad comes the bad. And there’s nothing more bad than the two things that are most prominent in my adoptee narrative: my illegitimate birth and my abandonment by my parents. There’s nothing more threatening than those two things.

**JM:** I wonder how many of us, even if we’re told from day one how lucky, wonderful, and lovely we are, how many of us grow up feeling that in there, deep in there somewhere that no one else can easily see or know—we are bad.

**EH:** Yeah, I don’t know.

**JM:** My folks were thankfully a bit different here. They wonderfully didn’t exceptionalize. They didn’t do the whole “you’re extra special because we chose you narrative”—which is, as many have written, just as bad as anything else. Mum once said, “well, there’s another person out there somewhere who loves you.” She didn’t do any of the kind of “look at you, guttersnipe,” nonsense. But it didn’t really make any difference. There is that sense—especially when it comes to our generation, Emily—of the matter of legitimacy and the weight of that word *legitimate*, legally and culturally. I think that it’s hard to completely ignore that, even if you’re young and you’re a kid, and you don’t fully understand its provenance. I think it’s hard to look round that, or for that to

dissolve. And this really is delving into some dark chambers of the heart, thinking about this today. It really is.

**EH:** I think even if my parents had not been completely subsumed in the narratives around them, I would have something like these feelings and ideas. You're probably right, I think. My older brother was the golden child, absolutely loved, everything he did was good or forgivable—for him, the narrative of adoptee badness was not overt. I think he has accepted that, too, and I think it has put a lot of pressure on him to be what he might not really want to be—or might not feel like he can be a kind of subject unto himself outside what he felt he needed to be or prove or undo, maybe, about his birth. My dad died fairly early in our lives—my brother and I were in our twenties—and pretty much from then on, he became the father to us all in certain ways. I'm talking out of turn because he's not in the room and I want to be careful with him in a place where he can't respond. But I do think he felt he had to become the best possible version of the patriarch, and that that pressure comes partly out of his being adopted. He said to me recently that he'd always been grateful for his adoption and that gratitude really mattered to him, and I thought to myself, being grateful for a family is an abuse. You can generate gratitude, that's fine. You can feel thankful that you weren't killed, or that you ever came into being and people materially took you in. But once that gratitude becomes a central vision of your relationship to your childhood and to the various responsibilities that you take on? I think that's perverting. I think that's hard and trapping and sad.

**JM:** I'm very moved by what you're saying. Do we think there is an issue here: the violence of gratitude, or gratitude itself as a kind of violence for the adopted subject? For several years I used to teach a class for a colleague in the Netherlands, and she once told me, "you keep saying thank you all the time! It's okay, John: we *want* you here, so don't keep thanking me for coming out, don't keep thanking me for buying your lunch, it's really okay to have that drink." The moment

stayed with me and listening to this conversation it's popping up in in my head again. I've always felt that kind of compulsion to display gratitude. There's a power relationship in that, isn't there? The thanker before the thankee.

**EH:** It's a struggle. Right now, over here anyway, it's everywhere, this idea that gratitude is a position from which one finds peace. You're encouraged, nearly forced by social pressure, to cultivate a thankful relationship to the world. This has always irritated me intensely, because I think that it creates a kind of aquarium effect, like I don't have any options, I have to be grateful and somehow that's going to be healing for me. I don't need to be told to be grateful. I don't need to be expected to be grateful. I don't need to express gratitude. That's a kind of pressure that's actually harmful and violent. I think you're exactly right that the idea that we have to be especially thankful as adopted people for everything that happens to us—our sheer existence, the gift of a family, being parented, fed, clothed—this is perverse and it's harmful. I can feel gratitude and I can feel thankful. But inside *the requirement* that I be grateful, I'm exhausted because it's so hard to tell what I really feel from what's demanded that I feel—the intense pressure to be thankful just for my own life let alone everything else blunting my actual affect.

**JM:** Do you think there's a relationship here between gratitude and contingency?

**EH:** Yes.

**JM:** When I went to my Irish birth mother's funeral recently, a couple of people I was talking to quite frankly admitted that had I been raised in Ireland in the early 1970s as an "illegitimate" child, my life would have been impossible. I would have been discriminated against from day one. I would have had a very hard time. I found myself thinking then—and also many, many times in the past, long before reunion—well, thank God I didn't end up experiencing that. Thank God that never happened. So the word *thank* pops up immediately when I ponder the contingency of my

adoption. I ended up with my mum and dad in the boring ordinariness of suburban Manchester. And I would still take that any day, absolutely any day, when you consider what might have been. And I think more and more that this sense of gratitude, almost of relief, has over the years made me kind of clingy at times, particularly with people, staying in situations too long, because outside is contingency and contingency is dangerous. Thank God I'm here in the known and I'm not out there in the unknown. Y'know, for years I wanted *not* to make all roads lead to adoption: I've always tried to try to be a little bit more wide-angled than that. But the older I get and the more sophisticated my knowledge of adoption becomes as a consequence of conversations like this, the more I can see those roads do have those signposts on them.

**EH:** There are of course other ways of children becoming aware of their contingency, but I think adoption almost *requires* that awareness. You become, especially if you're told early, very early, aware of the other possibilities for your life and the possibility of your nonexistence and the possibility of your other existences.

**JM:** This is the other side of what we were talking about earlier. This is the Janus face of it, really—of imaginative possibility, creativity, a certain kind of freedom to redraft, to imagine, to narrate beyond certain kinds of metanarratives. For me, this is why adoption can be quite vertiginous, because there is, in a sense, levity in that, if you like: how wonderfully buoyant that makes one feel. But there is gravitas too, there is the other side of that sense of flying wonderfully through the skies, without any engines, gliding rather than flying, I suppose. How one can drop out of the sky at any kind of point.

**EH:** Like Icarus—possibility and risk. Risk-taking behavior comes out of a sense, rightly or wrongly, of feeling safe, having sufficient support. This is different for everyone of course, and people feel safe differently or for different reasons, but risk-taking starts by asking: can you take

this risk? If you've been trained in contingency thinking and gratitude thinking, you might become more risk-averse. Maybe you don't do what might be exciting or helpful or future-oriented because it's just too much perceived danger. You don't leave relationships that are bad for you. You don't move houses or change jobs. Once you've been abandoned, relinquished, that's a lesson in how absolute risk can be. Even if you find you have a supportive adoptive home.

**JM:** Have you found as you've gone through various life stages that your risk-aversion gets worse—as you've gotten older—because you you've been through a lot changes of life? You've moved cities, you've moved academic posts...

**EH:** Moving from rural Georgia to Providence is not like moving from Cornwall to London. It's an enormous migration, more enormous than I imagined, could imagine. It's more like moving from rural Portugal to London, a total shift, totally disorienting. So to answer the most overt question, I suspect that depends on the person. With me, it's all countervalences, this way against that way. My understanding of the past ten years of my life has been: If this is what I can expect of life, why not do whatever's next, however scary? I mean, I've lost pretty much everything that mattered to me. What else is there to lose? Maybe that's my lack of imagination, I don't know. But at the same time, I still struggle mightily with my own lifelong reticence, and now with the effects of the pandemic, which taught me to be afraid in ways that are still uncomfortable to me, that I'm attempting to overcome. I don't know how much that has to do with age. I think normal aging decreases risk-taking in part, I suppose, because of increased awareness of what might happen, a better sense of all the dangers. Things have happened to me that in my twenties I could not have imagined. Now I know that versions of that could happen again—at my age, I can picture too much of it. And that should make me more risk-averse, maybe particularly as an adopted person.

**JM:** I certainly feel less adventurous now, which I get very frustrated about. That's not really my style. I mean, I've always been a little bit cautious. I have to say my mum was always super cautious when we were growing up, and that kind of rubbed off on me, to be sure. But in my forties, I was a great adventurer, I wanted to see as many places as I could get away with, with various kinds of trips and invitations. But that's really calmed down these past few years, and the pandemic, I think, certainly might have contributed to that. And I guess I'm also thinking about the fact that this aversion is coincident with the period of my adoption reunion, meeting people and thinking about the effects of that, plus my own bereavement, the loss of my father, my mum not being so well. Hence my frustrations with the experience of the recent funeral of my birth mother and the conversation we were having before about how biogenetic connection can be limiting rather than freeing. So it's all scrambled and entangled in ways I find very frustrating.

**EH:** A hard thing to think about: you don't know how much more existence you have, but grief requires patience, time. Real honest grieving, when you're attached, takes forever. Maybe it never ends, I don't know, but at least a really long time. I imagine your adventurousness may come back. These things just take such a long time especially as things pile onto it, just the natural things that you lose as you get older. It reminds me of Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art." Everything seems filled with the intent to be lost. In my life, maybe a lot of people's lives, to misquote Bishop, all the losses pile up faster and faster, disastrously. And for an adopted person, all this loss can feel like an iteration of the first loss. If you feel your relinquishment keenly, and as different from the natural loss of the womb, you can end up always looking for where you feel safe. Or maybe, the reverse: you can acclimatize to the hit of fear loss presents and go looking for that potential, especially. Anyway, I hope you'll get back to adventures again. I have always admired your intrepidity. It's wonderful to me to watch you venture through the world.

**JM:** I always thought the real perk of academic life was the chance to travel to places I wouldn't get to otherwise, meeting people I wouldn't meet otherwise. I've had a really good ride with that over the years. I'm trying to crank that back up again. I'm to give a keynote in Italy soon, which I'm really looking forward to: I'll be talking about the new book about trespassing, and I'll bring in some adoption studies work, since the conference is about beginnings. I'm going raise questions like: when *do* we begin? What happens to those whose beginnings are withheld or cloistered from them? And what could we learn from people in that situation? That we might begin again? That our beginnings, especially if you're not adopted, might be ahead of you rather than behind you?

**EH:** Say more about the new book!

**JM:** It's called *Global Trespassers: Sanctioned Migration in Contemporary Culture*. I guess it's about the so-called "good immigrant" figure. There's a lot of work in cultural studies these days quite rightly about refugees, precarious migrants, the most vulnerable, but this book isn't about those constituencies. It's about those who in many ways are permitted, are allowed, are welcomed, are ticketed. Those who have visas, have the paperwork, have the legitimation. But the terms of their legitimation, the terms of their admission, are themselves forms of prohibition. So I'm working with *sanction* in the double sense. One the one hand, to be *sanctioned* is to be given permission. But *sanction* also names punishment or penalty (think of the EU sanctions as regards Russia at the moment, for example). Foucauldians would immediately recognize what I'm up to—how power is productive and positions one in a place of privilege to serve a wider kind of hierarchy. I'm interested in such seemingly privileged sanctioned figures—such as certain adoptees, for example. What happens when those figures refuse the terms of their sanctioning and start asking questions about the terms of their admission, when they try to build relations with those with whom they are *not* meant to have anything in common. What happens if the "good



immigrant” figure wants to reach out and engage with precarious travelers, for example? How much opportunity or possibility is there for that to happen, or does the punitive element of *sanction* quickly kick in?

Just to make this a bit less abstract, the book has three quite long chapters with three different contexts. One context is elite sports people and athletes, some of the most sanctioned “good immigrants” going. To use an English example, if you’re a really good footballer, you can move from Senegal to England, and earn tens of thousands of pounds a day, no trouble. There’s a chapter on sports people and what happens when they go against or critique the terms of their sanctioning. I’ve got a section on a terrific art film about Zinedine Zidane, the great French footballer who has an Algerian background. There are all kinds of interesting things about how Zidane is represented as either an example of multicultural France or a figure who’s calling into question the hypocrisy of French multiculturalism. I’ve also got a chapter on cities and economic migrants. I’m looking there at novels like *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid and Teju Cole’s *Open City*, as well as Caryl Phillips’s remarkable depiction of David Oluwale, a Nigerian migrant who was hounded to death by the police here in Leeds in the late sixties.

A third chapter, which is actually first in the book, is on adoptees, which as David Eng once famously said, are some of the most privileged migrants in the world. What happens when those figures begin to push back against the terms of their sanctioning? When they question the apparent differences between biogenetic families and so-called synthetic adoptive ones? I look at work by Kay and Lemn Sissay, as well as Stephen Frears’s film *Philomena*, in which the birth mother goes rogue and refuses to disappear as required. I also look at Deann Borshay Liem’s *First Person Plural* and *In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee* and coin a term—*transgenerationality*—to deal with her films. Here I’m drawing upon Benjamin’s marvelous critique of exalted origins in his

comments about translation and trying to think about the ways, certainly in the first of those films (*First Person Plural*), Borshay Liem is trying to assemble or think about family and kinship, beyond some very familiar lines, that might separate out the biogenetic from other forms of family making. This is all in relation to my concepts of the trespasser and trespass as a particular kind of activity that lots of writers and filmmakers today seem interested in.

One really important theme of the book is the mercurial nature of the border, how borders can shift and move almost without warning between the legitimate and the illegitimate, if you like, between the permitted and the prohibited. In Britain, of course, the biggest recent example of this is the Windrush Scandal.

**EH:** Tell me about that—

**JM:** So the UK's Conservative government has for quite some time been pursuing an official policy of what it calls the "hostile environment." It wants to make it very difficult for undocumented migrants to remain in the UK, and the changes to the law have impacted upon everyone. So now, if I examine a PhD candidate at any British university, I've got to take a passport with me to the viva. I've got to present documentation that proves I'm a British citizen. When this policy began to operate in about 2015 or 2016, a certain generation of Caribbean migrants here in Britain—a grandparent generation who arrived before 1973—suddenly found themselves issued with deportation orders even though they had lived in this country for thirty, forty years and entered it legally back in the day. This occurred, for example, if they happened to apply for a UK passport for the first time and were asked to *prove* that they possessed all the documentation that certified they were indeed British citizens. Well, many of them didn't have their old passports, the ones they came with as children back in the fifties and sixties (some came as kids on a parent's passport). They didn't have the documentation that had a stamp in their passports saying, "permitted to

remain.” Several of them were woken at dawn by immigration officers and treated as criminals, despite decades of working and paying taxes and raising families, taken to immigration camps, put on aircraft and flown to Jamaica, to Trinidad, to Grenada, and dumped there and told, well, you’re not British. You can’t come back. There were several cases where people who, thanks to some legal help, managed to avoid getting on the plane at the very last minute. The *Guardian* journalist who ceaselessly reported the scandal is Amelia Gentleman, who, by one of the wildest of coincidences, is the sister-in-law of Boris Johnson.

**EH:** Really?

**JM:** Yes. She’s married to Boris’s brother, Jo Johnson. Amelia came across these awful stories and began to write about them in the *Guardian* before they were eventually taken up by other newspapers. It became a major scandal here in the UK: the deportation of British citizens who *overnight* were reclassified as illegal immigrants and often locked up. They could no longer apply for housing. If they had doctor’s appointments, these were all cancelled because they didn’t have rights to access the NHS. People died of cancer as a consequence. The Home Secretary, Amber Rudd, resigned because of the scandal, and promises were made for compensation for many of the victims. But it turns out that very little monies actually have been paid out by the government.

Amelia Gentleman wrote it all up in her superb book, *The Windrush Betrayal*. I absolutely recommend it. My friend from the University of Durham and I edited an issue of *Wasafiri* in 2023 on cultural representations of the Windrush Scandal, and there have been a few films and plays and things about it. The scandal is but one instance of how a border can just shift overnight when power decides to redraft the terms of others’ sanctioning.

Another example that takes us as back into the unfamilied would be the writer Lemn Sissay. His birth mother was from Ethiopia. He was fostered for the first eleven years of his life by a very

religious family—fostered rather than adopted, because his birth mother, before she returned to Ethiopia, refused to sign the order saying he could be adopted. But when Sissay was twelve, his deeply religious family, who are all White, decided it didn't want him anymore. So they tricked him into saying that he didn't love them. He thought that by saying this, he was doing something that God would approve of. The family promptly returned him to Wigan social services, and he spent the rest of his adolescence, until he was eighteen—a young Black man—as a ward of court, being moved from children's home to children's home. It's an appalling story. His memoir is called *My Name Is Why* because “Lemn,” in the Ethiopian language of his mother, means “why.” Recently he managed to get hold of his files from Wigan social services, and in the book he shows how he was being written about and documented by social workers and the like. He also offers his account of what it was like growing up. It's a very bracing story.

As a young man, Sissay discovered that his birth mother had initially come to England to study, became pregnant, and had put him temporarily into care in Wigan, only to be called back to Ethiopia at short notice as her father was ill. When she later applied to get access to her son again, Wigan County Council refused: “No, no, you disappeared. It's too late. He's now a ward. Of course you've relinquished your rights, so no can do.” Sissay finds all this out when he's eighteen. He'd been told all the time that he wasn't wanted, but he gets the evidence that his birth mother had been looking for him and tried to get him back. He eventually traced her—she was working for an NGO in the Gambia at that time. But as he portrays in his monodrama, *Something Dark*, things were difficult because she hadn't told the rest of the family about him. We also find out that his conception was the result of an assault, and his birth father was a pilot for Ethiopian airlines who died in an aircrash in 1973. I write about both the memoir and the monodrama in *Global Trespassers*.

**EH:** This is fascinating, not just his life, but what you might do with it in your book, how that resonates here in the US. Since you can become American just by being born on American soil, anti-immigrationists endlessly complain about people coming just to have their babies here which, when it's the poor or people of color, raises a hullabaloo to change the regulations so their babies don't have citizenship. It's crazy how the language of hygiene, of dirt and filth, always? now? —I don't know—is part of talking about immigrants here. It's really bizarre to me. We have a giant statue in New York harbor that asks for the wretched, etc. etc. I'm a product of that mass migration, and unsanctioned, too.

**JM:** Well, over here the language tends to be aquatic versus avian. Because we're an island, you hear the hostile vocabulary of us being swamped, being flooded. The current Conservative government is encouraged by the media hyperventilating about migrant boats and is trying to stop them crossing the English Channel—boats run by traffickers with so-called illegal immigrants on them. Small boats are a major threat to national security, we're usually told: the English Channel and the North Sea are full of shady characters trying to cross to the UK, come ashore, and disappear into cities like London. It's utterly xenophobic, of course, and deaf to the desperation of many forced travelers. The small boat is now a weaponized signifier, thanks to those on the right, of Britain's alleged "crisis." Illegal immigrants flood the country ... but wealth-generating tourists quaintly flock like birds. If you fly here, this seems to be okay.

**EH:** I wonder if before airplanes tourists couldn't flock, like if you came in on the Queen Mary. The status of arriving by boat has changed with the boaters.

**JM:** Indeed: boats, it seems, have become conspicuous vessels of maligned migration. Mary Douglas famously described dirt as matter out of place. If migrants are seen as matter—people—out of place, they become for some dirty by default. Such hostility fuels the demonization of boat-

borne migrants as challenging and threatening not only the health of the nation but our National Health Service. If you believe some, the National Health Service doesn't have enough money because there are too many people coming over here getting free healthcare. It's one of the key arguments made to justify migration's heavy regulation; and why Brexit, to a certain extent, was made into a debate about "controlling" borders because if you had an EU passport, you had some rights of entry to the United Kingdom.

There is something very distinct here about wanting to be in control of an islanded space which really encourages a lot of the vile anti-immigrant rhetoric here. There's a terrific novel published a couple of years ago by writer called John Lanchester which I can highly recommend—*The Wall*. It's fantasy about the United Kingdom in about ten years' time or so. The Government has built a wall round the entire island and everyone, instead of doing a version of national service, goes and stands on the wall for three months keeping migrants from the sea from climbing over it. If by any chance you happen on your watch to fail in your duty and people get into the country, then you're cast adrift in a dinghy and sent off into the channel. Our protagonist sadly falls into this into this predicament. It's really interesting and deeply serious sending-up of the "Fortress Britain" narrative.

**EH:** Don't you feel sort of nostalgic for the time when walls were wrong? When building a wall across Berlin was just wrong? Of course, it was a more nuanced thing, but the focus on the badness of the wall, the Iron Curtain, the keeping out or keeping back. We should not wall people into their predicaments. But I guess that was seventy years ago. That was such a celebration in 1989, bringing that wall down! That was a good thing bringing that wall down. And now we just want to build them back up again. And *we* want to build them.

**JM:** I am massively nostalgic for the 1990s. I remember being an undergraduate in the Student Union here at Leeds dancing on tables when the Berlin Wall came down in November 1989. I was a final year student, about to turn twenty-one years old. And what did we get next? We get Mandela being released and the formal end of apartheid. We get the Iron Curtain in Europe disintegrating before our eyes. We get Manchester United winning the Premier League for the first time! And in 1997 we have the first New Labour government under Tony Blair, which was the first Labour government of my adult life. After *eighteen years* of Margaret Thatcher and John Major, a young guy who comes in, triples funding to education, makes positive noises about Britain as a multicultural, thinks “let’s have devolution in Scotland,” “let’s try to address gender gaps.” Even if the rhetoric wasn’t always supported fully by policy or immediate change, here was a Prime Minister who at least seemed to want to look ahead (before the War in Iraq brought another version of the PM to the fore). I always talk about this period of my life as happening between the “two 9/11s”. The Berlin Wall comes down on the ninth of November, which for Europeans is written 9/11. And then of course you’ve got the horror of 9/11 in the US, how that changes everything globally and locally. The long 1990s felt for me a hopeful time, when there seemed more bridges than walls. What has transpired since is in many ways a refurbishment and remoulding of older orders, ever more kind of dispiriting and divisive. But we can’t give in.

**EH:** It seems like our conversation has moved here quite a way from adoption and the unfamiliar, but in some respects it hasn’t, especially as we were saying earlier that adoption can always be found somewhere at the center of wider social and historical circumstances—Jane Eyre and empire, Oliver Twist and nineteenth-century England’s class structure.

**JM:** Absolutely. Deann Borshay Liem’s films tell us that if we want to understand her adoption then we have to know about the Korean War. Stephen Frears’s marvellous film *Philomena* reminds

us that the adoption of Irish-born children in the 1950s and 1960s had everything to do with the distinctive place of the Catholic Church in postcolonial Ireland as well as the international childcare economy in which the US had major stakes. Lemn Sissay's youthful fortunes pivoted on the racist, hostile environment of post-war England which fed directly into the care system. These circumstances made us, even *required* us, just as our presence has helped support the maintenance of exalted assumptions about class, race, kinship, family-making, gender, the tungsten-tough durability of biocentric relations. Consequently, unfamilied and adoptable people are *not* historically exceptional, just as—and I say this very purposefully—Critical Adoption Studies for the same reasons is not peripheral to the arts and humanities. We've never been niche. We've always been necessary.