Seven Adopted American Women's Memoirs of Adoption, Reunion and its Aftermath
Marianne Novy
Adoption: Secret Histories, Public Policies

Thirty-five years after the first publication of B. J. Lifton's Twice Born: Memoirs of an Adopted Daughter, in 1975, memoirs are more popular than ever. This includes memoirs by adoptees that narrate the undoing of secrecy about the identity of their birth family. Barbara Melosh wrote in her 2002 book Strangers and Kin that most memoirs by adoptees suggest that "reunion heals the wounds of the past" and "drop the curtain soon after reunion." (249, 251) Looking at Twice Born along with six of the most recent memoirs by adopted American women, mostly written after Melosh's book, I find instead a more complicated picture, in which reunion, though important, is not enough. There are many other similarities among these books, and even in some areas of apparent contrasts, resemblances appear beneath the surface. Let me begin by saying a bit about each of them.

Lifton's Twice Born discusses how being adopted affected her early life, adolescence and young womanhood, and the circumstances that led her to search for her birthparents. Her birthmother talks to her on the phone but keeps their relationship secret; by the time she looks for her birthfather he is dead, but she learns more about him from relatives and his friends. While telling this story Lifton provides historical, literary, psychological and cross-cultural perspectives on adoption.

Sarah Saffian's adoptive mother died when she was six years old. Her father soon remarried. The family seems very stable when, at 23, she is contacted by her birthparents, who have married and had other children and want to meet her. This is the point where Ithaka, published in 1998, begins. Saffian is not ready for a face-to-face meeting, so they

exchange letters over several years, but eventually do meet and continue their relationship. Ithaka includes the birthparents' letters as well as Saffian's narrative of her struggle to come to terms with this new family.

Jean Strauss's Beneath a Tall Tree, published in 2001, begins with her relinquishment for adoption, narrates memories of her childhood, including her father's death, as well as her own marriage and children. Its basic structure, however, is the quest to draw a family tree, which becomes more and more inclusive as the book proceeds and Strauss finds her birthmother, then her birthmother's birthmother. I will also draw on a previous book by Strauss, Birthright, which tells something about her search and reunion in the context of providing a guide for others interested in searching.

Catherine McKinley's Book of Sarahs (2002) discusses growing up a racially mixed daughter to a white New England couple who had also adopted a white son, searching for her birthmother, who she learns is Jewish, and also her birthfather, who is African American. She develops a relationship with her birthmother, which is troubled as she discovers that Estie has given up another daughter to adoption and is unstable; her birthfather talks to her on the phone occasionally from Las Vegas and she visits once. She enjoys a better relationship with her new siblings.

Jane Jeong Trenka's Language of Blood (2003) tells how she was flown to the United States from Korea when about six months old and, along with her sister, adopted by a German-American couple. She is raised in a small town in Minnesota with little contact with any other Asian-Americans. While she is in high school, her birth mother starts writing to her. Her college life involves more contact with Asian Americans, but she doesn't feel she belongs with them. Worse, she has to deal with a determined, violent, and racist stalker. Upon college graduation, she visits Korea and gets to know her birth family. She returns several times, bringing her sister and, after her birthmother dies, her husband.

Emily Hipchen's Coming Apart Together (2005) emphasizes the difficulty of knowing the truth about the past. Raised in a troubled adoptive family and always suffering from stress-related vomiting, Hipchen tells how an extreme case of this motivated her to sign up with the state adoption registry for medical information. Her birthparents, who have married and had other children, contacted her, and eventually they meet. Much of this book focuses on her attempt to find out about their lives before her, and to imagine more from the details she is told.

A. M. Homes' The Mistress' Daughter (2007) begins when her adoptive parents receive a call from a lawyer who says that her birthmother is interested in contact. Homes has many phone conversations with her, eventually meets her, and finds her very difficult. She also meets her birthfather, who insists on a DNA test, meets with her in hotel lobbies, asks her to call him only in his car. After her birthmother dies she regrets her earlier lack of sympathy, and becomes obsessed with tracing her birth genealogy on both sides, and eventually with her adoptive genealogy as well. She attempts to join the DAR since her birthfather's ancestry should entitle her to, but, rejected because he won't provide her with an acknowledgment or test results to prove it, she devotes a chapter to imagining the questions she would ask him in a deposition. She ends the book with memories of her beloved adoptive grandmother, recently dead at 99, and the triumph of having given birth, as a single woman of 41, to a daughter in whom she sees many resemblances to her grandmother.

Some experiences are common to many of these writers. Most--Lifton, McKinley, Homes, and Saffian--mention having fantasies about their birth parents--some in childhood, some continuing through their twenties, others even later in life before they meet. Saffian, for example, begins by imagining her birth parents as fairytale characters, and then moves on to celebrities and eventually to people on the street with her coloring and build (6). Most explicitly confront sealed adoption records. This important theme in Lifton's book is also dramatized when Trenka wants to learn what her parents were told when they adopted her, when Strauss begins her search, when McKinley gets non-identifying information doled out slowly, and when Homes wants to

prove she is eligible for the DAR. Even Saffian, whose birth parents have sought her out, can't get her records from the adoption agency, the bureau of vital statistics, or the hospital where she was born.

Fantasies of birth parents usually involve finding someone you look like, but when the meeting occurs the question of similarity is more complicated for these writers than we might expect. McKinley and her mother, it is true, get into it at their first meeting, in an airline terminal: "comparing eyes and teeth, fingers, taking off our boots and stockings to show each other our feet, rolling up our pants to compare our legs.." (152) However, Trenka, Strauss, Saffian, Lifton, and Homes don't see physical similarity right away, and Lifton never does with her mother. It strikes Hipchen when her birthfather extends his long arms a few days after they meet and says, "These are pitchers' arms. These are your arms." (112). Saffian, after she has spent some time with her birth parents and their children, thinks, "We all have the same eyes" (28). At first Homes doesn't feel her birthfather looks like her, but at the later meeting for a DNA test, she sees him walking up to the lab counter and thinks, "There goes my ass.. . . His blue sport coat covers it halfway, but I can see it broken into sections, departments, of ass, high and low just like mine. I notice his thighs--chubby, thick, not a pretty thing. This is the first time I have seen anyone else in my body." (51).

Many of these writers find that they have other things in common with their birth parents. During a meeting with her birth family, Trenka goes into a "routine of exaggerated mock crying and laughing" (112) to show that both she and her birthmother and one sister are emotional. Homes discovers that she and her birthmother both keep their money in a jeans pocket (102). Sometimes, however, similarities are hard to acknowledge: Strauss has difficulty with the fact that she and her birthmother are both anxious, Saffian with her birthfather's similarity to an emotional side she keeps hidden. And sometimes instead of a clear temperamental likeness the connection is a compromise: Lifton comes to see herself as the grey sheep, a mix of her birthfather's figuratively black nonconformity and her birthmother's pale white timidity.

Contrary to the suggestion that reunion itself is simply healing, every writer finds it hard to integrate their birth parents into their life. With Lifton and with Homes, in relation to her father, the problem is the birth parent's wish for secrecy. But with Strauss, Saffian, McKinley, and Homes in relation to her mother, the difficulty is the adoptee's reaction to expressions of intimacy that seem premature or inappropriate to them. Saffian and Strauss, who lost a beloved parent at an early age, are sensitive to anything that seems to threaten or, worse, disparage their relationship with their remaining adoptive parent.

Most of them say that meeting their birth parents, or even learning about them, requires a drastic change in their worldview. Saffian writes of "having her fantasy heritage whisked out from under me, like in the old magic trick, only I wasn't left intact as the place setting is supposed to be after the tablecloth has been yanked away" (15) . Hipchen and Homes also speak of having to change their mental structures. These three were all surprised by being contacted by one or both birth parents, and so had less time to prepare for this shift, but Lifton also writes of moving mental furniture when the reality of her birthmother replaces the fantasy (150). The theme of being numb, and emerging out of numbness, whether temporary or long-standing, appears in Trenka, Strauss, and Homes. Saffian feels that she has moved from being closed to being open; she begins and ends with a chapter titled "aperture," and realizes how inadequate are her words about achieving closure.

Lifton, involved in the beginning of the adoptee rights' movement in the US, finds a crucial turning point as she attends an early meeting of ALMA, which Florence Fisher was then forming. She feels that she has now "found her true brothers and sisters" (177-78), and she comes to understand more of the pain of birthmothers from those she meets. And she learns of Jean Paton, Orphan Voyage, and her Museum of Orphan Literature, which contains "all those thousand of volumes of poetry, prose, plays, and nonfiction that have some connection with people like me" (182). McKinley finds it helpful to get in contact with the Nigerian Scottish adoptee poet Jackie Kay and make other racially mixed friends. Trenka, on the other hand, credits her adventurous white

college boyfriend, who never met his father, with giving her the courage to go to Korea to meet her family. Strauss begins her search because a screenwriting teacher talks about his own experience of losing a child to adoption. However, she doesn't always find interactions with others involved with adoption helpful. She concludes, "when one writes a book about something so personal and complex, others who have gone through the same experience, but with different perspectives, can feel mis-portrayed, if not betrayed" (156). McKinley and Saffian both describe attending meetings of search/support groups and feeling uncomfortable about prescriptive group leaders and the "extreme expression of emotion" (Saffian, 124; McKinley, 54). Saffian does, however, gains there some perspective on the problem of being found unexpectedly by hearing another adoptee talk about being rejected by her birthmother. Formal therapy is notably unhelpful to Lifton, but many years later turns out to be crucial to Saffian.

All of these memoirists are interested in a larger network of relationships, not just birth parents. Sometimes they can relate to their full or half-siblings much more easily than their parents. In the process of searching, though they experience rejections, they also meet and get help from and connect with many people they didn't expect. Several of them end their books with an overall greater feeling of connectedness. Homes and Strauss, the bohemian novelist and the college president's wife, converge as their search makes them feel part of American history. Homes is fascinated by the stories that she finds on the Web of American immigrants who may not be related to her either biologically or by adoption, and Strauss, having traced an ancestor in a Civil War battle and others in royalty many generations before, concludes, "I am related to everybody." Some of them also explicitly note parallels between their experience and those of others. Homes, as she looks at all the people searching for their genealogy, realizes that not everyone trying to find themselves is adopted.

Most writers close to the end of their memoir emphasize a family they have constructed, and suggest that their search and reunion experiences have prepared them for it. Hipchen is married and says she has learned how to love from the acceptance she received from her birthfather. Homes and Strauss see their biological connection ongoing

in children, and emphasize that that relationship is now more important than their relation with parents. Among the last event in Lifton's narrative is discussing her adoption and reunion with her children. Saffian is still single at the end of the first edition of her book, but in the afterword to the second she tells us about her husband and her wedding. Trenka ends her book going back to Korea with the white husband she has married since her previous trip, fantasizing about future children.

All of them seem to grow, and several in particular to gain in empathy for difficult parents of both kinds, over the course of the narrative they present. Every one emphasizes a renewed relationship with their adoptive family near the end of their memoir--an outcome that should reassure adoptive parents whose children want to search. Minimally, Trenka wishes to grant her adoptive family "something like forgiveness." Homes feels more belonging in her adoptive family, especially in relation to her grandmother; Strauss realizes that she can put her adoptive family into the family tree that she has been building as she finds her birth genealogy. McKinley writes, "My parents gave me the tools to go forth and figure out an American black woman's life. My bond with them is as simple and automatic as love" though she then continues "as vexing and intractable as our distances." Except perhaps for Trenka, they agree with Lifton's conclusion that "she who raises the child is the mother" (219), though as we will see, Homes insists on using that word in the same sentence to apply to both mothers without any qualification.

However, there are contrasts among these writers as well, sometimes explicit. Childhood and adolescence are uncomfortable for most of them, with Trenka and McKinley perhaps in a special category because of their transracial adoption. But Trenka's parents have no interest in Korean culture and wanted to forget about her birthparents' existence, while McKinley's mother (like most mothers, more visible in the childrearing story), learns from a black friend how to do her daughter's hair and finds a black church for her to attend, to connect with the black community. The adoptive parents of Lifton, Hipchen, and Trenka are bothered by their daughters' illegitimacy -- Lifton's mother denies it, while the two who acknowledge the illegitimacy are cruelly

repressive. Trenka's mother sees her daughters as saved from prostitution by adoption and thinks they need to see a doctor because they masturbate (122). Hipchen's father thinks she is pregnant at twelve when her second period is late. Most of the writers feel that their adoptive parents are uncomfortable discussing their birth parents or want to forget about them, and in general associate their adoptive parents with emotional control.

By contrast, the two writers with the best long-standing relationships with their adoptive parents, Saffian and Strauss, remember early open talks about adoption. For Strauss, bad feelings about adoption emerge during the third grade family tree project, but not as persistently as for most of the others. There are problems in her childhood--her father's early death, her difficult brother, who is also adopted and turns out to be mentally ill--but her childhood stories include victories over adversity, such as when she earns her grandfather's acceptance by her success at fishing, or when she holds and soothes her mother after her father's death.

Saffian also has a memory of early parental frankness about adoption. At seven, in the first year after her mother's death, she discovers that she didn't come home from the hospital for two months after she was born. She asks her father about the delay, and, she says, "Even when I was young, he took me seriously, was attentive to my questions and straightforward in his answers." (4) By contrast with Lifton's mother's insistence that they had insisted on a legitimate child, Saffian's father says that they wanted a girl, and birth parents who were college graduates or at least in college. Although Saffian uses some language of commodification in discussing her reaction--"I did have the sense of being carefully selected, deliberately ordered," --she writes, "The message that I was supremely wanted overrode any potential feelings of being unwanted by my original set of parents." She is happy with her father and her stepmother, known as Mom, who she first grew to know and love as a babysitter. More than any of the others, she discusses the similarities she feels with her adoptive parents. She includes both her stepmother and her dead mother, but the similarities with her father get the most emphasis: She comments on "his posture, his carriage, his gait, the way clothes hung on his frame, all

of which mine happened to resemble" (185), and even "taste for salty foods. . .. myopia, . . . unusually sensitive feet" (276).

Writers with worse relationship with their adoptive parents express bad feelings about themselves related to adoption. Homes calls herself "An amalgam. . . glued together" (38) early in her book. Trenka calls herself an exile and always feels there is something wrong with her. Hipchen grows up believing that people would leave her (136) Strauss, who seems more practical and less introspective than the others, never suggests similar feelings in Beneath a Tall Tree. However, in a previous book, Birthright (1994), Strauss writes of healing as the goal of search and reunion, even as she reports her anger at a psychologist who claims that complete healing is impossible for adoptees. While her relationship with her adoptive parents is better than that of most of the other adoptees, both books discuss difficulties with her birthmother in the early years of their relationship. In Birthright, however, she says,"I never really had a problem with being adopted, never really felt conscious pain or loss, until I began writing the first draft of this book." (340) While she writes in Birthright that it is important for adoptees to "give [themselves] permission to deal with adoption losses" (329), she decides to "focus on the benefits of being an adoptee--not just the love and experiences I share with all my families, but also the gifts that come from working through the losses" (341). She includes the wisdom and compassion that come from suffering, the empowerment from surviving trauma, and--what rings truest with regard to the persona that she has shown--the ability to adapt (341).

How about Saffian, apparently so happy with her adoptive family? As she works out her confusion at how to relate to her birth family, she admits feelings she hadn't acknowledged before, about being abandoned first by her birth mother and then in the death of her adoptive mother. She comes to this realization in a chapter called "Chimera.". In biology, a chimera is "an organism, especially a plant, containing tissues from at least two genetically distinct parents." An older meaning from Greek mythology, is more vivid: "a firebreathing monster represented with the head of a lion, the body of a goat, and the tail of a serpent." However, the chapter with this title, in which she is for

the first time bothered by other people asking about her heredity, is a point of transition. She has been emphatic about not wanting to give up her Saffian self, not seeing her previous self as a pretense (121), as an adoption counselor encouraged her to see it. She articulates what she has received from each of her three mothers, saying that "the realness of each woman's motherhood didn't diminish the realness of the others'" (188). She ends the book with a formulation that permits her to accept the complexity of her life, without seeing herself as monstrous: "just as one can have many children, one can, in varying degrees, also have many parents, many families--and even many selves, or discrete but complementary parts that make up the whole." (302).

Thus some adoptees portray their childhood as happy, others do not; for some, feeling abandoned or damaged or exiled is an important part of their history while for others such feelings seldom emerge. In spite of the differences, however, there is a convergence between the way that the happy-childhood adoptees Saffian and Strauss, and the "glued-together" Homes imagine their identities near the end of their books. Strauss writes, " I have held my adoptive family in one hand, like a ball of blue clay, and my birth family in another, like a ball of red, interpreting them as unrelated parts of myself. But they are not separate. They are the same. They belong together. Grandma reshapes my view of my family. She helps me make purple" (201). Earlin in her book, when Homes describes herself as something "glued together," she says, "I am not my adopted mother's child, I am not Ellen's child" (38). But at the end she says, "I am my mother's child and I am my mother's child, I am my father's child and I am my father's child, and if that line is a little too much like Gertrude Stein, then I might be a little bit her child too." (238).

For none of the white adoptees I consider does ethnicity seem as important in their summing up as personal relationships, though several have found ethnicity and religious traditions not part of their adoptive family. However, McKinley stresses her new certitude of race and ethnicity, even if multiple and paradoxical, in a way that resembles the summing up of Homes, Strauss, and Saffian. She writes, "There is no longer a question mark at the end of the tricky line of my identity. WASP and Jew and

Choctaw and Africa mark me with ferocity. I've lined up photographs of my . . . families, bearing the faces of these different tribes, all estranged from each other, with little reason to connect. I am in the center of each photo. When I look at myself there, I feel membership in all, in none." (288-89). Summing up is, of course, a frequent convention of memoir; however, the inclusiveness of most of these summations appears by contrast to the decisiveness of Trenka's. She ends her book with a fantasy of flying with her imagined daughter and her dead Korean mother alive again, surrounded by butterflies (symbolic not only of transformation but also of Asian womanhood).

Can we draw any conclusions from these memoirs, unscientifically small sample though they are? The most basic is that reunion is not the end of the story, and coming to terms with your birth family is complicated. In these memoirs, some adoptees explore places that Melosh found yet uncharted, not only what comes after reunion, but also "the territory of bad reunions" (253). Adopted people's experiences of both their adoptive families and their birth families vary enormously, and so do the way they, we, formulate their/ our relation to each, and often to the several parts of each. There is no easy formula. Nevertheless, Homes, who was found by her birthmother and recounts the worst relationships with birthparents of any in this group, speaks for all of these writers when she ends her book by saying, "I couldn't not know."