Adoptee Activism: I Am Not Your 'Child for All Purposes'

DENISE BLAKE, ANNABEL AHURIRI-DRISCOLL
& BARBARA SUMNER

In this article, we, three adoptee scholars, share collectively our experiences of adoption while engaging in activism that contests adoption practices. We apply autoethnographic and reflexive strategies to unpack our shared conversation in order to foreground the plight of adoptees and offer insight into adoption and the importance of the current law reform in Aotearoa New Zealand. We draw on a model of adoptee consciousness to frame the complexity of our 'lived experience' and activism. In doing this we outline some of the challenges we face as adoptees because adoption, as a human-rights injustice, is largely misunderstood, overlooked, or ignored. To begin, however, it is necessary to outline the history of closed stranger adoption in Aotearoa New Zealand with the purpose of providing context.

Tracing a history of closed stranger adoption

Prior to 1955 adoptions occurred in Aotearoa New Zealand but were essentially open and often transparent in that original and adoptive families knew of each other. However, driven by competing social, moral, and political agendas, in 1955 a new Adoption Act sanctioned the permanent removal of children from their original kin. This act launched the

'closed stranger' adoption period, a socio-legal intervention that aimed to address so-called social problems. For instance, women who became pregnant outside of marriage were perceived as wayward or sinful, bestowing great shame on their families. Prevailing discourses deemed any child born out of wedlock illegitimate, condemned to carry the stigma of their birth mother's transgressions.[1] To be born illegitimate had long been judged by some as a fate worse than death. Closed stranger adoption was seen as a means to redeem both mother and illegitimate child. It also provided a way for infertile couples to become parents, or for existing families to become larger, as was desired at that time.

The 1955 Adoption Act decreed that a child was 'as if born to' a legally married adoptive couple (Section 16(2)a Adoption Act 1955), a fiction in law but acceptable due to the assumed social benefits.[2] The act stipulated that once an adoption order was signed by the birth mother, all adoptees were given a new legal identity and all records of the original kin were permanently sealed by the overseeing agencies, meaning kinship ties were severed.

To uphold the legal fiction and present an adoptive family as a coherent and stable unit, secrecy was key.[3] Attempts were often made to match adoptees' physical characteristics to that of their adoptive parents. Advocates of closed stranger adoption professed that infants were 'blank slates' who could be moulded to fit the personal characteristics of adopting parents.[4] Yet, in a bicultural nation such as Aotearoa New Zealand, it was not uncommon for Pākehā birth mothers to have transracial relations and

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1 Keith Griffith, *The Legal and Social History of Adoption in New Zealand* (Wellington: New Zealand Adoption Education and Healing Trust, 1997), 45-49; *New Zealand Adoption: History and Practice, Social and Legal, 1840-1996* (Wellington, K.C. Griffith, 1998), 26-29.

2 Law Commission, *Report 65. Adoption and its Alternatives: A Different Approach and a New Framework* (Wellington, Law Commission, 2000), xv.

3 Michele Hanna and Ruth McRoy, 'Innovative Practice Approaches to Matching in Adoption,' *Journal of Public Child Welfare* 5, no. 1 (2011).

4 Griffith, *The Legal and Social History of Adoption in New Zealand.*

therefore mixed-race children.[5] Once these children entered the adoption system, they were categorised and labelled according to racial indicators: probable blood quantum, physical characteristics, and appearance.[6] When it was known that children had non-European ancestry, in many cases, potential adoptive parents requested those with a fair-skinned appearance.[7] Owing to the small number of Māori adoption applicants, more often than not, children were placed with Pākehā adopting parents, in what is now referred to as a transracial adoption.[8] Although not necessarily recognised as such, these attempts at matching were firmly underpinned by racist, settler-colonial thinking.[9] Transracial placement was particularly harmful for Māori; in conjunction with the legal erasure of whakapapa and severing of connections with whānau and whenua, the adopted person's ability to claim a Māori identity and stand in the Māori world is severely compromised.[10]

For both Māori and non-Māori, being adopted often generates a sense of profound differentness from others born to, and raised within, biological families. However, through the 'as if born to' legal fiction and practices

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5 Maria Haenga-Collins, *Closed Stranger Adoption, Māori and Race Relations in Aotearoa New Zealand, 1955-1985* (PhD, Australian National University, 2017), 61.

6 Annabel Ahuriri-Driscoll, *Ka Tū Te Whare, Ka Ora: The Constructed and Constructive Identities of the Māori Adoptee* (PhD, University of Canterbury, 2020), 13; Anne Else, *A Question of Adoption* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 1991), 186; Valerie Perkins (nēe Devonshire), *He Aroha Whaea, He Potiki Piripoho: The Unique Experiences of Māori Adoptive Mothers in the 'Closed stranger' Adoption System* (Masters, Massey University, 2009), 25, 76.

7 Else, *A Question of Adoption*, 187; Perkins, *He Aroha Whaea*.

8 Ahuriri-Driscoll, *Ka Tū Te Whare*, 47.

9 Richey Wyver, 'Civilizing Missions and Mimicry in Sweden's Colonial Present: Exploring the Construction of the Transnational/-Racial Adoptee as a Mimic Swede,' in *Adoption and Multiculturalism: Europe, the Americas and the Pacific*, eds. Jenny Heijun Wills, Tobias Hubinette, and Indigo Willing (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2020), 126-149.

10 Ahuriri-Driscoll, *Ka Tū Te Whare*, 58; Emma West, *Manu is My Homegirl: Navigating the Ethnic Identity of the Māori Adoptee* (Masters, Auckland University of Technology, 2012), 18; Maria Haenga-Collins, *Belonging and Whakapapa: The Closed Stranger Adoption of Māori Children into Pākehā Families* (Masters, Massey University, 2011), 89.

of 'matching', this differentness was then denied. Further, discourses of adoption as 'rescue' and the adoptee as 'lucky' for going to a 'good home' implied that adoptees ought to be grateful for their salvation. Together, these factors constitute an adoption paradox whereby adoptees were produced by and through contradictory social discourses of biological and adoptive kinship. Adoptee silence and ambivalence were common outcomes.[11]

There were over 80,000 legal adoptions between 1955 and 1985, with approximately 45,000 of those being closed stranger adoptions.[12] It is not known how many of these involved Māori children, however, due to unreliable and inconsistent recording of ethnicity. It is also important to note that the effects of adoption extend beyond individual adoptees, to original and adoptive parents, grandparents, siblings, extended family members, and subsequent generations. It also has implications on friendship groups, wider communities, and so on. The tentacles of adoption reach far and wide.

In 1985, after years of lobbying by adoptees and concerned citizens, the Adoption Act was supplemented by the Adult Adoption Information Act. This new act granted adoptees access to their original birth certificate, which identifies the original mother's name, but most often not the father's name. Reunions became possible, however both adoptees and birth parent(s) could remain untraceable through veto provisions.[13] Such provisions were included to protect the original adoption contract by stipulating that no identifying information be released.[14] Where reunions did happen, the social dynamics were often complex or problematic due to

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11 Ahuriri-Driscoll, *Ka Tū Te Whare*, 30, 253.

12 Maria Haenga-Collins and Anita Gibbs, 'Walking Between Worlds: The Experiences of New Zealand Māori Cross-Cultural Adoptee,' *Adoption and Fostering* 39, no. 1 (2015): 62.

13 Griffith, *New Zealand Adoption*, 377.

14 Keith Griffith, *The Right to Know Who You Are: Reform of Adoption Law with Honesty, Openness and Integrity* (Toronto: Katherine W. Kimbell, 1991), 17, 12.

the highly emotive experiences of grief and loss for all involved.[15]

Over the years, various reports have documented how the 1955 Adoption Act is archaic, discriminatory, and breaches Te Tiriti o Waitangi.[16] In particular, an inquiry by the New Zealand Law Commission in 2000 found that the values and principles of the act were outdated and discredited the treatment of a child as property. However, there have been no legislative changes since that review over 20 years ago. This means that current 'open' adoption practice remains a legally unenforceable contact agreement.[17] Thus, while all parties are known to one another and visitation rights are negotiated, if at any point an adoptive family decide they no longer want contact between the original parent(s) and the child, they have the ability to enforce that decision through the act. There is, however, a review of the 1955 Adoption Act underway. The review, instigated by government, proposes to remediate adoption by making it more child-centred in orientation. It is apparent, though, that the interests of adopted people constitute only one stake being taken into account.

Adoptees as activists

The current adoption law reform and the ongoing Royal Commission on Abuse in State Care, which encompasses adoption, prompted us, the authors, to come together as adoptees and would-be activists. We realise that in our

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15 Ellen Herman, 'Can Kinship be Designed and Still be Normal? The Curious Case of Child Adoption,' in *Histories of the Normal and Abnormal: Social and Cultural Histories of Norms and Normativity*, ed. Waltraud Ernst (London: Routledge, 2006); Denise Blake and Leigh Coombes, 'No-Man's Land: Adoption Storied Through the Aotearoa/New Zealand Adoption Act 1955,' *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 26, no. 1 (2015).

16 Ahuriri-Driscoll, *Ka Tū Te Whare*, 15; Denise Blake, *Wade in the Water: Storying Adoptees' Experiences Through the Adoption Act 1955* (PhD, Massey University, 2013), 18-21; Marie Dyhrberg, 'The Impact of European Law on Customary Adoption Practices in Aotearoa', paper presented at the International Bar Association Conference, Cancun, Mexico, 2001; Law Commission, *Report 65. Adoption and its Alternatives*.

17 Child Youth and Family, 'Adoption in New Zealand: Some Answers and Questions,' Ministry of Social Development, 2007.

lifetimes, at least, there has not been the promise of this degree of change or redress. We know that this, in a sense, is the Stolen Generation's moment described by Aaron Smale, who referred to other settler governments acknowledging the harms inflicted by the stealing of Indigenous children.[18] We are acutely aware of the importance of capitalising on this moment. Current political circumstances are such that there is the increased potential for (1) formal and public recognition of adoptees' experiences; (2) collation of evidence and achievement of consensus relating to the harms that were perpetuated through closed adoption; and (3) the shaping of adoption law and practice that is responsive to the lived experience of adoptees. However, as affected parties and researchers, having each taken opportunities to engage with the adoption law reform and the Royal Commission, we are aware of the personal costs of engaging, and the discomfort and challenges of this form of 'adoptee activism', part of, but also distinct from, 'adoption activism'. Our subjectivities as adopted people are central, both enabling and constraining our activism.

Conceptualising activism in this study requires a framing that sufficiently represents the unique and culturally textured experiences of adoptees. For that reason, the Adoptee Consciousness Model, as outlined by Blanco et al., offers a way to make sense of how adoptees come to activism through various 'touchstones' over their life course. Adoptees traverse these touchstones in a spiral that can shift, change, and reverse; it is not a linear process where adoptees move sequentially along a prescribed path or are nestled within or stuck at one point.

For us, adoption is simultaneously political, theoretical, and lived as we spiral through the touchstones. Adopted people have no choice but to be embroiled in these adoption processes, yet we can struggle with engaging with the various adoptive paradoxes and contradictions that this entails, and with being genuinely seen and heard as people who embody social and political injustice. Because of their non-white birth origins and adoption into white families, Denise and Annabel also share the effects of

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18 Aaron Smale, 'Taken by the State: Yes, we are the Stolen Generations,' *Newsroom*, 12 June 2020.

the transracial adoption paradox. To this extent, ethnic heritage intersects with an adoptive identity, bringing another form of difference.[19]

Touchstone	Definition
Status quo	Adoptees comply with dominant narratives that advocate for positive adoptive experiences. They do not question wider social influences on experiences of adoption, and they defend adoption as a social practice.
Rupture	Any adherence to dominant ideas about adoption are disrupted through an incident or event. Transracial adoptees also gain awareness of others perceiving them as racially different from their adoptive families.
Dissonance	Adoptees experience tension about their adoptive identity. This can cause painful emotions, such as sadness, anger, or anxiety.
Expansiveness	The adoptive paradox is embraced, even though it can be uncomfortable. Adoptees are able to appreciate a range of perspectives and maintain a fluid adoptive identity. They acknowledge the injustice of adoption and can join adoptive communities.
Forgiveness and action	Acceptance and forgiveness are the cornerstone of activism. Adoptees are able to challenge systemic subjugation in the institution of adoption and its accompanying practices.

Table 1. Dimensions and processes of adoptee consciousness.[20]

19 Richard Lee, 'The Transracial Adoption Paradox: History, Research and Counseling Implications of Cultural Socialization,' *The Counseling Psychologist* 31, no. 6 (2003).

20 Susan Branco et al., 'Out of the Fog into Consciousness: A Model of Adoptee Awareness,' *Adoptee Consciousness* (2022): 12-13.

Our aims as adoption scholars and public dissenters are to challenge the social power relations that enabled the violence of closed stranger adoption. We seek to disrupt the status quo and contest the social hierarchy complicit in our social engineering. While we may forgive the harms imposed on us through the loss of biological relationships, we protest the human rights violations created by the 1955 Adoption Act, and advocate for an inclusive, Te Tiriti-led law reform. Weary and wary of government promises, we are clear that any law reform needs to redress historical harms as well as reshaping the future practice of 'open' adoption. This entails a focus on the needs of all adoptees—adults and children, past and present.[21]

Methodology

As represented, methods of dialogue, autoethnography, and reflexivity have been used in this article to articulate our subjectivities as adopted people and to assemble a coherent narrative that represents our comparable and divergent adopted experiences. To gain a greater sense of who we are as authors, we each share a brief biographical synopsis.

Denise is an adoptee who 'wades in the water', a metaphor she uses to describe her life with an ambiguous ethnicity. While water has many facets, it has no colour, it is fluid, translucent, and forceful. Adopted into a Pākehā family, Denise wears 'colour', but has not been able to produce a bio-normative, essentialist identity. Told her birth father was Māori, he has never been named. Denise has two brothers who were also adoptees. Her Pākehā adoptive family fell short of their task of upholding the morally 'good' family, with its reliance on alcohol, existence in poverty, and family practices shrouded in neglect. Denise completed a PhD project that explored the way in which adoptees are enabled and constrained by the 1955 Adoption Act in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Annabel was born to a Pākehā birth mother and Māori birth father. Despite being 'white-passing', Annabel was the black sheep in her Pākehā

21 See: https://www.justice.govt.nz/justice-sector-policy/key-initiatives/adoption -law-reform/

adoptive family, not resembling them physically or in any other way. Annabel thinks of herself as 'doubly colonised', a subject of the colonising acts perpetrated on wider Māori society, and as a subject of the colonising act of transracial adoption. For Annabel, this experience reaches into every aspect of her life, from her experience growing up in-between, to her reconnection with birth family and te ao Māori. Annabel has also completed a PhD, which explores Māori adoptees' lived experiences and how identity features in these.

Barbara's mother arrived from England as a pregnant teenager. She can only speculate on the relationship between her mother and her much older Jewish father. She was acquired by a 'good Christian married couple' to resolve their infertility. An inappropriate pairing, the law and normative social practice required her to live 'as if' she was their natural child. Barbara mounted a legal challenge to the permanent sealing of her adoption records and succeeded in gaining access to some of her files. These reveal the timeline and methods used to procure her in a process she describes as child trafficking. Barbara's PhD on adoption is currently underway.

With lived experience as adoptees, we appreciate how autoethnography allows us to resist our construction and positioning through closed stranger adoption. Autoethnography also enables a way to produce research that has meaning to us, the adoption community, and beyond, because it offers a way to deepen engagement and represent nuanced and contextualised experiences.[22] Using voice as a research method has long been valued in activist spaces, where accounting for a 'self' as situated in and of the world is a vehicle for analysis to activate change.[23] As professed by Nick Couldry, 'Voice is socially grounded, performed through exchange, reflexive, embodied, and dependent upon a material form'.[24] Such processes also permit access to intersubjectivity, the space in-between where adopted

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22 Carolyn Ellis, Tony Adams, and Arthur Bochner, 'Autoethnography: An Overview,' *Historical Social Research* 36, no. 4 (2011).

23 Nick Couldry, *Why Voice Matters: Culture and Politics after Neoliberalism* (London: Sage Publications, 2010); Delia Dumitrica, 'Voice and Listening in Social Media Facilitated Activist Collectives,' *Canadian Review of Sociology* 57, no. 4 (2020).

24 Couldry, *Why Voice Matters*, 91

subjects can share and find validation in their liminality, together.[25] We argue this space also supports movement between the touchstones depicted in the Adoptee Consciousness Model. In a world governed by non-adopted subjects there are often limited ways to express adoptee agency.[26] Powerfully, however, our conversation became a way to speak ourselves into being.

According to Natalie Cherot, when adoptees reconceptualise adoption 'truths' through actively engaging in dialogue, we disrupt traditionally espoused adoption discourses.[27] These discourses include adoption upholding the welfare of the child, an opinion often promoted by pro-adoption agencies (see, for example, Adoption Option).[28] Through our shared engagement, we collectively interrogated adoption discourses and our positioning by and within these, including what enables and constrains our various and unique activisms and how we can incite wider interest in adoption reforms. We look at who we are as activists—what drives us and how we, and the injustices of closed stranger adoption in Aotearoa, are silenced.

In the following sections, we present the narrative themes embedded in our conversation. These themes include experiences of being activists for adoptees, what we risk when contesting adoption, acknowledgment of adoption activists that came before, how adoption disturbs the social order, the lack of language to signify adoptive experiences, and the challenge of having many causes to fight for. We also discuss the adoption law reform and how adoptees are contributing to that process and the need for a collective adoptee activism. Each theme is written in way that has included the minimal verbal encouragers (utterances that demonstrate engagement and listening) to highlight the agreement and connections between us.

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25 Roger Frie and Bruce Reis, 'Understanding Inter-Subjectivity: Psychoanalytic Formulations and Their Philosophical Underpinnings,' *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* 37, no. 2 (2001).

26 Blake, *Wade in the Water*.

27 Natalie Cherot, 'Transnational Adoptees: Global Biopolitical Orphans or an Activist Community?' *Culture Machine* 8 (2008).

28 http://www.adoptionoption.org.nz/about-us/

Narrative themes

Experiences around activism

The first narrative theme to materialise from our dialogue covered the various elements that impact on how we experience activism and the uncertainty and unease of claiming activism as a label. Our discomfort at taking up this mantle is connected to how we experience being adoptees and our associated identities, as well as to our loyalties to adoptive families.

Having to withstand being adopted means adoptees can experience an insecure sense of self and adjustment issues, such as feeling 'less than', due to incompatibility with adoptive family or the knowledge of having been relinquished by original kin.[29] While being removed from biological kin is a trauma in itself, microaggressions—the frequent verbal, behavioural, attitudinal, or situational acts of ignorance or hostility towards the adoptive family form—can cause adoptees to re-experience this trauma, consciously or unconsciously.[30] Particular adopted experiences—for example, carrying the shame of original mothers' ex-nuptial sexual activity and being raised in a 'cobbled together' family[31]—can trigger embodied shame, linked to how one experiences identity.[32] While there are movements towards valuing 'lived experience' in the mental health and addiction field, claiming lived experience, especially with stigmatised or minoritised identities such as an

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29 Blake, *Wade in the Water*; Femmie Juffer and Marinus van IJzendoorn, 'Adoptees Do Not Lack Self-Esteem: A Meta-Analysis of Studies on Self-Esteem of Transracial, International, and Domestic Adoptees,' *Psychological Bulletin* 133 (2007).

30 Amanda Baden, '"Do You Know Your Real Parents?" and Other Adoption Microaggressions,' *Adoption Quarterly*, no. 1 (2016): 6-7; Karin Garber, *'You Were Adopted?!': An Exploratory Analysis of Microaggressions Experienced By Adolescent Adopted Individuals* (Masters, University of Massachusetts, 2014), 54; D. W. Sue, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation* (New York: Wiley, 2010), 5.

31 B. C. Miller et al., 'Adopted Adolescents' Overrepresentation in Mental Health Counselling: Adoptees' Problem or Parents' Lower Threshold for Referral?' *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 39 (2000).

32 Rachel Farr and Harold Grotevant, 'Adoption,' in *APA Handbook of Contemporary Family Psychology: Foundations, Methods, and Contemporary Issues Across the Lifespan*, eds. Barbara Fiese et al. (American Psychological Association, 2019).

adopted one, risks social judgement.[33] Denise recounted being exhausted from the lived experience, a lifetime of microaggressions and having to explain why she looks and behaves differently to her adoptive family or why she cannot name her whakapapa connection. Her ongoing internalised feelings of psychic homelessness and ethnic inauthenticity means acts of 'activism' can require too much from her at times.

DENISE – for me, it has been a lifetime of being incensed. And I think that's where the exhaustion comes from, because even in the social-justice spaces, even in the critical movements, we're not given a voice, yet. So, we're constantly having to fight to be heard across all of the spaces. You embody the work that you do. So, it's like when you do racism work and you're a person of colour, it's incredibly exhausting.

BARBARA – And it's also that it's a daily effort to put together your identity, to assemble your identity out of, you know, out of sticks and stones.

ANNABEL – Yeah.

BARBARA – We've got nothing. . . . We become 'a child for all purposes' to our adopters. There's no soft landing, is how I feel about it . . . somebody isn't going to say, look at her, she's such an activist. She's just like Great Auntie da da da over there. And that's the soft landing.

The phrase 'a child for all purposes' that Barbara cites is a legal term which refers to the rights and legitimate status conferred on the adopted child through adoption. However, an alternative reading, implied by Barbara, is of the adopted child serving a purpose primarily to and for others, rather than representing something intrinsically valuable in and of themselves. This is reinforced by the dismissal of the adopted child's biological heritage and identity, in favour of an assigned identity derived from adopting parents.

A 'soft landing' in this case is the recognition by others and the

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33 B. C. Miller et al., 'Adopted adolescents' overrepresentation'.

ownership and connection that entails. 'Soft landing' also signifies ontological security, a security of being that some non-adopted people can take for granted, even if they have problematic relationships with their families. The philosopher Zygmunt Bauman captures this idea when he says, 'the thought of having an identity will not occur to people as long as "belonging" remains their fate, a condition with no alternative'.[34] The non-belonging Barbara experiences as a result of adoption forces her to live with a dismembered identity, akin to an ontological severing. A range of adoption literature talks to adoptees' experience of psychic homelessness, that sense of not belonging anywhere, an in-between space, which we contend matters to experiences of activism.[35] Without a solid foundation from which to act, our activism is tenuous.

While adoption can mean various things for people, it remains a controversial and emotive social practice. There is also a distinction drawn between challenging adoption as an institution or practice, and challenging adoption because it happened to you. Furthermore, adoption activism seems to be relatively unique in that adoptee activists are required to prove themselves and account for their lived adoption experiences.[36] On that basis, adoptee activists are assessed on whether they have legitimate grounds to oppose adoption. Being compelled to share personal stories to justify dissent can be emotionally fraught and socially sensitive. In any

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34 Zygmunt Bauman, *Identity: Conversations with Benedetto Vecchi* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004).

35 Blake and Coombes, 'No-Man's Land'; Haenga-Collins and Gibbs, 'Walking Between Worlds: The Experiences of New Zealand Māori Cross-Cultural Adoptee' 62-75; R. Hoksbergen, 'The Adoption Field is Full of Pitfalls for Professionals," in *International Conference on Adoption and Healing* (Wellington: New Zealand Adoption Education and Healing Trust, 1997); R. Hoksbergen and J. Laak, 'Adult Foreign Adoptees: Reactive Attachment Disorder May Grow into Psychic Homelessness,' *Journal of Social Distress and the Homeless* 9, no. 4 (2000); R. Hoksbergen and J. Laak, 'Psychic Homelessness Related to Reactive Attachment Disorder: Dutch Adult Foreign Adoptees Struggling with their Identity,' in *Handbook of Adoption: Implications for Researchers, Practitioners, and Families*, eds. R. A. Javier et al. (Sage Publications, 2007), 474-490; Judith Penny et al., 'Reconstruction of Adoption Issues: Delineation of Five Phases Among Adult Adoptees,' *Journal of Counselling Development* 85 (2007).

36 Lisa Wool-Rim Sjöblom, *Palimpsest: Documents From a Korean Adoption* (Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly, 2019).

case, any form of contestation against adoption can position adoptees as disagreeable and unappreciative.

ANNABEL – You know, I think Lisa [Wool-Rim Sjöblom] said, as a feminist you don't need to keep talking about your relationship with your father, or your brother or whatever. It's just accepted that this is a social justice. You know, this is the right thing to stand up for . . . but also, if we just keep telling our individual stories, are we actually changing anything?

BARBARA – I don't want to tell my story anymore because it becomes an anecdote and the moment that happens, someone goes, 'Oh, but I know someone who had a really good adoption'. And so my PhD is around the structures and functions and purpose of adoption rather than people's stories. . . . The publication of my book, Tree of Strangers meant that I lost my adoptive family, the last cousin just left, won't have anything to do with me anymore . . . but even my half-sisters, everyone because I've dared to question [adoption].[37]

DENISE – How come we don't come collectively together? And that's because we are three groups—we're the adoptive, the birth, and the adoptee groups, and we risk so much, and people don't want to hurt one another.

Adoption has three invested groups—adoptees, original family, and adoptive family. Adoptee activism in its very practice implicates original and adoptive parents. No matter who original kinship groups are, or the reasons why they relinquished their child, adoptees often want some form of reunion with that family.[38] And irrespective of whether the adoptive parents enacted 'good or bad' parenting, they were adoptees' parents in their formative years. Calling out adoption injustice can seem disloyal to their families and has consequences, as Barbara notes; and adoptees rightly want to protect them all.

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37 Barbara Sumner, *Tree of Strangers* (Palmerston North: Massey University Press, 2020).

38 Julee Browning, *Blood Ties: The Labyrinth of Family Membership in Long Term Adoption Reunion* (Masters, Massey University, 2005); Griffith, *New Zealand Adoption*, 439.

The risk of contesting adoption

We argue that adoptees endure a circular positioning where they are born nullius filius—an illegitimate child, made legitimate through being adopted by a legally married couple, which then ironically may delegitimise any claim made against their engineering as a legal fiction.[39] This, in turn, becomes a harsh reminder of their original illegitimate status—as the Other. Acts of delegitimisation, as argued by Bond et al., involve various microaggressions whereby verbal and non-verbal violence is inflicted on people to constrain their agency.[40] In the adoptee activist space, delegitimisation means adoptees are rendered an inauthentic voice. Such difficulties also imply that adoption is not yet deemed sufficiently problematic in and of itself and, as such, adoption activism requires additional forms of legitimacy or criterion for justification. Adoptees must 'prove' their hardship and justify their trauma, as in the telling of their personal stories. The eternally paradoxical position of residing in-between 'born to' (illegitimacy) and 'as if born to' (legitimacy) while being delegitimised likely constrains activist positioning and acts of activism.

ANNABEL – And so, you're trying to find the places where we might be valued and people want to listen to us, where we might be seen as legitimate, credible, authentic. So, for me, it's all those questions, who gets to speak, who is listened to, are we drawn in because we represent something? Do we even have to represent something? And then I think all of that feeds into whether we consider ourselves activists and that's not an identity that I hold.

Uncertainty about being an activist also points to debates around politics and activism. Moreover, our dissonance around activism could be a shying away from media-fuelled characterisations of problematic activism, where people are tied to fences, forming blockades, unrelenting in their demands. With ties to stigmatisation, these grassroots forms of activism carry additional risk for those who already always live stigma as adoptees.

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39 Blake and Coombes, 'No-Man's Land, 52.

40 Sophie Bond, Amanda Thomas, and Gradon Diprose, 'Making and Unmaking Political Subjectivities: Climate Justice, Activism, and Care,' *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 45, no. 4 (2020).

Whether felt or enacted, the various layers of stigma can be silencing.[41] While we each respect the aforementioned forms of activism, we argue that adoption activism necessitates a more subtle approach because it has deep personal and social costs, which are far reaching. Furthermore, activism, for us, is not some form of detached 'service' or 'external' cause taken up in personal time. It is not some liberal institutional action that can underwrite an academic's sense of worth.[42] Rather, we as adoptee scholars feel, breathe, and live our cause: it is a politics embodied, potentially in-utero.

Acknowledging activists that came before

Although unsure about how the label of activist sat with us and cautious about the ongoing need to tell personal stories, we categorically acknowledged the activists that led the way. These forebears had championed the 1985 Adult Adoption Information Act, which enabled us, and other adoptees, to search for our kinship origins. We also acknowledge and respect more current calls for justice and reform, including those from a group that advocates staunchly for Māori who have been adopted, fostered, whāngai, or placed in state care. We are members of a private Facebook group in which adult adoptees share their experiences and provide each other with support.

Adoption disturbs something

During our dialogue we continually questioned why, if closed adoption's tentacles spread far and wide, more people are not contesting the violence, displacement, or kinship ruptures that are never fully repaired even after reunion with birth kin. To us, non-engagement by the general public with the human rights violations implicated in adoption practices and adoption law reform gives the impression that adoption and its effects must disturb the social order in some way.

DENISE – Why . . . do we think that so many people don't engage with

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41 Bruce Link and Jo Phelan, 'Stigma and its Public Health Implications,' *Lancet* 367 (2006): 528-529.

42 Nicholas Blomley, 'Activism and the Academy,' *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 12 (1994).

adoption?

ANNABEL – I think and it's something that Lisa [Wool-Rim Sjöblom] said to us last week.

DENISE – There is something deeply comforting about the adoption myths, and I think it explains a lot as to why we encounter silence. And it's safeguarding something because it doesn't really make sense, does it? It's not rational . . . something happens, there's weirdness and you're aware that you've transgressed something clearly, by wanting to talk about being adopted and by wanting to talk about the losses and the negative aspects of that. People don't want to hear it. They shut you down. And I find that everywhere, across the board, it doesn't matter whether you're Māori, or non-Māori, whatever . . . I think our very being disturbs something, which is why we are treated this way.

BARBARA – Absolutely, I agree with that. I keep coming back to this term 'as if born to' and how we (as adoptee dissenters) are disturbing that idea of transferability. And so, I keep on going back to this, John Locke and the 17th-century idea of that tabula rasa, the blank slate. We are trying in our activism to unpick the blank slate. And it doesn't go down well for us. We're certainly not respected at all.

ANNABEL – No.

BARBARA – I talked a little bit about it in Tree of Strangers, where I talked about how we are considered strange fruit from an unknown tree.[43]

When adoptees attempt to contest this or other microaggressions, their experiences are questioned, or they are positioned as inauthentic.[44] Annabel mentions a conversation between her, Denise, and Lisa Wool-Rim Sjöblom, a Korean transracial adoptee. Lisa had identified how adoption myths

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43 Sumner, *Tree of Strangers*.
44 Branco et al., 'Out of the Fog', 12.

position adoptees eternally as children in need of rescuing, particularly non-white children. This comforting portrayal of adoption as 'win–win' is challenged by adult adoptee activism. Barbara talked about particular ways in which infants are understood that render closed adoption unproblematic and, consequently, the reception towards adoptees who challenge those notions; for her, such thinking and treatment is infuriating and unjust.

Lack of language to signify adoptive experiences

Central to adoption discourse, the language used to make sense of adopted experiences was a key element of our discussion. A core premise of Denise's PhD research was that adopted people are constructed within a non-adopted world; as such they have only non-adopted discourses from which to make sense of their 'dis-ease' at being socially engineered. When engineered with an 'as if born to' legitimacy, adoptees become the same as their non-adopted counterparts. With this comes acts of denial and other silencing strategies, so that adoptees can find it difficult to find the language to explain what it is like to be adopted or to not have knowledge of essentialist markers, such as the blood running through our veins, or the inner discomfort of not having a bio-normative mirror. Adoptees have to draw from language constructed by dominant non-adopted citizens to make sense of themselves, which is at times exceedingly difficult. Where there is not the language available, if adoptees wonder about their biological kinship, or their adoptive fiction, they can be easily gaslit, manipulated into doubting their experiences of difference.

BARBARA – I mean, I think that the gaslighting is top-down. It's deeply embedded within our legislation; it's deeply embedded within our social services.

DENISE – I just think because we've never been able to articulate it, we can't. I think it's to do with the fact that who we are is constructed by the language that we use, and we don't have any way to narrate ourselves. I tried to do this in my PhD, but again I was drawing from the language of non-adopted people to try and talk about adoption. So, I think [language]

constantly falls short of its task, and we can't really expect people who have never had the experience of being adopted, just like we say in other spaces, 'you don't understand my experience unless you've walked in my shoes'.

ANNABEL – You're right, so there's no language. Yeah, it's reliant on the people who've had the experience to articulate it. And then, the burden of that. . . . And that's what I argue in my PhD, you know, that this is deeply unsettling at an ontological level. That's your very security of being. And I guess I do agree with you Barbara, gaslighting, because it's that denial, that fundamental denial of our being. And then throughout our lives in various ways, we're trying to resist that—'no, no, this is how I am. This is my experience. This does matter'.

In the misrecognition of the adopted experience, in the fight to have the violence of the biological cut noted, adopted people can become angry, frustrated, or dejected. As mentioned above, adoption myths produce stories about adoptees being saved from a life of disadvantage; being adopted means they were 'chosen', 'lucky', or 'better off'. It seems adoptees are only recognised under certain conditions, such as being ideal subjects for investigating nature versus nurture.[45] A number of adoption researchers use the adoption context as a site for scientific inquiry, because the conditions of being born to one family and raised in another has the potential to elucidate genetic heritability of disease or disorder.[46] Adoptees are also overly examined in relation to pathology, where adoption is often the 'coat rack' that all psychology or behavioural issues are hung on, rather than the institution of adoption itself. The delegitimatising of adopted people and their experience can cause them to question their own legitimacy and value, and consequently, in terms of activism, when they are allowed to speak, on what and for whom.

An interesting expectation sometimes imposed on adoptees is to be 'anti-essentialist ambassadors', the notion that by virtue of our non-

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45 Adoptees are used in genetic research because birth parents transmit genes but adoptive parents raise the child so researchers can investigate the influence of heritability of disease and disorder.

46 American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5*, 5th ed. (Arlington: American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

bionormativity, we ought to resist rather than 'buy into' essentialist, biocentric discourses. Annabel and Barbara discussed how adoptees' arguments for the equivalent rights to biological-kinship knowledge, relations, and identities is dismissed in some areas of scholarship, using anti-essentialist arguments.[47]

BARBARA – I've only recently come across it, but I'm appalled by the things that are said, 'I'm sick to death of bonding through kinship and family . . .', blah, blah, blah.

ANNABEL – Spoken like a person who has everything intact? I know, and it's just so easy, so I've got a real issue with anti-essentialism. Because I think it is a luxury for people who have those things and can then say, 'Oh gosh, it's so unsophisticated to still be talking about the genetic link, and how boring'.

BARBARA – Yeah, I know.

ANNABEL – Yes, it's absurd. It doesn't make any sense to me, and I agree with you. I don't enjoy that kind of very narrow-minded [perspective]. I mean, that doesn't deal with the difficulty of always being different, you know? Or being without the things that everyone else takes for granted.

Here, the notion that to resist hegemonic discourses around adoption requires an anti-essentialist stance not only clashes with what many adoptees want and need in terms of biological connection but asks that adoptees relinquish what non-adopted others are able to take for granted. We argue that such a stance is an imposition of non-adopted privilege, which casts adoptee activism focused on achieving equity with non-adopted others as less legitimate.

Too many causes to fight for

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47 See, for example, Frances Latchford, *Steeped in Blood: Adoption, Identity, and the Meaning of Family* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019); Sally Haslanger, *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

The lack of language to narrate our experiences coalesces with trying to make sense of psychological or emotional experiences. However, the adoptee consciousness is complicated and often overlooked, especially when traversing other minoritised identities. In this sense, a recognition of intersectionality supports multiple identities and settings. Denise emphasises that adoptees are not a homogenous group, and even within the adoptee community, adoptees can silence one another or enact microaggressions. How adoptees engage with being adopted is embedded in a range of elements, such as adoptive family dynamics, the treatment of adopted children, and personal dispositions, which all in turn influence why adopted people do or do not come together.

DENISE – I'm just thinking about why we don't come together, and I think we also need to be careful . . . the people I engage with are the ones that don't know where they are from. And. in that way, we can unconsciously harm one another [when we get into reunion talk] because it gets to this really deep level and if we start talking about particular things we have experienced but others haven't it can silence and make it impossible to voice a different way of thinking or experience as adoptees.

While it can be assumed that most adopted people are happy that other adoptees have supportive adoptive families or positive reunion experiences, it can be emotionally painful if that was not someone's experience. For instance, Barbara's original mother died tragically in a plane accident on her way from Spain to New Zealand to 'scoop her up'. Denise had a wonderfully healing relationship with her birth mother, Carole, where they lived together, but that abruptly ended after three-and-a-half years as Carole died quickly of cancer. And Annabel has known her original mother for over 25 years; this relationship has been steady and supportive, whilst not without reminders of what was lost through adoption.

Further, the drive to contest the harms of the closed stranger adoption can be subsumed by more pressing everyday events such as work burdens and family commitments or extraordinary events that might include dying

parents or global pandemics.[48] Denise described having a number of social justice concerns that require strong advocacy.

DENISE – I have a whole lot of causes. I've had a really tumultuous life—a colourful life. So, I work across a whole lot of social justice spaces that represent inequity and injustice and discrimination and all those things. It's like which one do I stand for today? It's also not uncommon for us to have our own mental health issues or end up in problematic spaces, but often we don't know that it's our adoption that leads us there because we've never had the knowledge.

Adoption law reform

It makes sense that those most affected by adoption should be front and centre of any law reform. However, in its initial phases, the New Zealand Ministry of Justice established a generic submission-based consultation process that presupposes a level of voice and mobilisation that many adoptees do not enact, given their closed adoption experience. We are concerned that adopted people were not more purposely sought to contribute the first round of the law reform and also that their specific expertise, lived and scholarly, could be negated. We question if this was due to little respect for lived experience and being posited as 'problematic' adoptees.

BARBARA – That's what the law reform is about. About the rights of adults and equality under civil law.

ANNABEL – I guess you realise that in spite of reunion, the issues around adoption are still there, they don't go away. I guess my drive now is I want to change that non-adopted world . . . that's why I mention in my thesis the onus should not be on the adopted person to do all this. I guess that's the exciting thing about the law reform, although maybe I'm just being really naïve there, naively optimistic.

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48 Blake, *Wade in the Water*, 151.

DENISE – People aren't adopting anymore. We're almost like dinosaurs. So, I reckon we are the unknown, and the power in our kōrero is the next generation as the intergenerational trauma that our children and our grandchildren will experience because of the harms done to us.

The onus of responsibility falling to adoptees to contest unjust adoption laws is problematic because of the need to continually contest, explain to, or educate non-adopted people about our experiences, especially when they do not hear. Just as with other causes, adoptees must inform the law reform, but they need non-adopted people to champion and support their cause. This support would involve relational ethics where adoptees are given the respect to assert and oversee their needs, no matter what the emotional response is for them.[49]

DENISE – People position us as emotively driven, we're the ones with lived experience which is still problematised in the mental health space. I work alongside people who work in lived experience. And even though they are now getting included in the ministries and stuff, you're still that person over there with lived experience.

ANNABEL – I guess we're also trying to leverage off our lived experience as well, and we're getting some messages that lived experience counts, although some, yeah, conflicting messages too.

BARBARA – I've been trying to be involved in both the law reform taskforce and the Royal Commission. I'm not getting anywhere because I'm seen as difficult. I can see how I get considered that. Lived experience has no real value.

Barbara has been tireless in her pursuit of justice, and to better understand how the current law reform, and previous legislated changes, have transpired, Barbara frequently requests information from the government.

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49 Darrin Hodgetts et al., 'Relational Ethics Meets Principled Practice in Community Research Engagements to Understand and Address Homelessness,' *Journal of Community Psychology* 50, no. 4 (2021): 2.

BARBARA – I put in an OIA to find out who advised the government on [the law reform], who advised the Ministry of Justice. I said I didn't want individual names, but I wanted to know the organisations and companies that were involved; they turned me down. I've gone to the ombudsman and they're now looking at it . . . I've read all the submissions to the Adult Adoption Information Act. I want to be able to contextualise that historical conversation in relation to the conversation now. I want to see if Family First or Fertility Associates have been involved in influencing [the law reform] (these organisations have particular, vested interests in relation to adoption).[50] We're not allowed to be in those conversations because we represent the products to be transferred. [Adoptees] are marketable commodities. We could potentially disrupt the new market, the new paradigm for commoditised humans.

DENISE – Yeah. But I guess I just want to really acknowledge you, Barb, for continuing to champion in those spaces because I just get hōhā and walk away . . . that must be really, really difficult because you are an individual and what we need is a collective power behind us. And they're not going to listen to an individual, no matter how articulate or connected people are, are they?

As part of our activism, we each recognise adoptees' remarkableness and resilience for having survived this structural violence.[51] Annabel drew on a metaphor to describe adopted people as 'boundary riders'.

ANNABEL – We're boundary riders, as adopted people. That makes us vulnerable, but also potentially powerful. But it's the fact that wherever we position ourselves, or wherever we stand, we've got the other side looking at us . . . so if we want to be activists as adopted people, are other adopted people of various positions looking at us and, you know, have we stayed true, are we betraying our own cause? But I think definitely for me, all the negotiation happens in the Māori space. I mean, I get to have a voice in Māori spaces around certain things, around the research that I've done.

50 See, https://familyfirst.org.nz/; https://www.fertilityassociates.co.nz/

51 Blake, *Wade in the Water*; American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*.

But I am not the kind of voice that any Māori want to listen to (laughing), because I've got an inauthentic upbringing in the Pākehā world as an adopted person. I'm constantly aware of that.

However, as boundary riders, adopted people have to deal with critique from a variety of quarters including their own communities. Further, this is intersectional, spanning not only being adopted, but also how that intersects with race/ethnicity, gender, and sexual identity/orientation.

The need for 'we': collective adoptee activism

A final theme nascent in our discussion was the absence of, but need for, a collective adoptee voice. It is apparent that simply 'being contrary to the status quo' is insufficient to strengthen adoptees' identification with adoption activism.[52] As a feature of closed adoption, adopted people were placed (dispersed) into nuclear families, often raised without exposure to anyone else with similar experiences. In conjunction with the silences surrounding closed adoption, this produced a sense of isolation and, it has been remarked, a self-conscious, 'neurotic subjectivity'.[53] Moreover, the heterogeneity of birth and adoptive circumstances, and adoptive family loyalties, mean that adoptees can vary significantly in terms of their personal positionality ('adoptionality') towards adoption. Positionality impacts on, and is impacted by, fundamental decisions such as whether to search for birth families, let alone willingness to take a public stand on adoption.[54] As argued earlier, spiralling through the Adoptee Consciousness Model touchstones is fraught and impacted by many factors.[55] Finally, many

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52 Frances DellaCava, Norma Phillips, and Madeline Engel, 'Adoption in the US: The Emergence of a Social Movement,' *The Journal of Society and Social Welfare* 31, no. 4 (2004): 141.

53 Sayres Rudy, 'The Anxious Kinship of the Vanishing Adoptee,' *Adoption & Culture 7* (2019): 206.

54 Yan Zhao, 'Intersectionality, the Production of Difference and Norwegian Transnational Adoptees' Identity Work,' *Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 21 (2012): 204; Ulrich Müller and Perry Barbara, 'Adopted Persons' Search for and Contact with Their Birth Parents I: Who Searches and Why?' *Adoption Quarterly* 4, no. 3 (2001): 15-16.

55 Branco et al., 'Out of the Fog', 12.

adoptees are sensitive to the risk of being labelled, othered, and pathologised through public identification as adoptees, vis-à-vis the prevailing discourses on adoption. All of these factors make collective cohesion difficult.

Discussion

As demonstrated in the excerpts above, the silencing and denial that we experience as adopted subjects re-emerges when we dare to stand up against adoption in an activist role. The assumed good fortune of being adopted is utilised to challenge not only our truth but to deny that we have a need or valid grounds to challenge adoption as an institution/practice. Adoptive legitimacy is utilised to delegitimise our activism. The common factor, of course, is the challenge to the narratives of adoption, and the generalised resistance that any such action elicits. Adoptee activists share these forms of continuous contestation with other activists who belong to the groups who they advocate on behalf of.

In addressing the question 'what makes a subjectivity political?', Bond et al. suggest that it is thinking, feeling, or behaving in ways that reject or resist any taken-for-granted myths.[56] In this way, challenging adoption myths is a political act, subverting or quietly contesting power relations. However, where political subjectivity is taken to mean having a voice or being recognisable, this is where an adopted subjectivity falls down.[57] Where adoptees are not recognised, how will their cause be recognised? Rather than being the end of our activism, it is the very beginning. A fundamental aspect of our activism must be to achieve recognition of our adopted subjectivities.

Framing the message: how personal is too personal?

Just as adopted people search for the grounds upon which their adoptive

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56 Bond et al., 'Making and Unmaking'.

57 Kristine Krause and Katharina Schramm, 'Thinking Through Political Subjectivity,' *African Diaspora* 4 (2011).

being will be recognised and then accepted (i.e., the problematics of genetic severance), adoptee activists also search for the grounds upon which their activism will be acknowledged and effective. The discursive paradoxes and contradictions, the human rights breaches and legal inconsistencies (see, for example, Section 109, Birth, Deaths, Marriages and Relationships Registration Act), are arguments that we have each utilised variously in our academic and activist work. These are largely appeals to rationality and equity, acknowledging that the audiences we are trying to reach in order to effect change is that of decision-makers, who may require a more abstract and robust analysis of adoption injustice in order to propel them to act.[58]

However, we each have a personal adoption story, stories which we recognise as powerful. There is an inarguable authenticity and authority that comes with being able to speak from lived experience. Citing the activism of members of the American Vietnamese adoptee community, Cherot refers to personal stories as 'autobiographical pedagogy', an effective means of forming claims and potentially transformative adoption 'truths' to challenge the 'adoption biopower' wielded by institutions.[59] Storytelling also has the benefit of being able to appeal to an audience's emotions, to build connection, reveal insights, and achieve impact in a way that theoretical analysis or statistics will not.[60]

But activism grounded in personal story carries risk for the storyteller. Foucault acknowledged this in his consideration of 'parrhesia' (truth-telling) and the 'parrhesiaste' (truth-teller).[61] The risk here is of speaking one's truth in order to criticize someone or something more powerful than oneself, and of suffering the consequences. This can include vulnerability, judgement, being discredited or discounted or further stigmatised. Further, the telling removes the teller's agency for how the story will be interpreted or used by

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58 John Whitehead, 'What Personal Storytelling Leaves Out: A Suggestion on Alternate Approaches to Activism,' *Life Matters Journal* (2020).

59 Cherot, 'Transnational Adoptees'.

60 Lisa Disch, 'More Truth than Fact: Storytelling as Critical Understanding in the Writings of Hannah Arendt,' *Political Theory* 21, no. 4 (1993): 665.

61 Sonja Vivienne, *Digital Identity and Everyday Activism: Sharing Private Stories with Networked Publics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 5.

others.[62] This is where the truth-teller must reflexively choose what and how to disclose. We were each mindful of the risk of stories of relinquishment and reunion becoming fetishized without contributing to substantive change.

Willingness to be publicly identified as an adoptee is an important precondition for involvement in adoption activism. This hinges on the notion of collective identity: 'An individual's cognitive, moral and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice or institution . . . a perception of a shared status or relation'.[63] We each have connections to networks of adoptees who are taking action based on shared or collective identification and, to a degree, positionality. Some of us are undertaking research together as 'Māori adoptees', some have gathered together previously in support groups, led by strong adoption reform advocates, and some are supporting each other in private Facebook communities. Apart from Adoption Action, these collectives operate primarily at the meso level, none offering a collective voice at the national/macro level.[64] As is evident from references to Lisa Wool-Rim Sjöblom in the discussion, those connections between individual adoptees are enriching, inspiring, and mobilising. Progressing beyond these instances of 'everyday activism' to sustained, strategic, and organised activism is the next challenge, which may or may not be realised in the course of this Aotearoa adoption law reform.[65]

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62 Kim Collins, 'Cripping Narrative: Story Telling as Activism,' *Knots: An Undergraduate Journal of Disability Studies* 1 (2015): 31.

63 Francesca Polletta and James Jasper, 'Collective Identity and Social Movements,' *Annual Review of Sociology* 27 (2001): 285

64 Adoption Action Incorporated, *Questions and Answers re. Adoption Reform* (Wellington: Adopton Action Incorporated, 2011).

65 Vivienne, *Digital Identity and Everyday Activism*, iii.

Conclusion

To bring this dialogue to some form of crescendo, it is necessary to acknowledge the power of our collective soliloquy and its call to action. We interrogated adoption and how it has enabled and constrained processes of activism. Compared with adoptees' personal positionality towards adoption, which need only be justified by experience, with activism there is the demand for a more careful positioning conscious of representation. While refusing to remain gagged, adoptee activists must contemplate the relative merits of not straying too far from the authority of lived experience (maintaining experiential credibility), while taking care to not unwittingly discount the diverse experiences of others. These are the challenges of transitioning from the micro identity of an adopted 'self' (me) to the meso voice of an adoptee activist social movement (us), and then to macro-politics (the world) in order that the outcomes of reform and redress are achieved.[66] These considerations are also reminders of the deep relationality and accountabilities to each other as adopted people that run through all of our activism endeavours. Notwithstanding these obligations, it remains categorically unjust that adoptees have been harmed by the state. This harm must be acknowledged and addressed.

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66 Vivienne, *Digital Identity and Everyday Activism*, 18-19.