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**Wade in the Water:  
Storying Adoptees' Experiences through the  
Adoption Act 1955**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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Denise Blake

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## Abstract

In Aotearoa/New Zealand, the Adoption Act 1955 legislated and governed adoption practices until 1985 when it was supplemented, but not amended or repealed. More than 80,000 children have lived with the effects of that Act. Underlying the legislation were assumptions about illegitimacy derived from notions of *nullius filius*, the child of no-man. Dominant culture sought to right the wrongs of illegitimacy through the practices of adoption producing a child *as if born to* legally married adoptive parents. Through these practices, adoptees became legitimate beings in the social world. The first two chapters of this thesis trace the legal and psychological narrative constitution of adoptees and make it possible for me to ask the question: how are adoptees enabled and constrained through specific subject positions within a particular moral order and how are social power relations implicated in the narrative constitution of adoptees? To address this question, I draw on a Foucaultian poststructuralist position using narrative theory to form a hybrid representation of the stories of 12 adoptees. The first analysis chapter considers how a legal narrative positions adoptees so as to exclude the possibility of articulating their experiences within ‘normal’ kinship and social narratives. To be positioned *as if born to* did not remove the history of being *born to* for the adoptee, or the ‘real’ lived effects of that lack. The second analysis chapter discusses the ways in which adoptees’ psychological experiences are affected by their legal positioning, how they cope while living the legal fiction and include accounts of, and resistance to, psychopathological narratives that constitute their experience. The next analysis chapter explores the complexity of reunion experiences in relation to ongoing identity construction for adoptees. A chapter on hybridity then draws the analysis chapters together to represent some of the complex and contradictory social elements of adoption. This thesis argues that it is possible that the legal exclusion from normalising kinship narratives constitutes the psychosocial responses of adoptees that are observed as abnormalities and result in their over-representation in clinical populations. From the participants’ perspectives, it is possible that their experiences are normal responses to abnormal circumstances.



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I extend my aroha to the truly remarkable participants who shared of themselves. I appreciate your honesty, openness and willingness in trusting me with your stories and providing the voices that enabled this work to come to life. I feel privileged to know you and hope that I have produced a thesis to honour your stories.

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## **Prologue: At the Heart of Adoption**

This story begins with my conception. My 19-year-old birth mother was sent away when her pregnancy was revealed, to a family far away from her own. That family was not kind and she left and fended for herself. Everyone told her that giving her baby to a family who could care for me was the best thing to do. Her family were respectable middle-class Pākehā. Her mother was wheelchair bound at the age of 35 because of rheumatoid arthritis and her father was the carer. They thought they were making her do what was best. During my birth, she was given Largactil, an antipsychotic drug; perhaps they thought she needed to dull the pain. She was treated badly and after the birth ran away from the hospital. She was eventually found by the police and made to sign the adoption forms. I was in the hospital for three weeks before my adoptive family took me home.

Placed in a family that looked, sounded and acted in different ways to me meant that I always already lived difference. I had brown skin while my adoptive family was white. There was no ‘secrecy’ around the ‘abnormality’ of my family - skin colour does not lie. I was taunted and teased about my difference, and that hurt. As a child, I would think about the mother who did not want me, and imagined a drunk who was probably already dead. My adoptive family did not provide the stable nurturing duties befitting the ‘good’ adoptive family. I experienced poverty, alcoholism, violence and neglect. Over the years, people would try to guess at my ethnicity - Māori? Chinese? Both? After explaining my lack of a genealogical history, people would respond in silence or look at me with regret. I felt disconnected and misunderstood. Māori would try to claim me, but when I could not whakapapa, often the recognition was lost.

As a young teenage mother, judged for keeping her son, I held tightly to my belief that at least, with me, my son had a blood relative. Even at that stage, I knew that adoption mattered to the next generation. As the years passed, I noticed the effects of my lived experience as an adoptee on my son’s position in the world. For instance, he had an inherited medical condition that could not be traced. While doing a family tree activity for school, he was unable to access a birth history; together we fabricated a family in which we could both belong and be proud. My son lived the effects of adoption; I reproduced the lie.

I learnt that I embodied the effects of adoption, produced through deception and lies. After therapy to unpick the threads, I was ready to search for my birth history. Reuniting with my birth mother was the most wondrous and enlightening ‘gift’; I finally belonged. We mirrored each other so significantly that the connection cannot be described; I was where I was always meant to be and it just felt so very right.

For years, I had yearned to research the ways in which adoption matters and to add to the body of knowledge that makes a difference in the lives of adoptees. I realised adoptees had been silenced in their experiences; there has been no place to speak and no language in which to talk. I saw a gap in the way that psychology represented adoption and here I found a space to add a voice. By drawing on my insider knowledge and ensuing dedication to make visible what has been invisible, I aim to ‘trouble’

how adoption is understood in psychology and the social power relations that produce the 'real' lived experience of adoption.

The effects of adoption extend further than the subjectivity of the adoptee; birth parents, adoptive parents and extended family members are all influenced by the political and moral narratives that produce adoption. Therefore, in telling this story, I recognise that other stories connect to, effect and constitute one another. We all share, from our own positions, emotional experiences of loss, rejection, shame and guilt. While this research focuses specifically on adoptees, I acknowledge the others involved in the adoption triad and I take a moment to honour with a heartfelt tear, all who are affected.

This story is dedicated to my birth mother. Our reunion only lasted three and half years before we were separated again by an illness that took her life.

*Dear Mummy*  
*You gave me life then I lost you*  
*Many years past*  
*I found you and you found me back*  
*I loved you and you loved me more*  
*You once told me that I never knew what real love was*  
*But you showed me and now I know.*  
*Our love was unconditional, infinite and complete*  
*You made me whole; you gently care*  
*You held me when I cried; you hugged me when I hurt*  
*Or just because you could*  
*You held me in everyway*  
*In our short time together, we lived a lifetime*  
*I was a baby, a child, a girl and a woman*  
*I was your birth daughter; you were my mummy*  
*You growled me, you taught me, you nurtured me, and you understood me*  
*You were my mummy*  
*You once said*  
*You never deserved the title of mum*  
*But you were in every breath*  
*Every laugh, every tear*  
*And every gift*  
*To the moon and back...*

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