‘BANANAS, BASTARDS AND VICTIMS’?

HYBRID REFLECTIONS ON CULTURAL BELONGING IN INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTEE NARRATIVES

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I hereby certify that the work embodied in this thesis is the result of original research and has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other University or Institution.

(Signed) ........................................................................................................
For Our Children

Liam Jong Soo Gray

and

Nicola Hae Na Gray
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SYNOPSIS

Intercountry adoption emerged in Australia in the 1970s, at the end of the Vietnam War and with each new decade the adoption ‘community’ and broader society have become more aware of the challenges and complexities of the adoptee experience. It is an area where contemporary preoccupations with issues of identity, kinship relations and concerns about ‘race’ and cultural belonging are being played out.

Research on intercountry adoption has, until recent years, been primarily conducted by researchers in the professions of psychology, social work, law and child development. As a consequence these professions have to a large extent influenced and driven public debate and policy in this area. Issues about cultural and racial identity have generally been discussed and problematised either at an individual or familial level - how adoptees negotiate issues of racial difference in particular socio-political, historical and cultural contexts is usually missing from these accounts. As intercountry adoption is intricately connected to society’s ideas about race, culture, ethnicity, kinship and belonging - to family and to nation - the disciplines of sociology and anthropology have an important research role to play. This study seeks to problematise the narrow definition of identity that adoptees are usually subject to, attempting to move beyond essentialist notions about the ‘loss of identity’ and ‘loss of culture’ associated with the adoption experience which has tended to promote a discourse of victimisation. Rather, the study asks questions about how particular discourses of race, adoption and identity have impacted on adoptees’ lives and the different modes of belonging adoptees employ to manage their positions of difference.

This is a comparative qualitative study using multiple methods of social inquiry. It focuses on two core groups of Australian intercountry adoptees - an adolescent and an adult group - who were born in Vietnam, Korea, Sri Lanka and Malaysia. Their life histories are compared by placing their experiences in the broader socio-political and historical contexts of Australia’s immigration policies, adoption policies and history of race relations. Their hybrid experiences are also compared to some transracial adoptees in other Western nations and to some other transnational groups, within the broader body of work on postcolonial identity construction, in an effort to illuminate how intercountry adoptees’ share the ‘third space’ with others who also live through issues about cultural authenticity and the essentialism often associated with identity formation.
The study concludes with an alternative reading of the intercountry adoptee experience. It suggests that some adoptees are managing to (re)invent and (re)define their fluid, hybrid identities within the broader context of culturally diverse youth and adults in multicultural Australia and by their membership within other diasporic movements. The study points to the importance of appropriate social support including support from peer groups, family, other adoptees, and the significance of place to adoptees’ sense of belonging. ‘Cultural identity’, as the often quoted Stuart Hall (1990:225) suggests, “is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’” and “it belongs to the future as much as to the past”.