Trans-racial adoption: the fantasy of the global family

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Abstract
This chapter focuses on the concept of trans-racial adoption of children and adults. Despite the recent concentration on the adoption of white families adopting non-white children, we identify how the opposite was a regular occurrence in the classical colonial period. The existence of these inverted trans-racial adoptions is well documented in literary and autobiographical texts, historical and official documents, as well as in art and visual culture. This chapter aims at re-conceptualising trans-racial adoption within the framework of the European’s fundamental inability to attach to the lands and peoples outside Europe by making use of the concepts of indigenisation and autochtonisation.

Key Words: Whiteness, adoption, trans-racial families, literature, colonialism, indigenisation, autochtonisation.

1. Introduction
We have all seen the images of Brad Pitt, Angelina Jolie and their adopted children. While three of the children are biologically Brad and Angelina’s, the other three have been adopted from Cambodia, Ethiopia and Vietnam. We start this paper drawing on pop cultural images of adoption because they not only have the highest profile, but also represent a one-way relationship in adoption that has an established image: wealthy (white) westerners rescuing poor, non-white children from orphanages in destitute (non-white) nations.

While often thought of as a recent phenomenon, such trans-racial adoption of children, as well as of adults, is a centuries old practice. Despite this, it is a concept commonly de-historicised as a process dated to the post-WWII era and connected to adoptions from the Third World to the West or adoption of minority children to majority families within certain Western countries.

If we revisit the ‘classical colonial period’ between the 1500s to the 1930s, we can see such adoption practices as common practice. During this period, it was not only non-white native children and adults who were adopted by white colonisers and settlers, but also the opposite occurred in a process that can be described as ‘inverted trans-racial adoption’. This is well documented in a cross section of sources from literary and autobiographical texts, to historical and official documents, as well as in art and visual culture.

This paper aims to reconceptualise ‘inverted trans-racial adoption’ within a framework of the European’s fundamental inability to attach to the lands outside Europe. To understand this desire to ‘feel at home’ we turn to two key concepts:
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indigenisation and autochtonisation. When discussing ‘indigenisation’, we refer to adapting to and participating in local ways to the point when one aims to become part of the local. The second term, autochtonisation, refers to an autochthonous relationship to the land. This is a natural science concept and derives from Classical Greek and can be translated as that which comes from the earth itself.\(^i\)

Combined, we see these representing a desire to not only become part of the local land and culture, but also feel that one is actually born from it. In this way one becomes like the plants, animals and people: part of the indigenous social and natural world. Drawing on a cross section of literary works, we apply this lens to interpret and understand inverted trans-racial adoption.

2. The European settlers’ inability to feel at home

During the 500 years of major colonial settlement, millions of Europeans migrated to overseas colonies. Their initial intentions were varied, ranging from conquering, to permanent settlement or temporary migration with the aim of making one’s fortune and returning ‘home’. What emerges for both the settlers and many of their descendents is living with a feeling of not belonging to the new land. This feeling of homelessness created an obstacle for settlers looking to create a new life.

In his novel, *Redback*, Howard Jacobson\(^i\) describes just this type of longing for a homeland amidst the wealthy suburbs in Sydney, Australia. Jacobson describes a conversation between an immigrant father and his son. In responding to the question regarding ‘homesickness’ in the settler state, the son is encouraged to hear the ‘low moaning… of fourteen million souls in exile’, as the father describes ‘the sobs of grown men and women’ whose ache for their homeland makes the ‘whole country shakes nightly’.

This ‘un-belonging’ created a need to reflect on one’s identity on psychic, symbolic, physical and material levels that has continued for generations. It is this sense of not feeling at home that South African author J. M. Coetzee\(^iii\) discusses in *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*. Coetzee argues that this identity work is one of the main themes in settler literature written by the descendants of European immigrants in the colonies both during and after the classical colonial period. This sense of unease can only be overcome, it would appear, if one can finally attach to the new land. This is captured by postcolonial theorist, Pal Ahluwalia,\(^iv\) who asks ‘when does a settler become a native?’

The image of the settler looking for this elusive feeling which cannot be reconciled is exemplified by Australian author, Patrick White, in his novel *Voss*.\(^v\) *Voss* tells the story of a German settler, Johann Ulrich Voss, who sets out to cross the Australian continent. Set in the nineteenth century, it is a tragic story of an ill-advised adventure as Voss sets out with a large party, but remains alienated from the land he aims to both get to know as well as conquer.
The Canadian English studies scholar Terry Goldie presents a more confronting image in relation to this theme. In his book *Fear and Temptation*, Goldie argues that the image of the native ‘savage’ in settler literature which oscillated between an abject nausea, a will to exterminate ‘it’, and an erotic desire. For Goldie, this reflects the white European coloniser’s sense of homelessness. This is a permanent attachment problem to the world outside Europe and the dilemma of not being comfortable or feeling safe in the presence of non-Europeans.

This leads to an almost eternal need to both want to become and possess the Other. It is from here we see the obsession of naming new islands and territories such as New England, New South Wales, Nouvelle France, Nya Sverige or Nueva España.

3. **The issue of indigenisation and autochtonisation in the settler colonies**

In the American Spanish colonies, a division eventually developed between those who were born in Europe, and those who were born and grew up in the colonies or the Creoles. The original settlers were called *peninsulares* and, as time passed, most of them were composed of higher servicemen who had been dispatched by the European metropole to administer and govern the overseas territories. Today, we might compare the *peninsulares* to so-called *expatriates* or *sojourners* who do not look upon themselves as permanent settlers. The equivalent groups to the Spanish-descendant Creoles in British and French colonies were called settlers and *colons*. It was the white descendants of the British and French emigrants that the most intense identity work and attachment process took place to construct a feeling of being ‘at home’ outside Europe.

For the Europeans, the colonies did not just mean a strange and wild landscape, an unknown and challenging climate with exotic animals and plants, but also odd and ‘primitive’ peoples and cultures. Even if the indigenous population, who most often were dispossessed and displaced, and sometimes even exterminated, were treated and portrayed as being primitive, barbaric and wild in all respects, yet they had something which the European descendants lacked: the aforementioned autochthonous relationship to the land.

What followed was the practice and strategy to ‘go native’ by the settlers. This became central in the settler societies where the white population eventually were the majority or at least wielded hegemonic power. The aim was to accomplish the amount of indigenisation and autochtonisation that was felt to be absolutely necessary to be able to feel at home as a white person living permanently outside Europe. What developed from around 1900 was a strategy and a process that can be called ‘trans-racialisation’ or to ‘become trans-racial’. This racial transformation comes from the position of performative and constructivist identity development and takes place when, for example, a white person learns a native language, adopts native food and native dress and practices native customs and religions.
Both the literary and physical worlds are filled with examples of this trans-racialised white person who has gone native to the extent that they are more or less fully identifying with and performing a native and non-European position. One example of this is the Australian author David Malouf’s description of an English boy, Gemmy Fairley, marooned in Australia and raised by a local Aboriginal group, in his novel *Remembering Babylon*. Arriving European settlers try to save Gemmy, but he is too native to go back. Such a description captures the trans-racialised strategy of the white population and highlights the split of white subjectivities in a foreign land.

Sometimes it was not even necessary to involve the native population in this attachment work. The famous Swedish explorer and Asian studies scholar Sven Hedin explained in his memoirs that he used to lay down and hug the Asian ground which he had ‘discovered’ before he went to sleep. In so doing, he argued that, ‘Asia became my cold bride’.

4. Becoming the Other

While there are many ways that this indigenisation and autochtonisation occurred, in this paper we will focus on only four, beginning with the concept of ‘growing up’ amongst the Other, reflecting the strong historical genre based on the fear and the fascination of becoming the Other. Included here is the so-called white slavery and white captivity narrative that centres on a white character enslaved by a non-white people. The narrative could concern either a European or a white settler, and could be autobiographical or fictional.

In her study of the white captivity theme within the context of the British Empire, Linda Colley writes about the many soldiers, explorers, travellers, missionaries and settlers who were captured by natives in colonies, and who later returned to white ‘civilization’ and wrote memoirs and books about their experiences. Included here are James Fenimore Coopers’ *The Last of the Mohicans*, Theresa Gowanlock’s and Theresa Delaney’s *Two Months in the Camp of Big Bear* and Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim*.

There are two key variants of this narrative. The first is the way both animals and ‘natives’ become adopters of white children lost and Othered into a type of ‘feral brood’. Examples include Edgar Rice Burroughs’ *Tarzan* and Lee Falk’s *The Phantom*. The children grew up among ‘exotic’ animals as well as among ‘primitive’ natives. Additionally, there is the captivity that is desired, self-chosen and mostly pleasurable. This is the ethnographic anthropologist method of temporarily living with the Other. This can even involve the researcher having sex with or even being ‘adopted’ by her or his native informants. This voluntary captivity contains a more or less explicit element of elevating the ‘primitive’ and leaving behind the ‘civilized’. This is the conclusion of Marianna Torgovnick, who analysed such well-known names as Bronislaw Malinowski, Margaret Mead
and Claude Lévi-Strauss. Another example from the same period is the Swedish missionary and adventurer August Larsson who became a ‘duke’ in Mongolia.

The next genre is ‘inter-racial intimacy’ as the white slavery genre became increasingly eroticised in the first half of the twentieth century. Most obvious here is Edith M. Hull’s novel *The Sheik* that later became the 1921 movie with Rudolph Valentino. The development of this genre went hand in hand with waves of moral panic as authorities warned white women of having relationships with non-white men or even reading novels or watching movies that had such themes of interracial intimacy. So-called ‘anti-miscegenation laws’ in many Western countries, which prohibited interracial relations, including the marriage between white and mixed race people, accompanied this.

This eroticised version of going native has, according to several postcolonial feminists, always existed as a forbidden but yet on-going phenomenon. This was the case despite cultural condemnation and juridical legislation along what the American gender studies scholar Joanne Nagel has called the ‘ethno-sexual frontier’ – extending the arguments of Mary Louise Pratt who described this as the ‘colonial contact zone’.

The third area is ‘trans-racial fantasies’. During the process of decolonisation and the emergence of the New Left in the 1960s and 1970s, the desire to live with and become the Other was transformed into an anti-colonial and antiracist discourse. This later morphed into the loosely defined ‘world of New Age’. The American author, Jack Kerouac, who sometimes claimed that he had Native American blood wrote in his classic novel *On the Road* that, ‘I wished I was a Negro, a Mexican, or even a Jap, anything but a white man disillusioned by the best in his own 'white' world’.

The fourth area we describe as ‘hugging the Other’ and leads to the adoption genre we are most familiar with today. During the first half of the twentieth century when European empires reached their largest geographical spread and the colonial project had been almost fully achieved, non-white natives and especially non-white children were no longer perceived as a potential deadly threat. Rather, they became a philanthropic object of rescue and assimilation fantasies. This was an imperial sentimental narrative whereby the white European bourgeois subject could imagine the adoption of non-white native children as a sort of a melodrama of redemption and reconciliation. Although the true historical origin and development of trans-racial and trans-national adoptions took place during the Cold War and at the time of decolonisation from the 1950s to the 1970s, the white desire to save, protect, care for, nurture, civilise and assimilate the Other’s children can be traced back to the inter-war period.

This same kind of desire to adopt non-white children and wish to transform and convert them into Westerners is also found in children’s literature from the same period in which exotic animals often get to play the role of non-whites. In Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Book*, the monkey King Louie expresses a strong desire to
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turn into a white Englishman. Likewise, the African elephant ‘Babar’ and the South American bear ‘Paddington’ are both adopted and are transformed into colonial subjects in the French and the British Empires respectively. Indeed, these two representations really foreground today’s trans-racial and transnational adoptions.

5. Conclusion: White cosmopolitanism and the fantasy of the global family

This exposition took its point of departure in the white European’s need to connect to the colonies and their inhabitants to feel at home in the world outside Europe and among non-Europeans. The interracial families and trans-racial adoptions of our times can be said to complete the processes of indigenisation and autochtonisation. This captures the desire to live with and become the Other in a way which had not been previously accomplished. Here we see the division between the Western Self and the non-Western Other collapse into an antiracist trans-racial fantasy of postcolonial reconciliation, white cosmopolitanism and a vision of a future global family. Through intimate relations with people of colour such as inter-racial relations and trans-racial adoptions, as well as the construction of a white antiracist cosmopolitanism, white people can finally feel that they are comfortable with non-whites and feel at home in the non-Western world.

Notes


Linda Colley. *Captives: The Story of Britain’s Pursuit of Empire and how its Soldiers and Civilians were Held Captive by the Dream of Global Supremacy, 1600-1850.* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2002).


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