

Article

“The Past Is Never Dead. It’s Not Even Past” (Faulkner, 1919 *Requiem for a Nun* p. 85): Mapping and Taking Care of the Ghosts in Adoption

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Abstract: The Code of Ethics of the Association of Professional Genealogists promotes the communication of coherent, clear, and well-organised information). It is not that simple when adoption features in a family’s history. This paper suggests that standard approaches to family tree-construction will struggle to capture the complexities, gaps, and challenges posed by adoption. Firstly, the paper makes the case for family historians having an alertness to adoption by noting the number of people affected by adoption. It then goes on to look at the literature that argues that adoption involves erasures of birth families and makes ghosts of them. Adoption also creates possible selves and lives; the adopted person’s “could-have-beens” had there been no adoption, the biological child that the adoptive parents might have had and could not, the birth mother’s life with the child lost to adoption. These presences and possibilities haunt all involved in adoption, and writers have posited the existence of a “ghost kingdom”. This paper maps out a greater ghost world of adoption, paradoxically full of life, and because of access to birth records, a world that offers a much greater potential for materialisation. The paper avoids the traditional notions of ghosts as things to be shunned or as representatives of pathologies. Instead, it asks for respect for the “not-dead”/“not-past” of adoption and for family history researchers, a capacity to embrace the jumbled, the murky, and the disorganised. People everywhere are increasingly constructing their own family trees, with all the potential for pleasant surprise but also the shock that this might bring. Should genealogists overlook adoption’s ghosts then they overlook the opportunity to professionally map a rich and varied world of family knowledge and connections. The paper concludes with this observation coupled with a discussion of other associated ethical implications of family history work where adoption features.



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1. Introduction

I helped create a family tree for the first time in a few years since I had ceased direct practice with adults affected by adoption. This recent experience awakened in me a fascination with family history and family trees (Faulkner 1919, p. 85). I became struck by the process of constructing and drawing a family tree and in particular, the classic tree-like structure. This seemed to me to be inadequate in that, in my line of practice, whilst traditionally the lines between the various births, marriages, and deaths are seen as one-dimensional paths connecting the next factual event, in truth, when adoption features in a family, the construction of these lines can become complex and problematic (Patton-Imani 2018). This perception led me to think about the invisible in adoption who are nothing of the sort, and how often the words “ghosts” or “haunted by” feature in adoption writings. “Ghosts”, “haunted”, “spectres”, “phantoms”, and “invisible” are words that crop up throughout adoption (Lifton 1994, 2002, 2006, 2010). How can we understand the frequent repetition of these words, and where might this understanding inform the ethics of family history work? Starting from this question and building the notion of a “ghost world” of adoption, this paper offers a means to re-think family tree-making by providing a place

in that process for adoption's ghosts. With a few exceptions, ghosts are characterised as malevolent (Owens 2017). The classic ghost stories of M.R. James are the finest examples of revenants that punish transgressions past and present. Haunting and being haunted are usually synonyms for being in danger in popular imagination; however, this is not so in adoption.¹

For family historians, genealogists, and others working in the field of family history, standard ethical issues of fact or fiction can become problematised by a ghost world in the family trees of adopted people, their adoptive families, and their birth families. For instance, the Code of Ethics of the Association of Professional Genealogists promotes the communication of coherent, clear, and well-organised information (<https://www.apgen.org/cpages/code-of-ethics> (accessed on 1 February 2024)). It is not that simple where an adoption features in a family. As this paper hopes to show, respect for the “not-dead”/“not-past” of adoption means, for researchers, a capacity to embrace the jumbled, the murky, and the disorganised.

Before I go any further, it must be known that I write as an “insider” (Merton 1972; Patton-Imani 2018). In adoption scholarship and research, sometimes the insider status of the writer is unclear. For instance, Kirk's ground-breaking work *Shared Fate* (Kirk 1964) showed that adoptive families were simply different rather than being first or second best in relation to birth families, and this was first published in 1964. A postscript of his twenty years later revealed that Kirk was an adoptive father (Dwyer and Buckle 2009, p. 56). My insider-ness comes from being a ghost in adoption for twenty-three years until my daughter found me—her birth father.

2. Adoption: A Confounding Matter for Family Historians

Adoption complicates an already complicated field. Though family history regularly engages with the past and dead family members (its “bread and butter”), the fact of an adoption in a family/family tree blurs the clean lines of genealogy. How does it do this? As discussed in more detail below, adoption creates ghosts, ghost lives, ghost places, and ghost possibilities *that are much more real* than the imagined possibilities of all our lives. First of all, these ghost people, lives, and places (houses, streets, other towns, and cities) exist, and knowledge of these is available, thus making them more corporeal than any other could-have-beens that those without adoption in their families might imagine. However, more than the implications of the ghosts of adoption, the large number of people (and therefore histories) impacted by adoption needs to be spelt out to be appreciated.

We start from two statistics. There have been 875,000 adoptions in England and Wales since 1926 (O'Halloran 2021). In 2021, the population of England and Wales was 59,642,000 (Office of National Statistics 2021). Now, assume that for every adoption, there is a basic number of five people involved (adopted person, two adoptive parents, and two birth parents) and multiply this by the number of adoptions cited above. This equals 4,375,000 people directly involved in these adoptions². Some may not still be alive, especially the parents of the 1926 adoptions, though being alive has never been a requirement in family history work.

Next is a calculation of the percentage of people directly involved in adoption in England and Wales since 1926. This would be the percentage that the above 4,375,000—directly involved in adoption—is of the overall population of 59,642,000. This gives us 7.3% of the English and Welsh population with a direct involvement in adoption.³ This suggests then that family history work needs to bear in mind that in a significant number of cases, adoption will feature in the families in question.

Before we go on to name and discuss the ghosts of adoption and their relevance to family history work, it is necessary to briefly note two mainstream conceptions of ghosts.

3. Ghosts in General

Spectres, revenants, phantoms, shades, wraiths. In mainstream fiction, ghosts are scare-makers, invokers of horror, and often bent on retribution and punishment (in M. R.

James' *Lost Hearts*, child ghosts seek revenge on the occultist who has murdered them). Ghosts are also deliverers of omens, portents, and warnings, and may play a role in righting a wrong; "if you let it, the ghost can lead you toward what has been missing, which is sometimes everything" (Gordon 1997, p. 58) or demanding justice (del Pilar Blanco and Peeren 2013, p. 9). Dicken's *Scrooge* is the best example of a constructive haunting. Whether straightforwardly bent on malevolence, in the business of averting a disaster, or righting a wrong, one way or the other, ghosts are usually to be banished, exorcised, heeded, and laid to rest. Outside of scary fiction, ghosts appear (!) in clinical, non-fiction literature—the second mainstream conception of ghosts—particularly relating to therapeutic work with patients. In such writings in the fields of psychiatry and psychoanalysis, ghosts and hauntings are more likely to be representative of a buried or repressed neurosis or trauma. For example, Scholar refers to:

...the psychoanalysts Abraham and Torok (who) had explored the processes involved in responses to traumatic loss, using the notion of the "phantom" to represent lost objects (usually individuals but also places and communities) and of the "crypt" to represent the structures built around them in the unconscious of those who had experienced such painful losses, which they suggested were often associated with shame and prohibition. They explain phantoms as "the gaps left in us by the secrets of others". (Abel 2019, p. 6)

Grief is closely associated with loss, and work to assist the grieving process often involves engaging with the ghost as a symbol of unresolved grief (O'Loughlin 2010). In *Ghosts in the Consulting Room: Echoes of Trauma in Psychoanalysis*, the psychoanalysts, Harris and Kalb, and Klebanoff, a psychologist, dedicate an entire book to the role of ghosts in dealing with trauma. In the book's introduction, they remark that:

...we were struck by the way uncanny and spectral presence, or absent presence, entered minds, bodies, and consulting rooms. The attention to ghosts did not just stop in the clinical dyad. We found ghosts haunting our theories, our practices, and our training institutes. (Harris et al. 2016, p. 1)

If in mainstream fiction, ghosts are generally to be dreaded, and in the clinical literature, ghosts are symbols of grief and trauma and to be laid to rest, what might ghosts be for family historians?⁴ To answer this, we must first map the ghosts of adoption.

4. Adoption's Ghosts

"The story of adoption is a ghost story, full of fantasy, mystery, and missing persons, who, for the most part, are "as if" dead" (Lifton 2010, p. 71).

According to Gustafsson (2023), ghosts abound in adoption narratives. Yet a search for ghost-related adoption scholarly works produced just fifteen that directly engaged with the subject (Lifton 1994, 2002, 2006, 2010; Beatty 2000; Hipchen and Deans 2003; Dorow 2006; Gunsberg 2009; Appell 2010; Swain 2011; Collins 2016; Donoghue 2017; Mariner 2019; Scholar 2019; Quist 2023). Lambert claims that: "Despite the legislative shift to "openness", references to ghosts and haunting still pervade the online adoption archive" (Lambert 2020, p. 370). Certainly, there is greater frequency of "ghost" and "haunt" online in adoption-related writing. For instance, when the search terms "adoptee" and "ghost" are entered in Google Scholar, there are 3500 hits ("adoptee" plus "haunt" reaches 19,800), and for "adoptive family" and "ghost", there are 2540 hits ("adoptive family" plus "haunt" reaches 2770). "Birth mother" and "ghost" achieves 5370 ("birth mother" plus "haunt" reaches 520), with "birth father" and "ghost" reaching 1690 ("birth father" plus "haunt" reaches 1460).⁵

And to add personal weight to the case for ghosts in adoption, the author was struck by the early occurrence and frequency of the words "haunt" or "ghost" in his nearly thirty years of writing and research on birth fathers, for instance:

Many respondents indicated that thoughts of the child were regular and unexpected throughout their subsequent lives. A sense of a visitation was communi-

cated strongly in some accounts—one man likened the recurrence of thoughts of the child to the appearance of a ghost (Beatty 2000, p. 210).

This is followed by the remark: “It may come as a surprise that birth fathers can feel as haunted by the child’s absence as birth mothers do” (ibid.). One man from my research gave a poignant touch to the notion of being haunted: “I can still smell my baby’s scent. It’s always with me” (Clapton 2000). Furthermore, many of the seminal works consulted early in my research mentioned the ghosts of adoption, for instance: “The birth mother remains the always present ghost in the closed adoption” (Schechter and Bertocci 1990, p. 328); in his study involving 124 adopted adults, Sachdev (1992) found that adoption reunion participants expressed relief at no longer feeling haunted or having to dwell on fantasies about their genealogical past; and I came across Baran and Pannor’s observation similar to that of Schechter and Bertocci, that the “ghosts of the birthparent, inherent in the closed system, are ever present” (1990, p. 120).

So, how might these ghosts and hauntings be manifested? Severson remarks that adoption “...turns a home into a haunted house full of ghosts, full of guarded secrets and locked closets, full of questions unanswered and questions that can’t be asked” (Severson 1994, p. 7). Lifton goes larger and posits a whole kingdom of ghosts. For Lifton, the story of adoption is a ghost story in which adopted children, birth parents, and adoptive parents are haunted, both by those they have lost and by the selves they might have been had the losses not occurred. According to Lifton, the adopted person’s ghosts include:

...the ghost mother, eternally young, “the ghost of the baby he was before being adopted”, and the ghost of the biological child his adoptive parents wished to have. The adopted person lives with one foot in this life and one in the “ghost kingdom” inhabited by these shadowy figures (Lifton 2010, pp. 71–72).

This paper suggests, for family historians, the presence of a larger group than the inhabitants of Lifton’s kingdom and rather than a kingdom, a ghost *world* of overlapping connections—some more material than others—that problematises seemingly neat depictions of family trees.

For concision’s sake, here are the five people directly involved in adoption taken in turn, beginning with the adopted person. Who do they haunt and who are they haunted by?

5. The Adopted Person

The adopted person will have in mind the ghosts of their mother and father. For Lifton and others that write directly about ghosts in adoption (Gatti 2011), in keeping with the general focus on the birth mother in adoption (Clapton 2003; Chen 2014), the adopted person is chiefly haunted by the ghost of the birth mother: “He is also accompanied by the ghost of the birth mother, from whom he has never completely disconnected” (Lifton 1994, p. 11). She is always present: “My first mother was an ever-present ghost, a shadow always unseen but there, living in my mind and in my cells” (DeBetta 2022, pp. 131–32). Distinct from being haunted, adopted people speak of themselves as ghosts. One of the adopted people interviewed by Lifton said that she “felt like someone who looks into a mirror and sees no reflection. I felt lonely, not connected to anything, floating, like a ghost” (qtd. in Lifton 1994, p. 68). Weller writes of the participants in her study of adopted people who had reunited with a member of their birth family, that they “were acutely aware that there is a life they would have lived had they not been adopted—a phantom identity” (Weller 2022, p. 280). Topfer puts it this way: “I never felt embodied, always drifting like a ghost or being a puddle: formless, shapeless, with no beginning, no middle, or end” (Topfer 2012, p. 24).

In addition, if we consider the material journey of an infant adopted from birth, then the ghost world of the adopted person could include their first non-parental carers—foster parents. A very real presence–absence for the children that were adopted from care. As are the places, homes, residential establishments and so on in which they may have spent their first weeks and months (Beatty 2000). Patton-Imani draws attention to:

The Latinx foster family I lived with for my first three and a half months called me Jolon. I only know that they discovered my milk allergy, and they loved me and were sad when I left. (Patton-Imani 2018, p. 6)

The ghost world of adoption transcends racial and national boundaries. Writing about adoptions from China, Dorow argues: “The child’s history extends beyond the discrete borders of the family and the nation, stirring simultaneously the ghosts of here and there, now and then” (Dorow 2006, p. 229).

Lifton writes of the challenge for the adopted person. This is that they are haunted by “the ghost of the original baby he was before being adopted, the child he might have been had he stayed with his birth mother” (Lifton 2010, p. 71); there is still more for the adopted person because they are also haunted “by the ghost of the fantasy child his adoptive parents might have had” (Lifton 1994, p. 11).

A kind of ghost-making is also imposed on adopted people. The birth mother creates a ghost out of the baby that she gave birth to. Often frozen in her mind, never grown up, fixed as an image of the first and last time she saw her baby. Jackie Kay’s birth mother “conjures me up” (Kay 1991, p. 30).

What of the birth mother and ghosts?

6. The Mother

Ghost birth mothers “exist in a state of haunted motherhood, suspended in the shadowlands where the living and the invisible coexist” (Morris 2018, p. 828). For Lifton, the most powerful ghost in the Ghost Kingdom is the ghost mother (Lifton 2010, p. 73). Mariner argues that it is in the process of the adoption that the birth mother is made to vanish:

The adoption process is therefore—for expectant mothers—an elaborate structure of invisibility, which, in its attempts to render visible certain types of bodies, actually contributes to their erasure. (2019, p. 41)

Susan Bumps’ poem describes driving out to her birth mother’s house. She stands:

...outside while the neighbour dogs barked,
and looked through the kitchen window.

How she’s in there, my mother, a phantom.

(Bumps 1999, p. 282)

However, the birth mother ghost only comes out of the shadows in the concrete results of a successful search: “Seeing the handwritten letter gave Becca her first sense of her birth mother as a real, embodied person” (respondent quoted in (Collins 2016, p. 66).

The birth mother herself has her own ghosts. These include the ghosts of the adoptive parents that “hover about. She feels ambivalent towards them: both grateful and resentful” (Lifton 2010, p. 72).

And although statistically accurate but nevertheless a generalisation of Lifton’s undercut by Clapton whose research challenged the stereotype of the abandoning birth father (2003), Lifton remarked that the birth mother is also haunted by the ghost of the birth father who “never leaves her, as he did in life” (Lifton 2010, p. 72).

7. The Father

Birth fathers are much less written about in the adoption literature (Clapton 2019). When they are discussed, they are the invisible men of adoption (Coles 2010) in the shadows (Mason 1995), shadowy figures (Hughes 2015), or phantom fathers (Passmore and Chipuer 2009). Cornefert writes: “Birth fathers were often perceived and described as phantom fathers, or a shadowy figure often invisible in the shadow of adoption decisions and processes, either by exclusion or self-exclusion” (Cornefert 2021, p. 81).

Clearly, birth fathers are prime candidates for the role of ghost, just as fathers in general in children and family services are rendered insubstantial or invisible (Brown et al. 2009). Chief among adoption scholars for his work on bringing birth fathers into the light,

in an echo of the “invisibilisation” of birth mothers referred to above, Clapton quotes one man who neatly encapsulates the process of becoming a ghost: “The adoption rubbed me out physically but not emotionally” (Clapton 2003, p. 122). With echoes of the birth mother’s experience of being made invisible described above by Mariner, the birth father is banished into the ghost world but alive with feelings at the same time. Thus, birth fathers too may hold the ghost of a child in mind. Additionally, again in Clapton (and in Coles 2010), the birth father can be haunted by the ghost of the mother of his child, and the ghost of the relationship that might have been:

“I’m still carrying a torch for her. And that there was a sense in which throughout our whole marriage of 25 years, I have to say, I think that the ghost of C—the birth mother) existed” (respondent in Clapton 2003, p.143).

8. The Adoptive Mother and Adoptive Father

The adoptive parents can be ghosts in the minds of the birth parents as in Lifton’s notion of them hovering about (Lifton 2010, p. 72). However, the experiences of the adoptive parents themselves are fraught with the ghosts of the birth parents. And it is writings about how these ghosts impact the adoptive parents that appear to be the most frequent in the literature. Lambert writes:

Adopted children’s birth relatives linger in a time and space between life and death/absence and presence. Often, they cannot be mourned with the finality of death, but their loss is experienced as an ongoing event, with no knowledge as to when and if it will “end” (Lambert 2020, p. 371).

For adoptive parents to succeed in parenting they are called on to integrate the child with his or her “ghost-shadow families” (Koehne 1990, p. 283) because the “ghosts of the birthparents, inherent in the closed system, are ever present, and may lead to the fear that these parents will reclaim the child and that the child will love these parents more than the adoptive parents” (Baran and Pannor 1990, pp. 120–21). Pretending that the birth family is of little or no importance “. . .relegates them to the position of “hereditary ghosts” (Frisk 1964). Such “ghosts” or “skeletons in the closet” can become powerful forces in the dynamics of the family (Rosenberg and Groze 1997, p. 526). These are the dynamics in the adoptive family, the birth parents not physically present but hovering about, lurking, and for some, perhaps, are mildly threatening (Appell 2010, p. 131). Again, echoing Lifton’s notion of the birth mother as the most powerful ghost in the world of the adopted person, in the adoptive family “she (the birth mother) remains the always present ghost” (Schechter and Bertocci 1990, p. 328).

Given the rise in transnational adoptions (Högbacka 2008), it is not surprising that the literature featuring ghosts in transnational adoption has emerged in recent decades. In his discussion of his adopted daughter’s Chinese roots, Gammage recounts studying a photograph of his daughter, him, and his wife. The photograph, taken in the city in which his adopted daughter was born, surprises him by also containing a picture of an elderly Chinese woman. Gammage sees “a ghost. . .a familial relation to my Jin Yu, a long-ago matriarch of her clan. This reminds him that “Jin Yu has family in China. . .who will love her” (Gammage 2007, p. 252). Dorow also writes of ghosts in transnational adoptions when she refers to one adoptive mother of a Chinese child, who expressed listening to the confluence of ghosts in her family in this way: “I feel an obligation that I’m raising her not just for her and for us, but for the foster family, and for her birth parents. I feel their presence in trying to, you know, do the best that we can” (Dorow 2006, p. 259). Although just an account of a conference paper at the time of writing, in light of the majority anglophone nature of the discussions about ghosts in adoption, this author looks forward to the eventual publication of Gustafsson’s intriguingly titled, “Ghostliness, haunting, and Korean overseas adoption” (Gustafsson 2023).

Then, there are the ghosts of the might-have-beens for the adoptive parents. They have “their phantom child, who grows up with the adoptee, never throws tantrums, drops out of school, experiments with drugs, or totals the family car”. (Lifton 2010, p. 73). The ghost of

the child that could (or should) have been of the adoptive parents or was conceived and then lost by them (Waterman 2001).

Prior to any adoption, Mariner raises the prospect of the adoptive parents haunted by the ghosts of children of “fallen-through” adoptions. Those are the prospective adoptions that have not taken place because the birth mother/expectant woman has changed her mind (Mariner 2019, p. 31).

9. The Others

Beyond the five most directly involved, there are the child’s grandparents, uncles, and aunts (all real people), perhaps even siblings (of the adopted child) that existed at the time of the adoption or might even have come into being after the adoption. Just as for the adopted child’s ghosts of foster carers (Patton-Imani 2018), the child may also live on as a ghost in the lives of the foster parents. All these other people may hold in mind the ghosts of *everyone* else. And yet, they are unlikely to have a place, especially foster parents, in a conventional family tree.

10. The Possibles

Then, there are all the could-have-beens, the imagined possibilities past and present (never physically present yet having a psychological presence); “alternative possible life histories and selves” (Collins 2016, p. iv). Patton-Imani writes of “a slight shuffle in the applications for adoption received in the time and place I was born (that) might have put me into any number of different families” (Patton-Imani 2018, p. 4).

Lifton refers to “the Land of What Might Have Been” (Lifton 2010, p. 72) populated with people and relationships not known but imagined, for example, friends that might have been made in school, but also events that might have happened and could happen in an alternate future. And why should there not also be possible *places* in the ghost world, homes that could have been lived in. Indeed, the relevant information is out there: an adopted person’s original birth entry carries the address of their birth mother at the time. And we know that searching for, then finding and visiting these haunted places are significant for adopted people.

We all have possible selves; however, in adoption, these can take up a firmer psychological residence/presence. Moreover, the knowledge that these possibilities (future and past) could be explored concretely, with access to sealed records, lends the possibilities and could-have-beens much power.

This dizzying multiverse of possibilities⁶ may not be directly relevant for family historians. Nevertheless, it is still worth naming on our revised and enlarged map of the ghost world.

11. Adoption Ghosts: Lay to Rest or Welcome as Part of the Landscape?

“...admit the ghost...” (Gordon 1997, p. 206)

Just as in the literature on ghosts in general, in adoption, there is a strong theme that assigns roles and properties to ghosts. As already noted, this is especially the case in psychiatry and psychoanalysis in general. The ghost-related adoption literature frequently deploys the ghost as a symbol and challenge. In the writings of Lifton, in the vein of psychoanalysis, just as for mainstream ghosts in clinical literature, adoption ghosts are often to be confronted because “they spring from the depths of the unresolved grief, loss, and trauma that everyone has experienced” (Lifton 2010, p. 71).

Psychoanalytic writers often relate adopted peoples’ problems with identity formation to the existence of their ghost family: “The adoptee lives with both an observable family and a “ghost” family, making it difficult for both to integrate “good and bad parent representations of infantile object relations into a workable, more realistic identification”” (Farber 2006, p. 27).

Gunsberg sets up the adopted person’s ghost kingdom as a puzzle for the therapist to unlock with the goal of treatment being the integration of the ghost kingdom with that

of the “actual world” (2010). Here, “integration” can be read as dissolution. In the words of Mariner, for adoptive parents, birth parent ghosts are “problematically present” (2019, p. 57) and to be defeated. The Ghost Kingdoms of these analysts are problematic zones. They are “dark, isolated places with no windows to the outside world” (Lifton 2010, p. 78). Thus, the goal of Lifton and adoption-related therapists is to exorcise adoption’s ghosts.

However, there exists a countervailing view of simple acceptance. Accept adoption’s ghosts and fold them into the life (hi)stories of adoptees, birth parents, and adoptive parents (that) differ from each other, yet are related to and interact with each other’s stories in complex ways (Patton-Imani 2018, p. 6). In this sense, the family historians need not concern themselves with busting ghosts, rather they need to approach their work by being ready to see the ghosts of adoption. This, it is suggested, is an appropriately ethical and conscientious starting point for family history work.

12. What Should Family Historians Take from This?

“...the search for origins attempts to determine a life that exists between the lines” (Deans 2003, p. 256)

To summarise, this paper has suggested that adoption jumbles the already complicated field of family history. Though family history regularly engages with the past, and dead family members, the fact of an adoption in a family/family tree confounds the effort to draw clean lines of genealogy. There is a number of people involved that might not instantly appear in the searches of births, marriages, and deaths; then there is the ghost world that has been mapped above. These ghosts, ghost lives, and ghost places are all actualities that could become realities upon access to birth records and case files. Moreover, to take the USA as an example, the burgeoning number of decisions in favour of adopted people’s access to their previously sealed birth records (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2020) means that more than ever, adoption ghosts are not just spirits of our “past” but are increasingly “live” in the present (Lambert 2020, p. 371).

Then, there are the could-have-beens. The possible futures dependent upon our actions and inactions (the road not taken, the “sliding doors” phenomenon: “what would have happened if I did not/did board that train?”); Patton-Imani’s “slight shuffle”. Put another way: “We are always haunted by the myth of our potential, of what we might have it in ourselves to be or do” (Phillips 2013, p. xii). Adoption creates the conditions for these possibilities to thrive because in adoption, as discussed, the possibilities are much more real than the imagined possibilities of all our lives. The ghost people, lives, places of adoption exist and knowledge of these is available, thus making them more corporeal than any other could-have-beens that those without adoption in their families might imagine. In fact, paradoxically, adoption ghosts are living ghosts—unreal and real people (Yngvesson 2010). And unlike a dominant way of thinking in adoption-related therapeutic work, adoption ghosts are decidedly not “fantasy ghosts” (Drustrup 2016).

13. An Ethics of Adoption-Aware Family History

Embedded in the above discussion then is the suggestion that there are a number of ethical issues for family historians when an adoption features in a family. Despite the earlier footnote eschewing venturing into what ghosts might represent, Derrida’s remark is salient here. For Derrida, ghosts are not to be identified and then exorcised. He suggests that we must learn “how to let them speak or how to give them back speech” (Derrida 2006, p. 221). Aside from family historians paying this kind of attention to the ghostly world of adoption, what else can be offered?

Patton-Imani has written, as an adopted person, of being thwarted by online family trees that denied the option of compiling one inclusive tree for both her adoptive family and her birth family. She argues that the family tree is not an impartial or neutral tool for documenting family relationships, but instead forces her to choose one lineage or the other. She is not allowed to be one person with two sets of parents. Her birth parents “...must be made invisible in order for the new family to narrate a sense of family legitimacy” (Patton-

Imani 2018, p. 11). Though a vast amount of family history work is conducted online (and Patton-Imani acknowledges that there are other more nuanced adopted person-friendly methods⁷), the ethical issue here for family history work is the crucial inclusion of the constant possibility of the real ghosts of adoption being present in the tree. Indeed, a tree in which adoption features is not a tree at all but rather, a forest of overlapping and interlinked lines. In assembling heritage and family history, there are thus no “clean lines”. No satisfyingly geometrically arranged pedigree is possible in adoption.

A second ethics-conscious related observation concerns that of nomenclature. Though mostly unproblematic in non-adoption cases, the family historian must think carefully when allotting titles to parents. Care ought to be taken when using the terms mother and father. “Mum” and “dad”, or the appropriate cultural variations, are the preferred titles for those who raise a child, however what should the biological parents be called? There is too much debate out there to even summarise here, however some things ought to be obvious or least be acknowledged as contested. “First mother” might, on the face of it, seem to be biologically correct in the case of an adopted person’s parentage, yet the implications for adoptive mothers suggest “second mother” is second best. “Real parent”, though often used by the public clearly also carries connotations for adoptive parents as the “unreal” ones. The term “birth mother” is the most commonly used internationally insofar as it is the most emotionally neutral. Elsewhere in the debates over terms, the word “adoptees” has been problematised as a faintly derogatory collective name for people who have been adopted. So, historians ought to take care when writing “adoptee” next to someone’s name. Some of this is discussed at <https://adoptioncouncil.org/article/using-accurate-adoption-language/> (accessed 1 February 2024).

Thirdly, there are the implications for genealogists of DNA relative-matching networks, such as Ancestry.com and 23AndMe. In what she terms as “the geneticization of family history knowledge”, Abel writes that this type of relative-matching raises numerous ethical conundrums, one of which she terms “the expansion of “users” conceptions of who counts as kin” (Abel 2019, p. 2). The searches and discoveries provoked by DNA tests and matchings are both a speedy way of uncovering the ghost kingdom of adoption and, by their very nature, fraught with the challenges and possible upsets caused by fast, unmediated information. A professionally assembled set of family connections that from the start acknowledges and lets in the ghosts of adoption will go a considerable way to mitigating the discomfort caused by the folly of ignoring the “not-even-past” people, places and possibilities that haunt adoption.

Fourthly, more of a question than a formulated implication of the ghost world of adoption for family history work. What might recognition of adoption’s ghosts mean for family work where there are no adoptions or obvious ghosts? The approach suggested in this paper may also apply to families everywhere and anywhere. After all, the events of construction, de-construction, and re-construction—and discoveries—in families in general surely create worlds of alternatives, that, again, mess up the clean lines of family trees.

To conclude, in his introduction to the inaugural issue of this journal, Kretsedemas asks this:

At some point, we have to answer the question of whether the ideas about family and kinship that are being mobilized by family genealogists are sufficiently inclusive of the real diversity of family–kinship relations. Will genealogy studies be the medium that helps all of these perspectives negotiate a shared—even if uneasy—coexistence (recalling the agonistic pluralism proposed by William Connolly (1995)), or are some of these perspectives on family and kinship wholly antithetical, forcing genealogy studies to “pick a side?”. (Kretsedemas 2017, pp. 4–5)

This paper has introduced and inserted the ghosts of adoption into the craft of assembling family histories. It has expanded Lifton’s Ghost Kingdom into a Ghost World and rescued adoption’s ghosts from eeriness, symbolism, and therapeutic forays. The ghosts of adoption just are. They take their place alongside the “official” living and dead. These

ghosts also disrupt notions of both traditional blood-related kinship and nurture-related kinship (Patton-Imani 2018). An ethics of family history work where adoption features would do well to think twice about “picking a side” when there are so many sides to choose from. If this paper’s mapping and care for the ghosts of adoption are embraced, then, in the first instance, the most ethical thing to do before drawing lines might just be to stand back and prepare to be haunted.

“We’re here, you know . . . All the time. You can talk to us and think about us. It doesn’t have to be sad or scary.” (The Lovely Bones, Sebold 2015, p. 154)

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Notes

- ¹ The discussion of ghosts in adoption that follows mostly applies to those caught up in the closed adoptions of the 20th century in which original birth records were sealed and new identities created for the adopted child.
- ² Nb this “basic number” of five involved in every adoption excludes siblings, and other relatives such as aunts and uncles, meaning that the actual number of people involved and affected in a family in which an adoption has taken place might be well over the core number of five.
- ³ Other European countries such as France have a lower rate of adoptions per head of population (Mignot 2017), whereas the USA has a higher rate (United Nations 2009).
- ⁴ Away from the traditional mainstream conceptions of ghosts, see Scholar (2019) for a discussion of the rise of scholarly interest in ghosts, spectrality, and hauntology in the late 20th century. The latter have little to do with the concept of a ghost in this paper and more to do with the role of and meaning played by ghosts: “Spectrality does not involve the conviction that ghosts exist or that the past (and maybe even the future they offer to prophesy) is still very much alive and at work, within the living present. . .” (Jameson 1999, p. 39).
- ⁵ Searched 1 February 2024.
- ⁶ We will leave to one side other events that might conjure all these adoption ghosts and possibilities into being, for example, the later-life (or death-bed) revelations that an earlier sibling had been adopted (and was “out there”)—the subject matter of much of the content of “Long Lost Family” (a popular TV programme in the UK).
- ⁷ See for instance the artwork of The Adoptive Families of British Columbia that, rather than a family tree, offers the option of a “Family Forest” using which “the child can assign their birth family to a specific type or size of tree, and their adoptive family to a different type or size” (https://belongingnetwork.com/sites/default/files/adoption-friendly_family_trees.pdf, accessed 1 February 2024).

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