

**Adoptee Report of
The AVI & ICASN Melbourne Transcultural Adoptee Event
&
companion
Adoption Research Seminar and Round Table Discussion**

12 – 13 June 2009



Photo: Simon Keogh and Jessica Walton at adoptee event

Presented by the following organisations and individuals:

- Australian Vietnamese International (AVI) and The Intercountry Adoptee Support Network (ICASN)
- The School of Political and Social Inquiry, Monash University, The Australian Catholic University (ACU)
- The Academic Seminar Convenors: A/Professor Denise Cuthbert, Professor Marian Quartly, Professor Shurlee Swain, Dr Kate Murphy, Ms Amy Pollard (from the ARC-funded, *The Search for Family: A history of Adoption in Austral*) with sponsorship from Professor Gabrielle McMullen, Pro-Vice Chancellor (Academic), Australian Catholic University, Melbourne and The School of Social and Political Inquiry, Monash University
- The Melbourne Adoptee Film Event Committee Members: Dominic Golding (MA Candidate, Monash Uni), Jessica Walton (PhD Candidate, Newcastle Uni), Simon Keogh (Adoptee Rep, Adoption Information Service), Catherine Robinson and Sophie Blichfeldt (Media Promotion for event) with additional support from Lynelle Beveridge (Founder, ICASN & Adoptee Rep of Federal Govt NICAAG) and Indigo Willing (PhD Candidate, Uni of QLD and Founder of AVI)
- Additional panel speakers at film festival: Amanda Everton & Jenna Creswick
- Others include: The Asian Australian Studies Research Network (AASRN), Maryrose Casey (Academic supervision for 'Umbilical'), Amadeo Marquez Perez (DVD and Video Technician and Film support), Anh Dao Kolbe (photo-editing).

Day 1: Perspectives on local and intercountry adoption: Canada, US and Australia



Photo Kate Murphy, Karen Balcom, Shurlee Swain & Denise Cuthbert

To accompany the AVI and ICASN sponsored Festival of Films by Intercountry Adoptees, researchers from the Australian Research Council funded *The Search for Family: A History of Adoption in Australia* were pleased to convene a seminar and roundtable discussion on adoption. Papers were presented by Professor Karen Balcom (McMaster University, Canada, currently Associate Professor of History and a Visiting Scholar at the University of Melbourne) '*The US Enacts the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption: One Year In*'; Professor Shurlee Swain, ACU '*What shall we do with 'poor little Chinky'? Race and adoption in Australia between the wars*' and Professor Denise Cuthbert, Monash University '*How can adoption be so bad for Australian children, yet so good for children born overseas?*'. In a report of these presentations by Cuthbert she states, "The papers were received well and generated lively debate; and the afternoon roundtable session provided a welcome opportunity for engaged exchange between academic researchers and those involved in adoption policy and service provision, along with community stakeholders". Papers will be uploaded to a Monash University website on their adoption studies soon.

Cuthbert also reports that the research seminar and roundtable was extremely well attended, with attendees that included senior officers from the Intercountry Adoption Branch in the office of the Federal Attorney General, the Intercountry Adoption Service and the Adoption and Permanent Care Division in the Victorian Department of Human Services, many representatives from key adoption stakeholder organisations, and scholars and researchers working in the field. This includes young and emerging researchers Dominic Golding (MA Candidate, Theatre Arts, Monash Uni), Jessica Walton (PhD Candidate, Anthropology, Newcastle Uni) and Indigo Williams Willing (PhD Candidate, Sociology, Uni of QLD) who are also transcultural adoptees, plus non-adopted doctoral candidates Joshua Fokert (PhD Candidate, History, Uni of Newcastle) and Amy Pollard (PhD Candidate, History, Monash Uni).

Day 2: Melbourne's AVI & ICASN Transcultural Adoptee Film Festival & Panel Sessions



Photo: Adoptee committee and audience members from ICASN and AVI
Backgrounds include adopted from Korea, Vietnam, Malaysia and Nepal.

The Film Festival event on Saturday 13 June was a positive and well-attended inaugural adoptee-organized initiative, with one of the main sponsors estimating that approximately 50+ people were in attendance throughout most of the day's sessions. The beautiful and ultra-modern Mercy Lecture Theatre at The Australian Catholic University (ACU) proved an ideal space to accommodate the performance space needed for five actors, a film projection area and speakers' panel, yet intimate enough to allow for in-depth discussions of the play and films presented.

The day began with an opening address by Simon Keogh (Vietnamese adoptee), who was outstanding as the MC for the day. Keogh contributed to the smooth running and introduction of all sessions as well as sharing his community knowledge and personal experiences on adoption in the two panel sessions. Following Keogh's speech, Indigo Willing (Vietnamese adoptee) gave a brief speech warmly welcoming everyone as founder of AVI and on behalf of Lynelle Beveridge, the founder of ICASN, who was unable to make it from Sydney but sent her best wishes for the day. Willing then outlined to the audience how the film, performance and panel event was a debut one in many ways, not in the least due to it being organized by adoptees and entirely focused on revealing and celebrating the perspectives of adoptees. At the same time, she also acknowledged the warm support offered in terms of sponsorship, feedback, ideas and community building by various academics, artists, community groups and of course, adoptive families.

Denise Cuthbert, a key sponsor and supporter of the adoptee event from the very beginning, was then asked to give some opening words. Cuthbert

commended the Melbourne film committee on their developing such a rich, fresh and insightful program as well as thanking the broad audience in attendance and invited speakers, and the ACU for their support as venue host of the event. Jessica Walton (Korean adoptee) then followed by giving a short introduction to ICASN as one of its VIC Representatives. This includes her outlining the work that ICASN does, with acknowledgement to its founder Lynelle Beveridge, and generally encouraged people in the audience to check out the group's website. Adoptee members of the audience were also invited to join a special ICASN dinner later that evening.

The program then formally started with a staged first reading of a play script entitled 'Umbilical' by Dominic Golding (Vietnamese adoptee), a Master of Theatre and Performance Studies student from Monash. The play had a cast of five that including Golding, HaiHa Le who played his birth mother, Andrea Swifte who played his adoptive mother, and two puppeteers who made use of an eerily beautiful puppet dressed in an Ao Dai Vietnamese dress that also symbolised Golding's birth mother. The play reading, directed by Peta Hanrahan, was very moving and elicited a wonderful Q & A discussion afterwards that went for half an hour before we had to break for lunch.



Photo: Dominic Golding during the Q and A following the reading of 'Umbilical' play

The remainder of the day was devoted to the screening of four short films by intercountry adoptees, which were grouped in pairs followed by adoptee panel discussions. 'Missing' by Kate Hers and 'Mothers and Daughters' by Marlene Oostryck with Sue-Yen Bylund screened first. Jessica Walton and Simon Keogh participated in the first session and responded to range of questions about the themes explored in both short films. The main points of interest were the roles of birth mothers, adoptee's relationships with adoptive mothers and then adoptees who become mothers themselves and how that might tie in with wider notions and tensions of identity such as being ethnically Asian and culturally Western.



Photo: Adoptee panel session with Simon Keogh, Jenna Creswick, Jessica Walton and Amanda Everton

The second session screened 'The Girl in the Mirror' by The Post Adoption Resource Centre and 'Adopting Belinda' by Jane Jin Kaisen and Tobias Hubinette. Joining Keogh and Walton on the panel were Jenna Creswick, a Korean adoptee in her twenties and Amanda Everton, a Vietnamese adoptee in her thirties. Key areas of interest that arose from the panel's discussion with the audience included ones of ethnic 'authenticity', such as the pressure for adoptees to know their birth culture and the awkwardness of say, wearing traditional dress styles or going to staged cultural expeditions.

There was also special interest in the male adoptee panellists and filmmaker in 'Adopting Belinda', as one audience member was concerned that adoptee boys may lack future role models given that, all up, adoptee females seemed to be more visible and vocal in the community. In terms of audience participation, there was also interesting contributions from an adoptive mother of a child from Haiti and a grandmother with two daughters with her who were born in Ethiopia. Other adoptees in the audience had backgrounds that included Malaysia, Korea, Vietnam and Nepal.

As the day closed, the audience came and chatted with panel members for over half an hour, resulting in much networking as the general details and website addresses for both AVI and ICASN were exchanged. All involved are very grateful to everyone who gave their time, effort, advice and more for this important inaugural adoptee event. The committee agreed that key areas for development for future events of this nature in Melbourne include expanding the call for films from just short films to all kinds and a greater mix of genres, and to increasing participation from adoptee filmmakers and speakers etc. from a greater range of ages and backgrounds. Such diversity has also already been incorporated into many of the adoptee artist/film/panel events in various other cities to follow this year and is one of the hopes for all future events in general. For more info visit ICASN web www.icasn.org (which has links to AVI in it's 'Vietnam' section) and for more info on the films on tour that are being considered by state committees visit www.adopteefilms.info .

Transcultural Adoptee Reflections Following the Event

Dominic Golding (Melbourne Adoptee Event Committee & Performer of 'Umbilical') states:

“One of the benefits of this event is that it allows the creative works by adoptees to be treated with equal standing as more traditional research. It was also invaluable to share my play reading with such a broad audience and use the feedback I received from the scholars, artists, adoption professionals and community members in the audience for further development of the piece. The films are also important for the following points. The films were selected by a panel of adoptees, and all were submitted from adoptees internationally, thus there was a broad range of expressions about the adoption experience made available. Additionally, we are all able to now see adoptees as creating active projects and having a range of voices to be heard; not just quoted, sampled, taken note of or dismissed.

As a key coordinator I was pleased that the event was able to attract all members involved in adoption, from the department, NGO professionals, academia, adoptive parents and adoptees and artists. I was glad people were given a space to openly to discuss and debate issues raised from both the seminar and the screenings. I sincerely hope that this is a start to a more robust exchange of ideas and the chance for us all to debate policy together with universities, government, NGO adoption groups and adoptive families.”

Simon Keogh (Melbourne Adoptee Event Committee, Event MC & Panellist) states:

“It meant a lot to me to be involved in something I thought so important to adoptees and myself and just to hear the comments after the show were enough to make me think it was worthy of our efforts. Several attendees came up to me at the end of the show and congratulated us as a group on our production. I was absolutely blown away by people who asked me to swap contact details to offer further advice on several related adoption issues.

Following the film screenings, many of the questions were directed at our own thoughts and opinions as intercountry adoptees. In other words, the films and play were effective for raising questions about adoption and audience members were obviously intrigued by all the subject matters. I think the seminar formats have the potential to cover and discuss many issues relation to adoption in length and detail and hope that in our first show that people took away a greater understanding of adoption and the thoughts that we as adoptees shared.”

Jessica Walton (Melbourne Adoptee Event Committee & Panellist) states:

“Overall, it was a significant step for adoptees to voice their opinions and talk about their experiences to a general audience that included people from the adoption community. It was significant that adoptees were the authoritative voices rather than having others speak for them. I felt that people were genuinely interested in listening to us and was taken aback by all of the thanks and appreciation we received afterwards. I'd also especially give thanks to the media work done by Sofie Blichfeldt and Dominic Golding via radio interviews on the ABC, RRR and more news on SBS. For example, one organisation, Vanish, came up afterwards and told me that it was from listening to one of the radio interviews that they heard about the event.

The highlight of the event was definitely Dom's performance and I think it was great to experience his work as an Australian adoptee artist. However, I think the film event was also excellent exposure. The 'Girl in the Mirror' helped everyone to see the diverse perspectives we have and the teenagers that talked about their experiences were so direct and open. Additionally, each of the films touched on some aspect of the adoption journey, whether it is the actual adoption process (Adopting Belinda), or the challenges involved when searching and going back to the birth country (Missing). I liked that 'Mothers and Daughters' focused on the relationships between adoptive mother, birth mother and adoptee. It fit nicely with some of the issues raised in 'Umbilical', especially the presence of the birth mother. Another important issue that the films brought up was adoptee experiences of racism, especially that it's structural racism and not simply about difference. I think the panel discussions, while obviously focusing on adoptees' voices, were also inclusive and allowed for everyone to contribute thoughts and ideas. All this is able to lead to further opportunities to engage in fresh and open community dialogues.”

Catherine Robinson (Melbourne Adoptee Committee) states:

“It was the first adoption event I have been to with my adopted mum which was very positive for both of us...another step forward in opening up the lines of communication regarding my adoption. The day was a fantastic idea for adoptee's to be heard and to create a better understanding of what it's like to be adopted...something that means a lot to me. Events like this will make a difference for other adoptee's now and in the future. Having a panel of adoptees provided an opportunity for the general audience to ask any unanswered questions they may have or just listen/learn from our experiences and adoptee's to speak out.

What main themes of the films did you think helped everyone understand adoption better or open up conversations about it? Listening to a range of adoptee's experiences from local and international adoptee's gave a variety of topics to talk, some themes were: racism, the importance of meeting other adoptee's, feeling comfortable to communicate with other adoptees and your adopted family and what adoption issues can surface when experiencing motherhood. It also allowed people to reflect on how having children makes you question more about your birth family, and the need to learn your birth

country's language because it gives a feeling of belonging, especially when going back to your own country. The film 'Adopting Belinda' was great because it created laughs and visually showed what it looks like for an Asian couple to adopt a white child.

What future networking or follow-on did the festival possibly enable? It was a chance for people to meet face to face and exchange contacts. It got messages to a range of audience and some of this audience will encourage other adoptive parents, workers, adoptee's to go to more of these events or pass on what they learnt from the day."

Jenna Creswick (panellist) states:

"I thoroughly enjoyed the recent transcultural film festival in Melbourne and the fact that it was the first event of its kind, was even more special. For me it felt like a day of reflection and an opportunity to display to the public a glimpse of what being a transcultural/transracial/Korean adoptee means. It was also a day to learn about other adoptees personal experiences and stories, we all seem to have our own story, our own past and our own way of dealing with these issues.

I enjoyed all four films, but the one that really struck a chord with me was 'The Girl in the Mirror', a story about young teenage adoptee girls. I could relate to these girls so much, not just by understanding what they were saying or thinking 'hmm yeah that seems tough' but because I have experienced so many of the same issues as them. I remember the pain I felt as a teenager and it just seemed all too real and familiar to me. Being a teenage girl in the country is tough for anyone but add in the element of being a Korean adoptee, just brings so many more challenges. Watching that particular film brought back so many of my personal memories, although I have found some contentment with my adoption, since meeting my birth family and spending a considerable amount of time in Korea, I will always carry the ache of knowing my birth mother gave me up at birth in unfortunate circumstances, for both me and her. These films provided a small insight into the complex world of adoptees; they provided good discussion points in areas such as mixed identity, racism, cultural differences and acceptance into mainstream Australia. I applaud all filmmakers and all involved in the festival. This was a great first step to providing information on adoptee related issues and I hope to see future events in Melbourne. I'll be more than happy to participate again and help make adoptees voices be heard."

Indigo Willing stated (Melbourne Adoptee Event Committee) in excerpt from her welcoming speech that:

"We've all come together to learn and engage with each other. The adoptee films, performance and panels aren't presented so as to tell anyone 'how to think' but to instead flag themes and issues we might all explore together.

Dominic Golding will further explain Umbilical but it is useful to note that most of the films being presented are first time works. It is also the case that they may not be as glossy or have the budget of say, the movies of celebrity adopters such as Angelina Jolie, Brad Pitt, Tom Cruise, Nicole Kidman, Hugh Jackman and so on. However, the adoptee films remain important works, not in the least because they do what celebrity adoptive families cannot – that is give a voice to adoptees and to give deeper shade and light to the emerging picture of what becomes us once we begin to reach maturity.

The film ‘Missing’ can be seen as an experimental canvas that throws light on the tensions and trauma of a Korean adoptee trying to reconnect with her birth culture and birth mother. ‘Adopting Belinda’ offers a subtle satire that turns stereotypes of adoptee’s cultural heritage around by providing a mockumentary of an Asian couple who have adopted a White Danish child. Then there are the two documentaries, ‘Mothers and Daughters’, which explores cross-generational and maternal bonds in adoption while ‘Girl in the Mirror’ gives a voice to female teenage adoptees. These all offer a unique window into a side of adoption we rarely see yet must if we are to understand and assist all generations of transcultural adoptees to be confident to be themselves and define their own identities.”

Other Reflections

Associate Professor Denise Cuthbert states:

“As a researcher with long-standing interests in adoption in Australia, I am constantly struck by the voices we hear on adoption, and those that we do not hear. For too long, the voices of those most directly affected by adoption -- the adoptees themselves -- have not been heard. The intercountry adoptee film festival event, with films made by adoptees, and a program devised by adoptees, is a truly significant event in the culture and politics of adoption in Australia and puts the voices, the experiences and the remarkable creativity of adoptees on centre stage. The program in Melbourne also included a first reading of a play script by Dominic Golding, which was a powerful and moving exploration of the adoptee's relationship with his mothers. I wish this event a long and generously-funded future, and welcome its return to Melbourne next year.”

Associate Professor Karen Balcom

“I came away from the Friday seminar and the Saturday film festival feeling I had two very positive experiences of knowledge sharing. I learned a great deal from my interaction with the policy-makers, adoption practitioners and researchers at the seminar, and from the artistic achievement and really honest dialogue at the film festival. I have been reflecting on several themes since the weekend.

First, the weekend demonstrated so clearly that there are many ways to

produce and share knowledge about adoption. In the seminar on Friday, one practitioner shared her very important social work research interviewing adult adoptees on their experience of motherhood. The same issue was explored in the film *Mothers and Daughters*, and in discussion after the film.

Second, the weekend taught me the power of dis-placing the expected geographical and racial spaces of transnational adoption. At the Friday seminar, there was a fascinating discussion of why we all seem "shocked" when we consider the ongoing reality of the US as a sending nation in transnational adoption - relinquishing children to Canada, several European nations and potentially to Australia. Why does this shock us? Why does it seem somehow "wrong" or "impossible"? How does confronting this unexpected face of adoption force us to rethink our assessments of race and nation in transnational adoption, to recast our assumptions about sending nations and the cost of relinquishing children? The very funny satire in the film "Adopting Belinda" -- a mockumentary about an Asian couple from Minnesota adopting a Danish child -- made the same points, and promoted (for me) the same reflections.

Finally, many academic researchers in adoption studies have noted recently how the emerging voices of transnational adoptees have changed the face of adoption research in important and exciting ways. This weekend, I learned to appreciate the self-representing voices of adult transnational and transcultural adoptees anew. And, I learned the importance of seeing those voices in (at least) two lights. I re-learned the deep significance of adoptees presenting themselves and their personal experiences, but I was also reminded of the research skills, advanced training and academic finesse of adoptees building careers as academics specializing in the analysis of transnational adoption. Their work is exciting, and I am so glad I will be here to see how the research develops."