DEAR READER

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an unfinished identity project
by leonie simmons thomas

Two and half years ago I wrote a paper entitled, ‘Redefining a version of family and nationality’ (Simmons Thomas 1999). Within it I wrote about being an Australian person with a Vietnamese heritage. I wrote about my experiences surrounding having been adopted as a young baby from Saigon into an Australian Caucasian family. I also wrote about creating my own sense of nationality and family. Here is one paragraph from this earlier paper:

“I am often told that it is a shame that I do not know my ‘real’ family, as if my adoption is a pretend situation for when my real life comes along. It is true that my mother did not give birth to me, but both my parents have given me life, as well as a sense of family that I have inherited which does not deserve to be undermined. For me, family is about connection which comes out of shared experiences, temper tantrums, laughter and growth and if blood is thicker than water, then…love is stronger than genetics.”(p.58)

Looking back, I notice that my earlier writings imply and describe an identity project as an endeavour completed, or resolved. I get a sense of a story of identity found and discovered. I recall one particular phrase being, ‘I now celebrate the peace that I have made with my identity…’ Two and a half years later, I have some reservations about this statement. I don’t believe my relationship with my identity has ever been, or currently is completed or ‘at peace’.

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In this paper, I do not wish to write about resolving or finding my identity. I want instead to convey some of the stories involved in constantly creating and negotiating an identity as a woman with Vietnamese heritage living in a White dominant culture. I wish to do this, not because of its personal value (although it does have personal value) but because I believe that my experience of culture and race is significantly different than that of most people. It is my hope that such a perspective may shed different light on questions of identity and culture which could be relevant to the field of therapy and community work.

Perhaps the easiest way to convey my perspectives on issues of culture and racial identity, is by interviewing myself – strange as this may appear at first:

PART ONE: A Conversation about cultural identity

So Leonie, I was wondering if you could tell me what the notion of culture means to you?

I guess I would have to say that culture, in my life, has been a present and shaping notion.

Maybe you could begin by saying a few things about what culture means for you.

I think culture represents the environment that a person is surrounded by. Culture encompasses an embodiment of the social conventions; the acceptable and unacceptable codes of behaviour, the predominant language, dress, foods, the categorisations, the formal institutions and the broad collective meaning making of a society at a particular time and place. Individuals are surrounded by and immersed in these aspects of the particular community/ies in which they live. Individuals also having a specific cultural history, race and heritage all of which are shaped by the significant people in their lives - for example friends and family. All these influence the stories through which we understand and live our lives.

Okay, so for you, cultural identity is influenced by the community, and/or communities that a person is ‘surrounded by’, and ‘immersed in’, together with a person’s specific circumstances like, race and heritage. Is this kind of what you are saying?

Yeh, (laughing…. ) for me anyway. It’s a bit of many things.
I was wondering if you would like to talk about how issues of culture have influenced the way you think about yourself?

Gee, that’s a big question.

Is that all right? Would you prefer a smaller one?

No, no that’s fine. Ummm. I guess I would have to say that culture has influenced me in various ways, and still does, at different times. Having been born in Vietnam and then raised in Australia in a white family, I have, for almost all my life, lived immersed within dominant white Australian culture. Due to this upbringing, I can identify with this majority culture. I have an idea of what is predominantly acceptable and unacceptable. My first (and only) language is English and I can identify with the experiences and meaning making of a section of white Australia. My heritage and my physicality, determined by the Asian culture I was born into but not raised in, has meant that I have quite specific experiences of white Australian culture but… I’m sorry, I’ve forgotten your question…

That’s all right, I guess I am thinking that you have had a fairly unique situation.

Yeh, I guess.

I am curious as to what this unique cultural situation has had you believing about yourself?

I think there have been, and may always be times when the dominant culture conveys to me that I am ‘other’ or ‘less than’. In mainstream Australian culture I understand that by not being white Australian, one is not authentically Australian. I am constantly perplexed with how it has been that some (white) Australians have become the ‘border police’ while others are the objects of their scrutiny. Quite apart from the effects this has had on my life, which have been significant, this is particularly confusing to me in relation to the Indigenous peoples of this land. How could it have possibly come to be that only White Australians are authentic Australians, when this land was/is traditionally black land?

Anyway, what is clear to me is that in the eyes of mainstream Australia, I am ‘other’ or ‘less than’. At the same time, as I have grown up in a white household and community, I have no sense of full membership to a marginalised or ‘minority’ cultural community. And so, issues of culture would have me thinking that I don’t ‘measure up’ to either having an ‘Australian’ identity or a ‘Vietnamese’ identity. That I have no place of ‘sameness’. By not gaining membership to being ‘the same as’ any cultural group, there have been times when I have felt inferior.

So would you say that there has been a voice of inferiority in regards to your relationship with culture?

Yes, definitely.

What does Inferiority have you doing or saying, or not doing or not saying?

Sometimes it has me being quiet in a social situation. Upon being introduced to someone for the first time, I may feel a bit guarded… I wonder how that person will see me. I wonder if they are going to ask me where I am from, and sometimes this makes me feel tense and disheartened.

So would you say that inferiority is present in relations with other people?

Yes. Yeh I guess that is when it is there. I understand that sometimes people are interested in my background and history. Maybe they are being what they consider to be polite, and I understand that my situation, in comparison to most other people, can become a novelty. And then, because people may not have come across adoption before, and they wish to know more about my experience …it’s all right, but sometimes a person’s interest, excitement, or even admiration is communicated - and then I just feel a bit condescended to, or at worst I feel like a rat in a laboratory! It’s kind of hard to explain…
Would you like to speak more about these particular interactions and conversations?

It is not really what other people say and do specifically. Interactions with other people are tempered with a particular experience. I am accustomed to anticipate, at any moment in an interaction, an enquiry of my cultural identity. This is neither good nor bad, it is just a given. So I wait and then, if applicable, I hopefully have something to quickly say to diffuse an unnerving focus on my life – a focus which can sometimes seem like a spotlight on my ‘otherness’. Sometimes people are just interested, and sometimes they knew someone from China, sometimes they have an Asian exchange student living with them, sometimes they are learning Japanese at school….most of which has no bearing or similarity to my own life circumstance.

Sometimes the only commonality between what people say and my experience is difference, and in this way people’s questions inadvertently contribute primarily to pointing out my otherness. This can evoke many images for me. Because of my upbringing within mainstream white Australia, I have access to the disparaging or condescending ways I have known people of Asian heritage to be referred to. I am reminded of just how big those ASIANS OUT signs can look. I recall the patronising tones used in reference to Japanese tourists, the apparently ‘amusing’ feature of Asian language. Within and between all this is the history of the disapproval of Asian people in Australia. But those who are asking their questions would be unlikely to be aware of all of this.

I guess I have become pretty curious about people’s curiosity. Why does one person wish to know of the heritage or ancestry of another? What informs their curiosity? What assumptions are being made about the person being expected to answer the questions? What is taken-for-granted about the person asking the questions? How can we respond to a person, and/or a group, with whom we may be fascinated or whom we may find intriguing, without imposing a communication that is one way – where one person is positioned as a resource, without a reasonable way of declining to answer the questions?

Wow, you said a lot in there! I’d like to come back to your comments about inferiority if that’s okay… you said that sometimes inferiority has you feeling small and you might be quiet or nervous when meeting people for the first time. Is the presence of inferiority always there in social situations and new situations? Or is it present only some of the time?

I don’t think it is there all of the time. I guess because of my cultural circumstances, I have had the opportunity to consider a lot about culture and difference and similarities. My lived experience has led me to be reflective about what, in this particular time, being an Asian-born adoptive person living in Australia means. So because of this, I think for the most part anyway, I have a fairly strong sense of the variety of issues that come up in conversations. The awareness of the different situations that I may find myself in gives me some preparation. I think that because of inferiority, I have stumbled across ways to relate with people. I guess I have found ways that help me connect with people, that assist me to navigate around the assumptions, under the various expressions of curiosity and between the unintended insults. Without these maneuvers I think the assumptions, curiosities and unintended impositions could have me distancing from others.

Okay. Well, you have said a few things that stand out for me. I am interested to hear more about the skills and maneuvers that you have developed and how you have developed them, but I’d also like to know more about how ‘thinking about culture, differences and similarities’ effects your sense of yourself. Which of these would you like to talk about? If either!

Maybe the effects of thinking about culture and differences and similarities.

What is it about this that stands out for you?

I think I feel fortunate in some ways. My experience of culture has not been straight-forward, and this means that it has not easily gone unquestioned. I can’t be positioned into either a white Australian cultural category or a Vietnamese cultural category. Although this ‘non-fit’ has been problematic in some ways, it has also led me to question the extent to which any person completely fits within a single category of race and culture. This questioning, I think, has led me in interesting directions.
At the same time, I don’t mean to diminish the real effects of living in a world which places emphasis on distinct racial categories. At times, I have felt, and do feel, required to justify and explain my background and lived experience when maybe I do not feel that I want to. When assumptions are made about the country I am a citizen of, the family that I have, or even the food that I am meant to like, it can complicate my life. These assumptions are not value free. Entangled with these taken-for-granted ideas is the dominant culture’s evaluation of Asian people living in Australia, and this evaluation has quite a long history.

Would you be interested in speaking about some of the ways these assumptions bring complications to your life?

Yes o.k. There are instances where I can be with predominantly white Australians and feel a common ground. In those times my cultural self is centred in the country that I live in, my home. And yet if a conversation with the same people turns to discuss racism, or marginalised communities, then the position in which I stand can suddenly shift to a place that centres my lived experience as an Asian person in white dominated Australia.

These situations can be profoundly complex and I have tried to find a language to describe them. The best phrase I have come up with so far is that it has to do with ‘the invisibility and complexities of affiliation’. In some incidences there is a nuance in the way that dialogue is delivered which positions the speaker and the listener as being on ‘one side’ and positions a third party as other. For instance, there may be a reference to people from Asia or a dialogue that goes something like ‘yeah, and then the car ran into me and this Asian guy got out, and…..’. In these circumstances, I can flinch. When there is an utterance of a label or a category which I can identify with, but where my affiliation or identification is either overlooked or assumed, I can often find it extremely difficult to find a place to stand and to speak from. Some of this is the outcome of racism and discrimination, but some of it is also about the complexities of affiliation. For example I have often experienced a conversation where a spoken or implied assumption has contained a positive or esteemed connotation. In these moments I am confused, I simultaneously experience a sense of appreciation for the person’s intention, as well as frustration towards the silencing corner that an assumption can position me into.

These situations I have referred to are about how I, and others locate my affiliation with others and the process by which this takes place in conversations.

I am certainly not saying that around me people should not refer to their experiences with people from Asian communities! And I’m not saying that in reference to Vietnam or Asia I automatically feel centred (although I would also never imply that I am neutral or objective on topics such as the Vietnam War or adoption or immigration). What I am trying to say is that I reckon I have a particular experience of these conversations that others do not. My guess is that these inter-relational experiences has not got exclusive relevance to issues of cultural identity. Because of this I hope that perhaps over time I and others will find a language for this. Perhaps then fewer assumptions will be made about complex affiliations.

When I am in the company of people of Asian heritage and community, I have another experience of sameness and commonality, but in language and daily cultural experience my standpoint is different once again. It is not as if I ever experience one cultural position and then another, rather, my life consists of a constant shifting or juggling of cultural identity.

This shifting or juggling of cultural identity, is this a positive or a negative development?

You know, I think it has been mainly a positive development.

Why do you think it has been a positive development?

I think I have had to find a way around rules and regulations, or boundaries of a singular and predetermined cultural norm. I have had an absence of a fixed sense of nationality. I think my view point has given me an opportunity to consider self and others in a particular light.
Is this a helpful or unhelpful contribution to your life?

More than helpful. I do not have a group whom I can refer to as ‘my people’. There are not people in my life with whom I share the same heritage and the same experience of culture. And, actually, I believe this has inspired in me an appreciation and respect for communities of people who do share a common heritage. To share a bond with other people through ancestry, to have timeless links to cultural rituals and meanings, and to be reminded of these by the very pulsation of the blood in your veins, must be powerfully symbolic. The actions of communities whom uphold, sometimes in spite of great odds, the continuance of a rich affiliation of history and heritage, seems to me both powerful and healing, and my life is richer for fully appreciating the significance of these connections.

While powerfully valuing how others relate to culture and common heritage, I have come to see how the cultural and relational bonds in my history are constantly determined by a combination of similarities and differences. While this is different than the ways most people go about creating their identity – it is not less than, and the relationships are not less than. The meanings that I have developed surrounding my connection with others have not been characterised by genetic compatibility or race commonality. In my life, the connections and relationships that make me who I am are sustained by and are grounded in history and shared experience. I treasure these relationships themselves and I also treasure what they mean.

Are there other ways in which your unusual position in relation to culture and your questioning of cultural identity has been helpful to you?

Well yes. Although, I do not have a known genetic lineage to discover and make meaning of, I don’t believe that the absence of a known ancestral story should hinder the exploration of my cultural history. In thinking about this for a brief time, there are many threads which contribute to understanding my location in place and time. My cultural story encompasses the passion and the courage of Rena Briand the woman whom took a significant part in arranging for Vietnamese orphans to come to Australia, it involves the atrocities of the Vietnam War, and the politics of culture. There is much which shapes my cultural story and homeland histories, contributory events include: the European invasion and colonisation of Aboriginal land, the White Australia policy, the experiences of the contributions to Australian society by the people whom traveled from the Orient, Australian foreign policy and the histories of immigration – former and current. My cultural story also includes the shaping plots of the lives of my mum, my dad and each of my brothers. The stories that loved ones of mine will inherit, will also include snippets of cultural diversity, and the complexities and joys of growing up in a working class Caucasian family and its legacy of a constant dissatisfaction with the status quo.

I have come to learn that there is not one way to explore and connect with cultural history and cultural stories. There are many.

In fact, one of the significant realms which has shaped my experience of culture has been through travel. The times when I have had the privilege to experience travel outside of Australia have brought many reflections as to how I attended to my cultural identity on these trips and how people I met regarded me. I am especially thinking of the times I have been a traveller in Asian countries, such as Nepal, Thailand and Singapore, and also the experiences I had in Europe when in the company of travellers from different parts of the world (including Australia). I have loved these experiences of travel. These explorations of culture, cultural history and where my own stories fit with those of others is a process that I cherish.

Leonie, in this conversation so far you have spoken about some of the effects of culture and race in your life. Some of those have included talking about the effects of isolation and exclusion from others. But you’ve also spoken about how the shifting or juggling of cultural identity has brought unique understandings. You’ve spoken about what you know of connections with people based upon shared history and experience, and about how there are many ways of exploring cultural histories. Would these reflections fit with you?

Yeh, … I like how that sounds. …and yes, that fits with me.
I am curious to know if there is anybody in your life who would not be surprised to hear you speaking about these knowledges?

I think my long time friend Annie would not be surprised. Annie and I met when we were in a dance class together. Annie has been a sister in my life. She has been extremely supportive and caring towards me and both of us have witnessed so many changes and developments in one another’s lives. Annie would know that our connection has been so significant to me and how she is an important member of my family.

What would Annie notice you doing that would convey to her how she is an important member of your family?

Annie has always been welcomed into my family. My parents are very embracing of honourary members to the family, and they regard people whom they are friends with and whom they care about in the same way as they embrace members of their family whom they may be genetically related to. They are very inclusive and warm in their treatment of other people. And with Annie it is not as if she has been ‘like’ a sister. It is not as if she comes ‘close’ to fitting a mould of sisterhood. She is my sister and I have learnt about sisterhood from our connection.

Can you tell me more about this sisterhood that you share?

Umm, it’s difficult to say.

I have three brothers and an intimate knowledge of ‘brotherhood’ and brother-sister relations. This is something that I value very highly, including all of the un-idealistic and surprising forms that brother-sister relationships can take.

And at the same time, all of my relationships with women in my life are extremely important and special. Maybe this is because I did not have a sister-sister relationship as a young girl, maybe this was a type of relationship that I was curious about. As a young girl, I often said how I wanted a sister. My sisterhood with Annie, probably more than anything else, has shown me that things are not always as they seem. It has shown me that sometimes although it may look like you may have missed out on something – maybe you actually haven’t. This is quite a gift.

I was wondering if you could make a guess as to how your contribution of sisterhood has been influential in Annie’s life?

I’m not altogether sure, but I think that it’s maybe opened some possibilities for her too. I have no doubt that our connection is significant to Annie. I think that she may have some relationships in her life that are unconventional and uniquely connected and that maybe our sisterhood has been one of the things that has made her more open to the possibilities of different types of relationships. I hope that it has….

Leonie, I’m just curious about how although you did not have a sister in your family, you were able to create a relationship of sisterhood. Could you make some guesses as to the places or the people which provided you with an understanding of the sisterhood you have spoken of?

I’m not sure about that, but I like the question. I’ll have to think about it for a while. However, these questions that you are asking me are reminding me of a range of different characters that have made significant impressions on my life in many ways.

For instance, I remember my maternal nanna, who would often speak of her ‘mixed bean’ cultural origins. She would proudly tell of her ancestral influences being from German, Ireland and Wales. I feel appreciative of nanna offering her stories to me as an example of cultural ambiguity and complexity.

I also recall a conversation that I once had with a person in a shop who told me about a friend of his who had been adopted from Vietnam and had been brought to Australia. He told me about how this
young man had died of cancer, due to Agent Orange, and how heart breaking it had been for his friend’s family. I remember how this story moved me at the time, and has stayed with me to this day.

And I am reminded of the experience I had in meeting a young woman I was introduced to who had also been adopted from Vietnam and lived in Australia, and how our introduction resulted in an uneasy feel in the room. Looking back on this now, I have gained a new found appreciation for the respectfulness that we showed to one another by not forging an expected pact. I think in our carefulness we were demonstrating that we wished to define our own relationships and identities and that we would do this in our own time and place.

Perhaps most significantly though, these questions you are asking are leading me to think about a person that I may one day meet. I am wondering about what it will be like, if in my life I give birth to a child whom I will be genetically related to. I wonder about how my perception of relationships and family would influence this person’s life.

**What is that like to imagine?**

It’s interesting. The other day I was told that I have inward curved toenails and that this was probably something that I had genetically inherited. I found this information to be quite novel. I would think that to have commonalities based on biology could be a lovely aspect to a relationship. I reckon it could be quite humbling. My guess is that this could further contribute to enriching meaningful relationships experienced between members of a family.

**How do you hope your life’s experiences will affect a child whom you parent?**

Well I hope that if one day I do happen to have a child in my life with whom I was biologically related that together we could uncover an appreciation of the special significance of a shared genetic bond, and of the interesting nuances that this can bring.

I would also hope that what might be equally as important for a child I parent would be the awareness that any abilities I might demonstrate to show care for them and to demonstrate love of them, would be made entirely possible because of the imperfect, fluid and incomparable experiences of family I have been part of. These experiences have supported me to move beyond defined and pre-determined versions of relationship and enabled so many possibilities of beautiful connections with others. I believe this could be a nice gift to offer a child.

**Leonie, why has it been important to you to write about cultural identity?**

Basically because these issues of culture have such a prevalent focus in my life. I must admit that I have had some fear around addressing this issue of culture. At times I’ve thought that by giving voice to my experiences of being born a Vietnamese person with an Australian homeland, that maybe I would contribute to describing myself as in some way wounded by having been adopted and raised in a different country than the one I was born in. I have also feared that I would have to defend my self and my family against the hegemony of the discourse of ‘genetically connected family’. And I have worried that if I spoke about the incidences of racism directed towards me, or the complexity of cultural identity, that this would be taken as evidence to support the notion that I should not have been brought to live in Australia - that my life is a mistake.

**So how is it that this fear has not silenced you, has not prevented you from speaking and writing?**

I think because I have been helped to realise that the discrepancy between whom I experience my self to be and who I am according to predominant cultural and societal discourses, is not of my doing. There is something terribly disturbing about thinking that acts of racism and intolerance enacted towards me are my fault. It is also disturbing when my definition of family does not fit with mainstream definitions of family – that somehow this can make my relationships with those I love automatically problematised. Realising that my experience of these things is not of my doing has enabled me to speak.
But probably the greatest support to resisting silence is the realisation that speaking of cultural identity, of racism, of bigotry, of dominant definitions of family, has less to do with ‘finding myself’ and ‘searching for a place to belong’ - and more to do with an attempt to seek out the hindrances and limitations to our current ideas of identity and culture. Locating this writing and my thinking in this broader context, understanding that what I am trying to do is to make more apparent the intricate threads which entangle our understandings of culture, makes it possible for me to speak and to write. I hope that this speaking and my writing is not just for and about me, but may open possibilities and ideas about us all.

PART TWO: Talking about cultural identity in a therapeutic context

In my experience there have been incidences where it has been okay and where it has not been okay for a health worker to instigate a conversation involving my cultural identity. I have had conversations whereby I have felt compelled to assure a health worker that I was ‘perfectly fine’ – that my living experience was so very unproblematic that it was virtually a non-issue. I have also had the experience whereby it has been a relief to have a person acknowledge my cultural dissimilarity to the visible majority, and to ‘check-in’ with where I am at.

I do not believe that there are any full proof rules. Ethical practice regarding discussions of culture in a therapeutic context can only arise out of questioning, dialogue and transparency. Many times in training and/or work settings I have found myself within moments of breath-stealing tension. From these experiences I have tried to develop a range of questions that I have found helpful to consider in relation to talking about cultural identity in a therapeutic context:

• Whose responsibility is it to bring to the conversation the topic of a person’s cultural positioning?
• What would be the intentions surrounding the purposes of initiating a conversation or enquiry about culture?
• In a therapeutic context, what are some possible effects of making reference to a person’s cultural identity based on:
  o A person’s physicality
  o The dominant culture of a person’s residing homeland
  o A person’s country of birth or that of their significant family and friends
• Who is responsible for the therapist/counsellor to be informed about various cultural issues that may be helpful and relevant in a therapeutic conversations?
• What different ways could a therapist/counsellor communicate their own cultural position? Where would this be helpful? In what scenarios would this be unhelpful?
• What phrases or expressions could a therapist/counsellor use in regards to initiating a conversation about the effects of culture that would indicate that they were not making assumptions about the person’s cultural identity?

In a society that upholds and perpetuates distinct categories of culture and outlines classifications of groups of people according to race and homeland, assumptions about our selves and other people in regards to nationality and culture are readily available. Here are some further questions that I have found helpful to consider:

• What questions can we ask ourselves in response to the information we are given via media, educative mediums, dramatisations and personal histories, about people who have a homeland different from our own?
• What ways can we sustain vigilance in noticing inconsistencies and contradictions to our generalised notions of cultural identities of self and others?
• Within therapeutic practice, in language and ritual, how can we best convey to those who visit our services a commitment to cultural diversity? What does cultural diversity mean?
• What new understandings could arise if people were encouraged to address the diversity of cultural stories in their lives?

In regards to initiating or facilitating conversations involving cultural identity, these considerations would significantly depend upon the cultural identities of the person seeking consultation and that of the
therapist/counsellor, along with other considerations such as positions of class, gender and age. Even when the counsellor and person seeking consultation appear to be of a similar cultural background, however, I would urge a note of caution. It is my belief that it is the responsibility of the counsellor to acknowledge that a similarity of one person’s cultural and racial identity with another person’s, is not all inclusive. And that furthermore, it is important that the person who has sought consultation, and whose life stories are being privileged, must be the person whom determines the sameness or difference to other people’s circumstances – or/and the significance of a comparison to begin with.

PART THREE: Talking about adoption – moving beyond totalising descriptions

In this final section I would like to consider a couple of themes in relation to adoption. As a person who has been adopted, my experiences have led me to notice that an adoptive status can generate either a ‘less than’ evaluation, or an ‘extra-ordinary’ judgement. There can be a highly esteemed perception of adoption, where the adoptive parent/s are seen as amazingly charitable people and the adopted person as ‘evolved’ and worthy of admiration. There can also be a perception of adoption where the adopted person is pathologised based upon their adoptive status, and the parents whom have adopted, and their decisions to adopt are either pitied are vilified. In my experience, a family is never that clearly and simplistically defined. I believe that these totalising evaluations of people, and of their lives, which are largely based upon adoptive status are unhelpful.

These totalising descriptions risk not giving any credence to the knowledges and learnings which people have and generate about how to make family, how to approach conflict and how to live in a sometimes disapproving and unsupportive society. They can undermine both the struggles and the achievements of families in which one or more members is not genetically related.

These totalising descriptions also ignore the fact that there is a multitude of versions of adoption. The effects that the presence of adoption may have in a family is determined by the country, or in some cases the state in which the family resides, the class and social standing of the family, the gender of the parents, and issues such as religion or poverty that may be relevant to a family’s story.

As well as weaving my way through these totalising descriptions, I have also understandably been queried about my thoughts of my biological birth parents. I believe that if I had the opportunity to meet my birth parents, it could be a very lovely meeting. I would probably discover physical qualities in common with them, I may even find that both or one of my parents tended to enjoy similar activities and maybe there would be things that they felt they were good at that I too feel that I am good at. They may have stories to tell that would be very significant for me to hear.

For me though, not having access to this information does not make who I am deficit in any way. If information about my family of birth became accessible, or if a meeting was ever possible, this could be an extremely meaningful and profound experience. It could also be nothing like that. A satisfactory sense of self is not dependent on my knowing more about my birth family.

I understand that this is not true for all other people whom have been adopted. Everyone has a different story. As is the case for people whom have been born into and remained with their birth parents, it is the same for families whom are connected through adoption - each family tells a different story about the effects and developments of their life situation. Some stories tell of knowing enriching and supportive experiences of family, some are testaments of experiencing sad and disconnecting versions of family – and some stories have a bit of both.

Understanding more about how societal conventions and discourses dictate the definition of a ‘proper’, ‘accepted’ and ‘real’ family has created space for me to embrace with my own definitions. Incorporated within a definition of real family, (customarily a heterosexual couple, generally married, with genetically compatible offspring), are the criteria for what acts and omissions are accepted and not accepted. I have come to see how the notion of blood ties in family can act to build beautiful connections, and it can also act to justify horrendous and damaging acts.

I have also come to learn how dominant definitions can be incongruent to the circumstances and lived experience of many existing familial relationships - sole parents, families of former relationships, gay
families, inter-racial families, sole person families, adoptive families, lesbian families and families of choice all defiantly struggle to create forums for validity and acknowledgement.

Understanding adoptive families experiences in this context enables the placement of individual experience into a broader social picture. Here I have tried to generate a number of questions that have assisted me to think more about ways of talking about adoption and family:

- What difference could it make if adoption was not simplistically understood as a broad umbrella notion, and instead specifics of experience were sought?

- How different would it be if the hindrances and limitations of adoption were contextualised within the social and political climate, rather than the intra-psychic developmental needs of a child adopted?

- If dominant discourses surrounding the definition of family were deconstructed what possibilities would this open up for those of us whose families are ‘non-nuclear’?

- In a community that esteems blood tie relationships, what conversations could be made possible about the achievements of creating non-blood related family connections?

- What possibilities could be created for people to deconstruct what is often a hierarchical structuring of their genetically related relationships in relation to their non-genetic related relationships?

- As genetically related connections are generally assumed and taken-for-granted, what conversations would be made possible for people to acknowledge and honour the commonalities inherited from their biological ancestors?

A Final Word

The issues of cultural identity and family relationship are of interest to me for many reasons. Throughout the society that I am immersed in, persistent notions of cultural categorisations and the effects of these have acted as a limitation and a liberation to my life. I am assured that I am not alone in being affected by such constructs. I know that there are many people committed and determined to think, or sing, or work, or write, or speak out to challenge the oppressive and limiting implications of particular ideas about culture and family.

It is important for me to state that the challenging and complex effects of cultural identity in my life, as well as the impact of racism in my experiences, have not meant that I have had to live under inhumane conditions, nor has my life been, and is not in danger or threatened in any way (since the very early years of my life at least). This is however, not the case for far too many people living on this earth today.

As I sit writing tonight, in November 2001, there is much to be in anguish over. The consequences of cultural and racial divisive tactics, on a linguistic, political and violent level, are devastating. The destructive effects of the issues of race and culture are hardly new, nor are actions towards equity and social justice insubstantial.

It seems important to hold onto hope and to seek out ways to act for change. For me, at this time it is in my attempts to make a contribution in this realm of understanding culture and family. The field of therapy and community work holds intentions and hopes for the healing of relationships and lives, surely there is a part for those of us in this field to play in generating acts of resistance to human suffering and actions towards global restoration.
Acknowledgements

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Reference:

Simmons Thomas, L. 1999:
Redefining a version of family and nationality in Dulwich Centre Publications (ed) Narrative Therapy and Community Work: A Conference Collection. Dulwich Centre Publications

ENDNOTES

1 At this moment of time, I would not describe my relationship with my identity as peaceful. This is not to imply that I am dissatisfied with my identities, or that there is not the presence of solid footing with the ideas of who I am. This lack of peace is not a reflection on me, nor is it due to having been born with a Vietnamese heritage. Rather, I believe it is due to the pervasive mechanisms of the dominant culture, which act to remind me that I am ‘other’. This lack of peace, and indeed so much of the anguish, embarrassment and awkwardness that I have known at times, I now recognise as due to having been born with a Vietnamese heritage and residing in a White dominant culture. I am curious as to what stage racial discrimination and ethno-centricism managed to convince me that if I was just to have left the room, or left the country, or had white skin, that then there would be no cause to cringe, no insults, no loaded assumptions, no practices of cultural exclusivity. I wonder how the shame became mine to swallow? I now honour the lack of peace I have in relation to my cultural identity. For if I was to feel at peace I sense that this would mean that I would be condoning practices I do not wish to condone.

2 The broader historical context of colonisation and European migration to this country seems to be currently overlooked or dismissed in terms of decision-making and conversations about those people from Asian and Middle Eastern countries who are seeking to take up residence in Australia.

3 There are specific stories about culture and discrimination that I could tell here but such revelations can be found in many places. I feel that emphasis upon these ‘tales’ from my history would only contribute further to the depiction of the ‘trials and tribulations of inter-racial adoptees’, and that is not the story I wish to tell here.

4 To a certain extent, the ways in which we understand our lives are also shaped by social institutions and conventions that existed before we are born. This is certainly true for my life in regards to my cultural identity. The newspaper clippings from the 1970s that I have read tell of the highly contentious and almost experimental nature of children being adopted by a family living in a country different from the one the child was born in. Twenty something years on, I now read about the experiences and outcomes of the children of this ‘social experiment’. It is an unusual feeling.

5 I wish to acknowledge the conversations I have experienced with individuals whom live in Australia and whom have journeyed from their country of birth. It seems that there is a different way of speaking, of asking questions and sharing stories, when people themselves have experiences of immigration and stories of what it is like to live in Australia as a person having been born in another country.