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The Healing Promise of Adoptions:

Revisiting a Foundational American Myth through *News of the World*[1]

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Abstract

The 2020 release of *News of the World*, adapted by Paul Greengrass, returns to the American cultural trope of white-Indian adoption to the big screen. These adoption narratives, in film and literature, offer the promise of healing, though the adoption more often benefits the white community and adoptive parents over the Indian community and child. While these texts may acknowledge the decline of a particular Indian tribe, they generally celebrate how the individuals and the community may be stronger by remembering what has been lost, through the new family connections. This essay examines this recent film in the context of this Hollywood and literary tradition – looking particularly at the novels *The Bean Trees* (1988) and *Pigs in Heaven* (1993) by Barbara Kingsolver and *Indian Killer* (1996) and *Flight* (2007) by Sherman Alexie.

Keywords: adoption, American Indian, trauma, film, contemporary literature

Evlat Edinmenin İyileştirici Yanı: *News of the World* Filmi Üzerinden Temel Bir Amerikan Mitinin Ürünü Olan Evlat Edinme Anlatılarına Bir Yeniden Ziyaret

Öz

Paul Greengrass'ın 2020 uyarlaması *News of the World* bir Amerikan kültürel motifi olan beyaz-Kızılderili evlat edinme hikayesini dev ekrana taşır. Bu evlat edinme anlatıları, evlat edinme her ne kadar evlat edinilen çocuk ve Kızılderili toplumundan çok evlat edinen ebeveynlere ve beyaz topluma yarasa da, iyileşme vadeder. Eserler belirli bir yerli kabilenin çöküşünü bildirebildiği gibi, genellikle bireylerin ve toplumun kurulan yeni aile bağları vasıtasıyla kaybedileni hatırlayarak güçlenmesini kutlar. Bu makale yakın tarihte vizyona giren *News of the World* filmini, Barbara Kingsolver'ın *The Bean Trees* (1988) ve *Pigs in Heaven* (1993) ve Sherman Alexie'nin *Indian Killer* (1996) ve *Flight* (2007) romanlarına bakarak Hollywood ve edebiyat bağlamında inceleyecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: evlat edinme, Kızılderili, travma, film, çağdaş edebiyat

The publicity for the 2020 release of *News of the World* heralded it as Tom Hanks' first Western – America's beloved everyman in this mythic American landscape. However, Paul Greengrass's choice to adapt Paulette Giles's 2016 historical novel may have been less nostalgic. Several of his latest film projects have been about acts of global violence – *United 93* (2006), *Captain Phillips* (2013), and *July 22* (2018) – in between chapters of the *Bourne* franchise. Giles' novel gave Greengrass the opportunity to reteam with his *Captain Phillips*' star, in a film that allowed him to interrogate U.S. myths and history – in the particular context of the Trump era.

Most significantly *News of the World* revives the foundational American literary trope of American Indian-white settler adoptions. Caren Irr has observed that in literary historical projects adoptions "homologize family and the nation, arguing that a less biological approach to forming families and creating affiliation triggers a more

flexible vision of the nation" (386). *News of the World* dramatizes Captain Kidd (Tom Hanks)'s quest to return a German immigrant child to her family, after the slaughter of her Kiowa family, a tribe who not coincidentally had killed her birth family. Though technically a Western, there are no cowboys and no wide-open spaces in this film. The Indians who remain in Texas, the Kiowa, are meekly retreating to Indian Territory, leaving Cicada / Johanna (Helena Zengel) a ward of the federal government, in a former Confederate state.

The land that Kidd and the orphan Johanna travel literally reveals the unhealed rifts of Reconstruction-era Texas, which offers no place for a child who does not speak English, however white she may look. *News of the World* presents the particular vulnerability of children during periods of racial conflict. Specifically, *News of the World* follows the American fantasy of the white-Indian adoptions, a fantasy that Kristina Fagan describes as a "desire for a nation that combines and reconciles white and Native peoples" (251). But the question remains: Who does this recurring fantasy benefit – and what is the quality of this reconciliation of past conflicts? While *News of the World* revives the Hollywood trope of the white child adopted by an Indian tribe, the complementary issue of the fraught adoption of American Indian children has been evoked and interrogated by contemporary American novelists, both white and Native American.

This essay will argue that the cultural work of Greengrass's film *News of the World* brings renewed attention to the American fantasy of trans-racial adoption, as also played out in contemporary novels by Barbara Kingsolver and Sherman Alexie. While *News of the World*'s Johanna was literally orphaned, contemporary Indian "orphan" characters are as likely to be separated from their parents by harsh social and economic realities. While these orphans embody the collateral damage of racial conflicts, the individual texts differ as to whether the adoption's purpose is to heal the abandonment experienced by these child characters – or whether the child serves more to heal the traumas of their adoptive parents.

The history of the American continent has been one of violence, often between people of different ethnicities. Orphaned and abandoned children have been a consequence of these conflicts, with their hope of survival often resting with people linked to their losses. Together these texts complicate the hopes embedded in transracial adoption,

particularly involving American Indians, confronting the long-term effects of United States' policies toward indigenous Americans.

Building a Nation Through Adoption

This literary trope of white-Indian / Indian white adoption first evolved through the popularity of Indian captivity narratives. These mixed family structures provided a unique American feature to the Anglophone literary market. Yet as it moved into American fiction, authors used these adoptions as a trope for nation-building – uniting these peoples as actual American Indians were being driven West. The promises of transracial adoption appeared in one of America's first major novels: *Hope Leslie, Or, Early Times in the Massachusetts* (1827) was written by Catharine Maria Sedgwick, about the same time that James Fenimore Cooper established the model of the "good Indian" in *Last of the Mohicans*.

Like Cooper, Sedgwick's novel returned to the settlement of the country, exploring (alternately celebrating and questioning) the founding values of the nation. Sedgwick re-imagines colonial settlement in ways distinct from her male counterparts, making it clear that the Indians learned brutality and betrayal from their English neighbors. Other issues Sedgwick weaves into the narrative are religious intolerance and the threat of financially independent of women. The adoptions bridge the colonial and Indian cultures, placing the values of these communities in conversation.

Central to the plot of *Hope Leslie* is the failed adoption of Magawisca and her brother Oneco by the Fletcher family, and the subsequent adoption of Hope's sister Faith by the Pequods. The governor had promised Magawisca's dying mother that he would see that her children were well taken care of. Unfortunately, his idea of keeping this promise is to give Magawisca and her brother to the Fletcher family as servants – so what began as adoption becomes indenture. When Mrs. Fletcher writes to her husband of her inability to train Magawisca as a domestic, she compares the girl to a deer and a bird, as "might you yoke a deer with an ox." Instead of appreciating Magawisca for herself, she "marvelled at the providence of God, in bestowing on this child of the forest, such rare gifts of mind" (32). She suggests the removal of the child before she becomes too attached to

her son Everell, fearing miscegenation. Carol Singley notes how race often presents a barrier in 19th century adoption narratives, with "the child portrayed as unworthy of adoption" (5), as Mrs. Fletcher argues to her husband.

However, the novel still presents the potential to bridge racial divides. When their chief father rescues his Magawisca and Oneco, he also abducts five-year-old Faith Leslie. Unlike the Fletchers, the Pequods fully accept and raise Faith as a daughter. As Mark C. Jerng explains, Native adoption traditions involved complete substitution for lost children – not "as if" – which is threatening to American practices: "Substitutablity means that borders between peoples dissolves" (21). Though raised as a full Pequod, Faith has been baptized (though as a Roman Catholic). So when the Fletchers attempt to "rescue" Faith, she escapes and returns to her Pequod family and her husband Oneco (an interracial yet consecrated marriage).[2] In *Hope Leslie*, Sedgwick portrays an adoption of a white child by Indians as more enduring and less constrained by race or history.

Yet despite the Fletchers' indifferent parenting, the adult Magawisca still suffers split loyalties between her white foster brother Everell Fletcher and her fragile Indian community. Magawisca's sacrifices for Everell Fletcher and Hope Leslie allows them to resist Massachusetts societal pressures, yet she receives little recompense for herself or her tribe. In Magawisca, Sedgwick creates a more complex version of the loyal Indian than found in Cooper. This conclusion dovetails with Singley's assessment that 19th century adoption narratives address "a collective need for improvement, assuages a social guilt of over inequality and shows that disparate elements of society can be assimilated without altering the fundamental composition of society itself" (8). Though Sedgwick's novel creates sympathetic Indian characters – Magawisca and Faith – she admits the limits of their assimilation within their white families. However, she presents Everell and Hope as better citizens for their integration of these disparate values through their interracial family connections, while their marriage will not dramatically alter society.

Healing through Adoption

As the late-twentieth century saw a resurgence in mainstream

interest in American Indians and American Indian culture, novels and films returned to the integration trope of adoption. Robert Berkhofer noted in late twentieth century "sympathetic" artists, authors and politicians consistently appropriated the figure of the Indian to reflect "disquietude with their own society" according to their own values, "rather than in terms of the outlook and desires of the people that they profess to know and depict" (103). Barbara Kingsolver's novels *The Bean Trees* (1988) and *Pigs in Heaven* (1993) appropriate the figure of the Cherokee orphan Turtle to enrich the multicultual community in which she is dropped. However, the Indian child lacks the complexity or the rich backstory of Magawisca.

Despite the critical, classroom, and commercial success of *The Bean Trees*, the novel did come under some attack for Kingsolver's unproblematized portrayal of Taylor's adoption of an American Indian child. As Fagan points out, though the character and novel are not racist, they are not "race-aware" (255). Kingsolver responded to these concerns through her sequel *Pigs in Heaven*, in which Taylor's appropriateness and legal standing as Turtle's mother is challenged by a female Cherokee attorney, Annawake Fourkiller.[3] The celebration of a cross-cultural community that marks *The Bean Trees* is questioned as potential ethnic destruction in *Pigs in Heaven.*

In Kingsolver's first novel *The Bean Trees*, Taylor Greer (nee Marietta) leaves her childhood home and heads west, encountering obstacles and Indians as part of her journey to New Mexico, where she learns to become part of a diverse community – a journey not dissimilar to that urged by Horace Greeley to 19th century men: "Go west, young man, and grow up with the country." As a sign of her desire to be reinvented by her journey, to emancipate herself from her previous history, she renames herself based on where her car runs out of gas: Taylorville rechristens her "Taylor," as she sheds the more feminine "Marietta."

Likewise, Taylor's adoption of a child is based not on emotional connections or desires but on the automotive and chance. When her car breaks down at Cherokee roadside stop, she looks for ties to her Indian "heritage" (supposedly one eighth). However, a Cherokee claims her. A young woman places her swaddled niece in Taylor's car: "This baby's got no papers. There isn't nobody knows it's alive or cares... This baby was born in a Plymouth" (24). With no one in sight at that

late hour, Taylor drives off with the mute child. Because of the child's past abandonments and abuse, she clings to Taylor – Taylor christens her "Turtle" and drives on, not even considers turning over to proper authorities, or what "proper" might be.

The novel's main thrust is as a distaff Western narrative for the twentieth-century, with an American Indian encounter an element of this fantasy. Taylor has managed to become a mother within an all-female community, without falling into marriage, sex or commitment to an adult, male or female – the mirror-image of Bret Harte's "The Luck of Roaring Camp." Discussing the novel's incorporation of feminine values, Catherine Himmelwright argues that *The Bean Trees* deliberately combines Western mythology with the Native American myths of Star Woman, who fell from her father's sky garden, and Turtle, who rescued Star Woman and on whose back vegetation sprang that became the Earth – a white appropriation of an Indian creation myth, that makes Turtle the rescuer.

However, Himmelwright glides over the fact that in *The Bean Trees*, Taylor has merely *acquired* a child, rather than become a mother: "The *acquisition* of the child is pivotal in Kingsolver's novel, for at this point Kingsolver breaks from the archetypal male construction. … no longer mirrors that of the masculine" (italics mine, 127). However, this plotline occurs regularly in the Western genre, where the male protagonist *acquires* an orphan child, negotiating an unconventional parental relationship (as occurs in *News of the World*). Taylor's adoption of Turtle does not lead her to adopt more feminine values but rather justifies gathering a homosocial community of women that allows Taylor to remain independent and undefined – which could be construed as a masculine pattern of behavior.

In many ways, *Pigs in Heaven* serves as Kingsolver's attempt to correct the racial oversights of *The Bean Trees*. Instead of Taylor's first-person narrative, this novel moves to third-person, following the journeys of Taylor, her mother Alice, and Cherokees Cash Stillwater and Annawake Fourkiller – quests that all intersect in Turtle. Disappointingly, early in this novel Taylor abandons the rich community that she formed in *The Bean Trees* – which had expanded to life in an artist's commune and her live-in boyfriend Jax. When Annawake Fourkiller challenges Turtle's adoption on behalf of the Cherokee Nation, Taylor becomes an outlaw, insisting on seeing the

situation as an individual crisis. As Taylor unilaterally rejects the Cherokee claim to Turtle, she likewise voids the claims of Jax and her community, to Turtle – claims based on their active love – by fleeing with Turtle without consulting them.

Not only does Annawake Fourkiller see through Taylor's staged adoption, but she also invokes the Indian Child Welfare Act, which forbids the adoption of a Cherokee child without the permission of the tribe. Annawake feels personally compelled to intervene in Turtle's adoption, because of the transracial adoption of Annawake's brother. She blames his criminal history on the identity crisis he experienced as a teenager, being neither white like his "parents" nor understanding his Cherokee heritage. As Margaret Homans notes: "Transracially adopted children ... need to be equipped for a lifetime of being interpellated – often in racist ways – as belonging to the race of their birth parents" ("Origin" 62). Annawake does not believe that Taylor can equip Turtle for this interpellation, a suspicion confirmed by Taylor's lack of interest in Cherokee culture.

However, while Annawake argues passionately for the importance of Cherokee culture to Turtle, *Pigs in Heaven* highlights the cracks in its authenticity, despite the tight-knit community of Heaven, Oklahoma. The Cherokee civic buildings of Heaven are in disrepair. Turtle's original "Cherokee" name is revealed to be "Lacey Stillwater," after the TV show *Cagney & Lacey*.[4] Though Cash Stillwater is Turtle's link to the tribe, Callahan notes that Kingsolver portrays him as "alienated from his culture," producing beadwork for a tourist shop (118). Through these details, Kingsolver calls into question the Cherokee culture that is left for Turtle to inherit. Of course, the novel acknowledges the reasons for the decline in cultural integrity, in particular the legacy of Indian boarding schools that disrupted family bonding and learning. As Annawake laments, "Family has always been our highest value, but that generation of kids never learned to be in a family" (227). Nonetheless instead of these realities justifying Turtle's removal from Cherokee culture (as in *The Bean Trees*), Annawake sees the fragility of Cherokee families as making the child's return even more crucial. Regardless, Kingsolver maintains sympathy for Taylor's rescue narrative.

Overall, the focus of this sequel is still more about how Turtle allows Cash and Annawake to heal, rather than serving the orphan

Turtle. While she does recognize her grandfather, Turtle never moves out of her role as a magical presence, never emerging as a real girl with needs of her own. In Fagan's terms, Turtle is the site of the union of white and native people, a union that "privileges the settlers' point of view" (252). Even this shoring up of the Cherokee community is according to a white perspective.

Ultimately, the Cherokee community of Heaven, Oklahoma compels Alice and Taylor Greer to recognize the dead end of their own family legacy of single mothers. This realization by Alice actually opens *Pigs in Heaven*: "Women on their own run in Alice's family" (3). At the close of the novel, Alice and Taylor both commit to men who are capable of being full partners. In Dickensian, deus ex machina fashion, Alice's prospective husband is Cash Stillwater, Turtle's birth grandfather, solving the problem of Turtle's adoption, while simultaneously rescuing Alice and Taylor from their rigid independence. If, as Donna Harraway posits, adoption provides release and relief from "genetic essentialism" (qtd. in Homans "Origins" 60), in these novels, adoption provides release from the genetic destiny for the adoptive Greers more than for the adopted.

In *Hope Leslie*, Magawisca similarly helps free the main characters from their society's constraints, while receiving little in return from her adoptive brother to save herself or her tribe. The only difference is that the tragedy of the Pequod is felt in the heroic character of Magawisca – while in Kingsolver's novels, the ongoing challenges facing the Cherokee are forgotten in the wedding celebration.[5] Yet despite the problematic nature of rescue-narratives, Irr urges scholars to not dismiss them, particularly when they are as popular as these two novels: "their efforts may not be limited entirely to the reproduction of racial hierarchy. Surely scholars should find out why rescue fantasies continue to thrive" (392).

Surviving History with No History

As Laguna Pueblo author Leslie Marmon Silko noted in her response to *The Bean Trees*, "Books were and still are weapon in the ongoing struggle for the Americas" (qtd. in Callahan 113). Silko and Spokane / Coeur d'Alene novelist Sherman Alexie both responded to Kingsolver's "weapon" with their own novels. In his adoption narratives,

Alexie keeps his focus on the trauma of Native adolescents and young adults who have lost their parents and history, rather than the needs of (white) adoptive families or communities. However, though *Indian Killer* (1996) and *Flight* (2007) feature male Indian characters who have been estranged from their family and their tribe, Alexie's attitudes toward trans-racial healing have evolved. While Alexie acknowledges in both works the potential violence unleashed by these young men's traumas, in *Flight* this rage is contained and tragedy avoided.

While Kingsolver presents Turtle as uniting two communities, solving all issues in fantastical close, Sherman Alexie keeps his focus on the loss of the orphan, regardless of the qualities of the adoptive family. Alexie's orphans are not only estranged from family, but estranged from all sense of history:

> Yes, I am Irish and Indian, which would be the coolest blend in the world if my parents were around to teach me how to be Irish and Indian. So they're not here and haven't been for years, so I am not really Irish or Indian. I'm a blank sky, a solar eclipse. (5)

These comments by Zits, the protagonist of *Flight*, points to the challenges of being estranged from all sense of history. Raised in a series of foster homes, Zits has had no one to teach him to be Irish American or American Indian, let alone a person.

A theme throughout Alexie's fiction is the fragility of contemporary Indian identity, particularly with the erosion of history and culture caused by America's melting pot and popular culture. And, of course, these homogenizing tendencies are amplified by the dissolution of parent-child bonds – which though not unique to American Indian families, is a particularly serious issue for a culture already under attack. *Indian Killer* likewise features a young man of Indian heritage – John Smith – who was raised with no knowledge of his history. Ungrounded, John like Zits gravitates toward violence to feel real.

Through its range of characters and subplots, Alexie's novel *Indian Killer* skewers the failure of Seattle's white citizens to correctly read Indians living within their community. Alexie focuses on acclaimed white "Indian experts," who believe that they can teach Indians to be Indians. Dr. Clarence Mather is a professor who teaches

"American Indian" literature, though none of the books on his reading list is actually written by Indians. One of the listed authors is Jack Wilson, a local mystery writer. Wilson's Aristotle Little Hawk is a detective who looks like a warrior but is also a part-time shaman: his novels are what Alexie might term the "corn-pollen, four-directions, eagle-feathered school of Native literature" (qtd. in West). Both the professional writer and the literary critic are presented as failures and fakes at reading people, American Indians in particular.

The identity crisis of the adopted John Smith is an important subplot throughout the novel. *Indian Killer* juxtaposes the false claims of Indian culture of Mather and Wilson with the well-meaning attempts of Daniel and Olivia Smith, as they try to pass on Indian culture to their adopted son John. However, due to the closed adoption policy of the day, they do not know which tribe John was born into – so they expose him to everything. When John was an infant, Olivia "soothed him in words in Navajo, Lakota and Apache" (12). Though John's schizophrenia as an adult cannot be blamed on his adoption, his condition serves as a metaphor for the position of contemporary American Indians: Janet Dean sees *Indian Killer* as critiquing the white collection of Indian history and culture, perpetuating "the confusion, the schizophrenia, of racial identity for Native Americans in a world of fictions partially produced through the archive" (46). Without a distinct tribal identity, John becomes a high-rise steelworker because of New York Mohawks, telling white people he is Sioux and Indians that he is a Navajo – because that is what they respectively like to hear. In keeping with Homans' warning, John strives to ease the discomfort of interpellators, never succeeding in finding an identity that feels authentic to him.

This false interpellation continues to plague John. When inter-racial violence breaks out in Seattle, John is falsely targeted because he looks the part of an Indian warrior – and he is too unstable to be sure of his innocence. Part of John's inability to assimilate, to disappear into his adopted culture is that he looks like a stereotypical warrior: his foreman calls him "chief;" he is aware of the confusion his appearance causes: "Though he wasn't a real Indian, John knew he looked like one. His face was his mask." (276) Despite his lack of history, John is continually interpellated by whites and Indians. Carrying the name of a colonizer, John never is able to move beyond stereotypes of the shaman and warrior – and is ultimately of most danger to himself.

However, as much as *Indian Killer* critiques inauthentic identity, it is ultimately ambivalent about whether that is possible – or even helpful – today. As Homans argues, "Traumatized without a doubt by the circumstances of his adoption, John nonetheless could not be cured by recovering his authentic place, for in the novel that place exists only in and as words" ("Adoption" 22). Alexie also does not present John's displacement as unique to the adopted: Reggie struggles to resolve life as a mixed-race Indian, while his cousin Marie is negotiating her move from the reservation to being an urban Indian, a dispersed community comprised of 200 tribes. Alexie's more optimistic treatment of Zits in *Flight* may be due to Zits' own awareness of the imperfection of his search for identity.

Unlike Alexie's earlier novels, *Flight* is less concerned with tribal origins. Though Zits knows what song his parents danced to, he is less clear on the details of his father's background: "My father was an Indian. From this or that tribe. From this or that reservation" (4). Though, unlike John, Zits is protected by the Indian Child Welfare Act, he has found no difference between his Indian foster fathers and white foster fathers. And what tribe could he ask to approve his adoption?

Left in limbo by the Indian Child Welfare Act, Zits has assembled his identity through books, watching television to "be Indian": "everything I know about Indians (and I could beat 99 percent of the world in a Native American version of Trivial Pursuit) I learned from television" (12). All he sees when he looks in the mirror is his untreated teenage acne; the only reflection of himself he sees in the world are homeless Indians: "I don't know any other Native Americans, except the homeless Indians who wander around downtown Seattle. I like to run away from my foster homes and get drunk with these street Indians. Yeah, I'm a drunk, just like my father" (7). With only fragments of his Irish and American parents, Zits collects arbitrary shards to create his (half) Indian identity, taking pride in being drunk and belligerent.

Alexie deliberately situates Zits' personal crisis within the context of American literature and history. With the epigraph "Po-tee-weet," Alexie directly references Kurt Vonnegut and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, a novel where the protagonist becomes "unstuck in time." According to Vonnegut, "Po-tee-weet" is the only sound you hear after a massacre, signaling *Flight*'s critique of "justified" violence. In addition, the opening of his novel "Call me Zits," crudely echoes

Herman Melville's "Call me Ishmael," another story of a young man swept along by someone else's fate. As Zits is buffeted from foster household to foster household, he carries three novels – John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, James Welch's *Winter in the Blood* and Stephen King's *The Dead Zone* – a mixture of classic American, Indian lit and pop culture. This range of reading in his backpack reflects the range of American cultural and historical allusions of the novel.

Indian Killer and *Flight* both ask if the path of the Warrior still has value, despite the rage experienced by Indian as well as white Americans. In *Flight*, the lonely Zits is convinced by a white boy that his life will have meaning if he shoots up a bank. As "a blank sky," Zits becomes the easy prey of charming white teen Justice who, like a cult-leader, offers Zits flattery and the potential of love:

> He *understands* me...this kid is some kind of Jesus. ...I really get the feeling that this white kid could save me from being lonely. I bet he could save the whole world from being lonely. (48)

Justice convinces Zits that he must dance a version of the Ghost Dance (asking Zits to be an Indian), that to make his parents return he must kill white strangers. Zits marches alone into a bank, armed by Justice with a 38 special and a paint gun – playing the Indian Warrior.

As his self-destructive behavior manifests as violence toward others, Zits become "unstuck in time" and unstuck in his own body. By inhabiting the positions of various witnesses and agents of massacres in American history – in particular massacres involving American Indians – Zits learns not only that his anger is not unique, but that violence provides little relief.

Overall, Zits' episodic visits resembles less the Vonnegut's Billy Pilgrim, than that of Sam Beckett in television's *Quantum Leap* (1989-93). At the moment that Zits is shot in the head after his killing spree, he awakes in the body of a white FBI agent, working the Red River case. From Hank Storm, he leaps consecutively into the bodies of an Indian boy after the Battle of Little Big Horn, to a white scout in a retaliatory raid, to the unwitting flight instructor of a suicide-pilot, to his dying father. Aitor Ibarrola-Armendariz and Estibaliz Vivanco comment on the structure of the central part of the novel: "The time-traveling and body-migrating devices perfectly serve Alexie's purpose of delving

into the cycles of violence and mutual denigration that have pervaded White-Native relations since the eighteenth century" (42). Zits inhabits the exhibits of male figures of different ages and ethnicities. Through these varied masculine identifications, Zits witnesses betrayals and rage – he finds a history.

Though the focus of the novel is Zits' deeper connection to Indian history and his father, it is significant that at least one of his personas reflects his mother's heritage; as Gus, he finds himself speaking in a "weird" accent: "Maybe I am finally Irish" (84). As Jennifer Ladino comments about Alexie's short fiction, Alexie's work often "provides models for building polycultural [as opposed to multicultural] alliances that offer hope for justice through generosity, empathy, community, and a recognition of our shared humanity" (39). *Flight* calls for this justice, individual and collective, with empathy the cornerstone of real communities.

Only one of Zits' leaps is directly connected to his birth identity. Zits' last leap requires the smallest distance in time and geography, when he leaps into his biological father's body in the present day, less than 30 miles away. At first, Zits only experiences him as an anonymous homeless drunk, in the last stages of rotgut. He realizes he has become his father when the man opens his wallet, revealing a picture of six-year-old Zits. His thoughts turn again to revenge:

> What would Hamlet do if he looked into the mirror and saw the face of the man who'd betrayed and murdered his father? And what should I do now that I am looking into the mirror at the face of the man who betrayed and abandoned my mother and me? (151)

Yet as in his other leaps, Zits is not allowed to judge their choices: he must feel the circumstances that led to these present moments. As his father, Zits "remembers" sitting in the waiting room while being born. The soon-to-be-father was over-whelmed with the memories of his own brutal father, so he fled the hospital rather than risk repeating that cycle: "My father cannot be a participant. He cannot be a witness. He cannot be a father" (156). Zits learns that his father was not indifferent, merely afraid and weak.

Through these leaps, Zits builds a complicated American identity, no longer a "blank sky." Zits' self-aware humor allows him

to look directly at this pantheon of American violence, as well as his tragic past, without getting lost in it. As Zits relives and reclaims American and his own history, he simultaneously finds himself. By living American history, this Irish / American-Indian teenager is saved from being doomed to repeat history – in particular America's history of revenge-fueled violence. As a disfigured Indian child after the Battle of Little Big Horn, Zits experiences being prodded by his father to kill a captured soldier. When the boy resists, Zits starts to feel the "old time Indian kid's need for revenge." He recalls his own violent impulse: "And then I wonder if that is why I killed all those people in the bank. Did I want revenge? Did I blame those strangers for my loneliness?" (76). Zits understands that the customers were just easy targets that he projected his rage on.

Though the focus of Zits' journey is about learning history so that he can change his own story, as significant are the human emotions he experiences along the way. For the first time since his mother's death, Zits feels the possibilities of loving and being loved through his borrowed personas. Despite the moral ambiguity of Hank Storm, Zits is overwhelmed by the love that his wife, children and partner feel for him. In his second leap, he experiences the love of a warrior father: "And since I never knew my real father, I feel like I am going to explode. I want to hug this guy forever and ever. … I am happy for the first time in my life" (64-65). He may learn more from being loved than the violence he witnesses. When he returns to his life, Zits embraces the chance to choose differently: "But I am tired of hurting people. I am tired of being hurt. I need help" (161). Instead of hiding between his indifferent façade, he asks for help from Officer Dave, giving him the guns that he (almost) used.

After his journey through history, Zits is now emotionally ready to be adopted. Officer Dave's brother Robert and sister-in-law Mary take him in as foster parents, with the goal of adoption. They accept his past and are not asking Zits to save them. Mary's first act is to give him medication for his acne, seeing the handsome boy and not the "zits." He shares his real name: "Call me Michael." This adoption is not the national fantasy of *Pigs in Heaven*'s ending but an intimate and quiet happy ending.

In the end, *Flight* is a fairy-tale about how one troubled teen magically avoids being drawn in the-too-frequent American solution of violence. Zits embodies the potential that Jerng sees within adoption

narratives, with "disidentification with 'birth' and inclusion of multiple histories that fracture the singularity of personhood, "offering potential for rethinking cultural and national belonging" (146). Alexie is well aware that there are disaffected American men, Indian and white, who are susceptible to the virus of violence, noting in interviews that "Columbine isn't very far from Sand Creek." Through this magical history lesson and an appropriate adoption, Alexie saves one disconnected boy from becoming a killer.

Going Back to Move Forward

Like Sedgwick, Paul Greengrass's adaptation of Giles's 2016 novel allows him to indirectly comment on issues of race, nationhood and healing facing American society today. In Reconstruction Texas, the after-effects of the Civil War have made Captain Jefferson Kyle Kidd's profession and previous life meaningless. He has created a nomadic life, supporting himself by reading newspapers to people. Largely infotainment, Kidd titles his program "News of the World" – since the word "nation" is problematic. The one time he reads a news story of the current President, his audience jeers. While on the one hand, the "bluecoats" restrict gun ownership by Texans, small groups commit racial violence. The parallels throughout the film with 2020 Texas are hard to ignore.

The twice-orphaned Johanna is dropped into this traumatized context, combining the literary tropes of the white child "gone native" and the Indian orphan. Hollywood's depiction of Indian-raised white characters normally focuses on the returned adults[6]; Johanna is an unusual case as simultaneously a white and Indian orphan. With her Kiowa family recently killed in front of her by federal troops[7], and no knowledge of English or white customs, she identifies as Kiowa, actively mourning her second family. When Captain Kidd asks "What is your name?" she replies in Kiowa "Home. …. I want to go home." However, that home does not exist: not only is her family dead, but the remaining Kiowa are being driven across the Texas border. The soldiers who "rescued" her charged a black agent with returning Johanna to her German immigrant family – who was lynched. Captain Kidd finds his body, with a flyer pinned to his chest: "Texas Says No / This is a White Man's Country." Captain Kidd is then pressed into service to take her

to the agent in the next town, who will organize her further transport to Castroville – a town hundreds of miles away, close to San Antonio.

Greengrass's adaptation leaves it unclear whether their journey is more about relieving the traumas experienced by Captain Kidd, by Johanna – or by Texas as a whole. The opening scene watches Captain Kidd dressing for a performance, showing his scars from multiple bullet wounds (the Civil War was not his first time in combat). He holds on to his military rank as he introduces himself; however, as terms of the Confederate surrender, he is legally only allowed to carry a rifle with bird shot. He is hundreds of miles from his wife and home in San Antonio – he is asked repeatedly asked whether it is time for him to see her. Though the Captain may suggest to his audience that they enjoy his uplifting stories, the news is merely a distraction from their personal and shared loss – not a remedy.

The Captain's motivation for transporting Johanna, for his temporary guardianship, is under-explained. When he learns that the federal agent responsible for dealing with her will not return for months, he declares, "I'll take her. I found her. The little girl is lost; she *needs* to be home." Not speaking her language or understanding her customs, he has no real understanding of her *needs*. And this is a man who has been avoiding home for years, who has chosen to be lost – with only prescribed loyalty to U.S. troops. Who is he serving?

The film is slow to reveal Johanna's full trauma, perhaps reflecting Kidd and the federal government's shallow appraisal of her needs. Early on their journey, Johanna runs off at night when she sees Kiowa across the river being marched to their new reservation. She screams in agony (in Kiowa), "Don't leave me – come back – I am the daughter of Turning Water and Three Spotted." Even if they could hear her over the river and the rain, it is unlikely that the Kiowa would have the resources (or the freedom) to take her. Kidd only sees a young girl screaming at shadows in a downpour, with no sense of her grief or abandonment. The "home" that is Kidd's destination is not the one that she longs for.

As they head toward Castroville, the Captain learns more about Johanna from an innkeeper in Dallas – Mrs. Gannett is an acquaintance of Kidd who speaks Kiowa. She explains to the Captain that the girl does not even recognize the name Johanna – her Kiowa name is Cicada.

Mrs. Gannett also explains the girl's short hair: she cut it in mourning for her Kiowas family, "orphaned twice over." When the Captain asserts that he is taking Johanna to family, Mrs. Gannett comments that does not mean anything to her – Cicada would not see her German aunt, Anna Leonberger, as family or home. As Turtle and John Smith were interpolated as Indian, despite being raised white, Johanna has the opposite problem – with her blond hair, she is interpolated as "white," with her singing in Kiowa and table manners attracting attention for being incongruous. She is expected to welcome being returned to a family and language that she buried long ago.

On the road, the Captain comes to value Johanna for her Indian upbringing, rather than judging her as an unruly white child. When they are besieged by men who wish to sell Johanna, she actively assists him, turning his dimes into lethal shot. She sings a celebration of his victory, decorating his horse with markings for his kills. After this bonding, he begins trading words with her, learning Kiowa as he teaches her English – uncovering the German that is still in her memory. However, the trip also reveals the difference in their American / Kiowa philosophy. When he fears the effect of her awakened memories, he tells her that going forward is the answer, to not look back. It is obvious that this has been the Captain's solution since the end of the Civil War. However, Johanna corrects him: "To move forward, you must first remember." Her insight connects to the time-journey of Zits: before he could move forward, he likewise needed to experience the pain of his history.

While the Captain continues to ignore his past, Johanna directly confronts hers. On their trail, she recognizes the abandoned settlement of her German parents. Though the Captain tells her not to, she goes into the cabin where her family was killed when she was six. Four years later, the splattered bloodstains are still visible on the walls and on the beds. She finds a cornhusk doll that she takes with her. After she asks Captain if they are dead, she takes his hand: she is now ready to move forward. Johanna confirms her shift during their next crisis. Their cart has been destroyed, and their horses are dead. As they wander across the plains, they are caught in a dust storm. As the storm subsides, they found themselves surrounded by Kiowa. After Johanna speaks to them, they give her a horse – this time, she chooses the Captain rather than going with the Kiowa. Being given the chance to say good-bye to her German and Kiowa family, she is now ready to move forward.

Yet, at this point, the Captain has not benefited from their journey as fully as Johanna. He still defines "family" in the same way as the federal orders –Johanna belongs with her German-American aunt. The Leonbergers begrudgingly take Johanna, with the stipulation that she will need to learn manners and to work (as Mrs. Fletcher expected of Magawisca). For the Captain to "move forward," he travels on to San Antonio. He visits his house, with the furniture draped in sheets. The wife that has been "waiting for him" is in the cemetery; he received news of her death while he was still in the War. He finally has the courage of Johanna – to face his wife's death and say good-bye. It is only then that he is ready to adopt Johanna, as she adopted him in the dust storm. In Castroville, he finds her "family" has tethered her, to keep her from running away. Speaking in Kiowa, he tells her "You belong with me." In the epilogue, they are on the road together, still delivering the news, with Johanna providing sounds effects to his humorous tales, smiling widely. He closes by introducing her to the crowd as "Johanna Kidd." As Callahan observes, "fictional representations of adoption can shape perception of policy and cultures while also serving as a vehicle for examining concerns about cultural belonging" (105). This tension remains in *News of the World*'s epilogue, as Johanna and Captain Kidd have formed a migrating tribe of two – serving to entertain Texans, while declining to become a part of their difficult journey to nationhood or tolerance.

In his Hollywood adaptation, Greengrass evokes many of the elements of white / Indian adoption trope. The film places Johanna's failed first adoption and subsequent second adoption in the context of a traumatized land and people, where their hurt is displaced onto racial violence. However, Kidd and Johanna each remain individuals who present models for forgiveness and healing. And despite Captain Kidd's asserting the value of forgetting, the child demonstrates the stronger path of healing *with* remembering.

Significantly, neither the (white) novelist nor filmmaker presume to speak for the Kiowa – their tragedy is expressed through the mourning of their daughter Johanna. In both *Hope Leslie* and *News of the World*, the Pequod and the Kiowa are vanishing – only to live on in the hearts of their white "family." This situation is directly expressed in Michael Mann's *Last of the Mohicans* (1992)'s final scene, Chingachgook eulogizes his son Uncas with his adopted son Nathaniel Poe and his lover Cora. He looks forward to the point where he will

die as the last Mohican, finally joining them. His only legacy will be through Nathaniel and Cora's children. *News of the World* offers more than other Indian-adoption narratives in that the Captain does not force Johanna to give up her traditions or language. Unfortunately, the film closes with not only no Kiowa visible but no faces of color. However, Greengrass's film does value the healing of the Captain and Johanna equally, with a nomadic life that is no longer an exile, but a life that suits them both.

Adoption is a narrative event or trope through which these authors address, often with ambivalence, an evolving American character and nationhood. The rhetoric of adoption is double-edged, and for that reason alone it is a fertile site of inquiry. Adoption draws lines of inclusion and exclusion, entails independence for some characters and dependence for others, and applauds fresh starts while expressing regret over lost origins. (Singley 5)

Carol Singley's above overview unites the 19th century Hope Leslie with these contemporary texts – yet with their focus on American Indian adoptions their connections to nationhood and regret over lost origins is more intense than in other American adoption narratives.

American popular and literary culture has regularly returned to the figure of adoptions between white and native communities, with the hope that these adoptions can provide healing. However, these adoptions can never be equal, with Indian communities weakened by the history of U.S. attacks on their land, their movement, their traditions, and their families. As Fagan warns, "the ideals of community and individuality cannot easily coexist in a national myth" (257). Yet, these unions continue to offer hope that this integration will weave together the best qualities of both societies, creating new possibilities.

Together these texts struggle with the ambivalence noted by Singley, moving between inclusion and exclusion. In *Hope Leslie*, the Fletchers are massacred for not allowing their Indian charges to become full members of their family. While the Greers (Kingsolver's novels) and the Smiths (*Indian Killer*) do provide love and care for the Indian infants, they fail to provide the expanded community that these children need to thrive. Though Kidd may be trying to ignore history, Greengrass's concern with past and present American history connects his adoption narrative most closely to *Flight* – reminding Americans,

that to move forward, it is essential to first remember, no matter how painful those memories may be.

In the 21st century, the United States is actively struggling with issues of inclusion and exclusion, both as a society and through popular culture. Though the American society metaphor of "melting pot" has been replaced by "mixed salad" or "mosaic," acts of inclusion often feel exclusionary to others. And with the growth of mixed-race families, through adoption and marriage, terms of ethnic identity become even more complicated and fraught. At the same time, children are being abandoned at our border, raising the question of whether reunion or adoption is the more humane option. Adoption narratives in literature, film and television provide opportunities to explore these issues together,

Notes

[1] I would like to thank the *JAST* readers and Sara Hosey of Nassau Community College for their contributions to the development of this essay.

[2] Jerng notes the anxiety experienced by early American citizen of actual white adoptees who declined to be "redeemed," remaining with their American Indian family and tribe.

[3] In several interviews, Kingsolver publicly apologized for not having considered the moral implications of Turtle being "lost to her tribe" (qtd. in Callahan 116).

[4] In *The Bean Trees*, Lou Ann determined that Turtle's birth name was likely "April" because of Turtle's reaction to the word. Kingsolver's changing the name to "Lacey" may be a deliberate challenge to the tribe's claim for preserving their heritage.

[5] *Pigs in Heaven* provides no real solution for transracial adoptions, since, as Novy notes, "its resolution is totally dependent on an unlikely congruence of events to create its utopic vision" (210).

[6] *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956); *Little Big Man* (Arthur Penn, 1970); *Dances with Wolves* (Kevin Costner, 1990); *Last of the Mohicans* (Michael Mann, 1992),

[7] The film differs here from Paulette Giles' novel: instead of her Kiowa family being killed, they traded her for "15 Hudson's Bay four-stripe blankets and a set of silver dinnerware." Similarly, Kidd is paid well for transporting her, rather than volunteering for the duty. Greengrass's film keeps its focus on family and adoption narratives.

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