University of the Sunshine Coast

Jo-Ann Sparrow

‘Darling Adopted Daughter’: A practice-led exploration of adoption wounds through the writing of a memoir

Abstract

This paper discusses my quest for a narrative means to give voice to the story of my adoption. Using practice-led research to explore my adoption experience, I wrote a memoir entitled ‘Darling Adopted Daughter’ for the degree of Doctor of Creative Arts at the University of the Sunshine Coast (USC). The memoir investigates the adoption wounds I sustained when separated at birth from my biological mother and was adopted three weeks later into a family with three existing biological children.

Keywords: memoir, magical realism, adoption, second voice, trauma

Those who do not have power over the story that dominates
their lives, power to retell it, deconstruct it, joke about it,
and change it as times change, truly are powerless,
because they cannot think new thoughts.
— Salman Rushdie 1991

Introduction

I had already been exploring the best way to tell my story for more than twenty years, by the time I considered writing a memoir about my adoption experience within the structure of a creative arts research degree at the University of the Sunshine Coast (USC). To say I was experiencing writer’s block would be a gross understatement. I’d spent the best part of those twenty-plus years with no idea what to say, and the final months with no idea how to say it. To end the impasse I’d experimented writing about the adoption experiences of others, writing fiction about adoptees and writing stories from other perspectives, but it became clear to me, that it was my own story I needed to tell. I then wrote several two-dimensional, lifeless drafts of my own experience, which failed my story in every respect.

When people asked me about what I was writing and why, I was unable to articulate my purpose and aims. I understood my personal need to understand the adoption experience and my hopes to find catharsis on the pages of a memoir, but I struggled to define anything further.

At a Queensland Writer’s Centre (QWC) course, I received feedback on my early drafts from a participant who challenged the ability of my manuscript to sustain a reader’s interest in a work the size of a publishable memoir. ‘I just

don't see how your story of essentially a happy childhood with loving parents could sustain a narrative the size of a memoir,' he said. 'Have you considered interviewing other adoptees and including their stories as well as your own?' It was the ultimate disenfranchisement of my adoption experience in its literary form. It was also possibly the best feedback I received throughout the process of writing the memoir, as it made me stop and consider what my real objective was. He had hit on my most sensitive nerve and biggest fear in relation to writing my story – that in fact, I didn't even have a story worthy to be told. I decided I needed guidance and looked into completing the memoir through a creative writing research degree.

During my first meeting at USC with the men who would eventually become my doctoral supervisors, Dr Paul Williams and Associate Professor Gary Crew, I was challenged to explain how my proposed project was innovative – demonstrated innovation being a requirement of the program. I had no answers for them. I left the campus deflated and certain I'd blown my one chance to impress and thereby pry open the door to academia (and write a publishable memoir). During my disappointed drive back home to Brisbane, my mind scanned the story of my adoption and the solo research I'd done to that point. By the time I ordered a long black from the waitress at my local coffee shop, I'd drafted my email answer and uncovered a possible innovation:

Psychologist Nancy Verrier posits that when an infant is separated from its birthmother, they incur a primal wound that changes the way they behave and interpret relationships etc from infancy through their entire lives. In his novel, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, Jonathan Safran Foer uses narrative devices to portray his protagonist's possible autism and his characters' traumas post-war and 9/11. It is visual and emotive writing that allows you inside the characters' heads. I would love to find a way to portray the primal wound in a memoir, in a similar way. I think this is what separates me from other adoption memoir authors and if I am successful could be my innovation? (Sparrow 2012)

In *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, Safran endeavours to represent the traumatic experiences of his characters post-9/11 through language, font, layout and structure. The result is an innovative novel that explores trauma in multiple, visual layers.

I received a flurry of supportive emails in the hours that followed, with one from Associate Professor Crew sparking the idea that broke down the wall that had been blocking me for more than two decades.

Following up your earlier email on Foer and the fact that he used visuals, you could substitute the visual text with a secondary voice by telling your primary memoir in the first person with your 'other' who suffers the 'primal wound' telling a secondary memoir – albeit enclosed in the first memoir (womb-like, dare I say?) – in the third person, as if she was your doppelganger or 'dark other'. This is an innovation which was demonstrated by Stephen King in his novel *The Dark Half* which was about an unborn co-joined twin existing only in the writer's brain. Nice idea for you I reckon. It would work big time as an innovative memoir. (Crew 2012, used with permission)

A horror novel ... really? I read *The Dark Half* (King 2011), trying to keep an open mind as to how a horror novel could influence my adoption memoir. I have to admit I was dubious for a while. In *The Dark Half* King's protagonist, author Thad Beaumont, who has been successfully writing crime fiction under the pseudonym of George Stark for years, is about to be outed by a blackmailer. He chooses instead to take control and out himself in a *People* magazine article, the act of which animates his alter ego/unborn twin and brings Stark to life. I chewed on the idea for a few months ... it wasn't the craziest idea I'd ever heard. The idea seemed so 'left of field' that I figured I'd explore and discard it quickly. I didn't. One weekend of experimentation later and the idea grew wings ... even then however, I couldn't have foreseen how this one, tiny, supervisor-planted seed would sprout and become the framework for the entire memoir.

Adoption in literature

In writing my creative artefact, my objective was to portray the wounds of adoption (which I will explore in greater detail below) in such a way that a reader (and I) might recognise their own wounds amongst my words. The creative artefact was my opportunity to add something new to adoption literature, which others might identify with. I look back through my life and recognise there are few dramatic events to propel a reader through the pages of my memoir, but I hoped that by writing about adoption wounds in a way others could identify with, they would be compelled to turn the page. I was in fact, setting out to write the memoir I wished I could have read before discovering the theoretical literature.

If I wanted to innovate in the genre of adoption memoirs, I needed to benchmark myself against other written work on the subject. Adoption has been explored in literature since early Greek mythology. Before he was hijacked by Sigmund Freud, Oedipus was the protagonist in Sophocles' tragedy, *Oedipus the King*. The child of King Laius and Queen Jocasta, the infant Oedipus had his feet fastened together with a large pin and was abandoned to die on the mountainside to thwart a prophecy that the child would grow up to murder his father and marry his own mother. Instead of death, Oedipus is discovered by shepherds and adopted by King Polybus and Queen Merope, whom Oedipus feared he was fated to murder when he discovered the prophecy as an adult. Despite his best efforts to avoid his fate, Oedipus ends up fulfilling the predictions and unwittingly kills his father, marries his mother who then suicides, and finally blinds himself.

I'd like to say that, post-Sophocles, adoption became a lighter subject in literature, but even the current genre of adoption memoirs rarely offers a light narrative. As my QWC peer pointed out, happy stories about wonderful, boring lives don't usually make for good memoir.

The adoption memoirs I read for my research typically fell into two categories. The first were memoirs I enjoyed, but could not connect to my own experience. In an interesting way however, these works had the greatest impact on how I wrote my own memoir. The second group consisted of memoirs that I could strongly identify with as an adoptee, which had an influence on the writing of my own memoir because of the way they had been written.

When I read memoirs by other adoptees, their stories unfolded in a far more interesting way than mine. There were more dramatic twists and turns, abuse, secrecy, plot twists and heart-wrenching origins and reunions. My own story by

comparison seemed limp and boring – like a rich girl complaining about the damaged handle on her latest Gucci bag. Who cares? However, many of these writers' stories, as incredible as they were, didn't resonate with me personally. I didn't see my own story reflected in theirs. It was the drama framework of their story, their plot and my interest in exploring adoption that propelled me through their narrative and kept me turning the page. It was not the narrative devices used by authors in this category that kept me interested. Many were written in an almost journalistic style ... straightforward, not unemotional, but more nonfiction than creative nonfiction.

An example of the first category is Elaine Pinkerton's (2012) *The Goodbye Baby: A Diary about Adoption*. In her nonfiction story about her adoption, Pinkerton plucks entries from the diaries she kept throughout her life and separates them into three parts. The first part is the 'prelude', where she explains how she wrote the memoir, and the second part is a series of diary entries taken and edited from the forty diaries she wrote throughout her childhood and as an adult. Part three concludes her work and muses on what she has learned from the experience of gathering the diaries together and her thoughts now, looking back.

Pinkerton's story opens with the heart-breaking disclosure that she was relinquished and adopted at the age of five and was raised by adoptive parents who wanted to pretend she was 'born again' at the time of her adoption and that she was their 'real' daughter. They discouraged her from discussing her previous life or adoption. From the moment she revealed this, I could feel her life story eclipsing my own purely on the basis of her having an incredibly interesting plot. Her diaries capture snippets of her life, many of which seem to have no link to her adoption experience, eg:

Nov. 28 – Miss Andrews really does like the illustrations in my derivatives notebook. My tooth has been aching real bad. It hurt so bad I cried. (Pinkerton 2012: 35)

The diary entries flow through her everyday life as a young girl and into womanhood, capturing both her exuberance and unhappiness. There is rarely any narrative musing on these entries to give the reader greater insight into her adoption experience; however a new voice cuts through occasionally to give additional, explanatory information on her life at the time.

Feb. 12 – Mother doesn't approve of my going to fraternity parties. She's been so sick, weak and grouchy. The neighbours keep bringing us regular dinners.
For the following nine months my friends and I were going to fraternity parties and staying out late. Either I was too exhausted to write in my diary or I was too embarrassed about what I was doing, or both. I started working at Whitney's dress shop after school on weekends. The drinking continued...
(Pinkerton 2012: 79)

I believe Pinkerton's objective in writing the book was not dissimilar to my own. She was aiming to honour the voice of the young, forbidden adoptee throughout her manuscript by selectively using her actual diary entries, as they were written at the time and leaving them unedited so as to maintain an authenticity and to portray the wounds of adoption.

While I enjoy books written in a diary format because of the voyeuristic feeling of peeking into the secret thoughts of another person, I could not feel Pinkerton's adoption wounds in a way that I could identify with. In the prelude,

Pinkerton foreshadows the coming portrayal of the wounds by writing about ‘adoption bruises’:

Whenever I think I have finally been healed from the wounds of adoption, life serves up a reminder that I am not. It is the opposite of “looking through rose-coloured glasses.” When one looks through the glasses of being adopted, everyday events are reminders of loss and betrayal, or abandonment. (Pinkerton 2012: 6)

When I finished the book, I felt the promises made in the beginning had not been delivered throughout the text. Through the diary entries, her narrative covers the difficult relationship between herself and her adoptive parents and how she struggled as a teenager to fit in and find her identity. It examines her marriage and other relationship breakdowns and the raising of her children; but it ‘draws too long a bow’ for me to identify the wounds if I wasn’t already looking for them. Because Pinkerton doesn’t muse on her diary entries or create effective scenes through the use of narrative devices, anyone who isn’t adopted or isn’t an adoptee who is looking for answers as to how she/he is feeling may not find anything that resonates with them on the page.

Throughout my research I read a number of memoirs that, like Pinkerton’s, told compelling stories, each I felt more interesting than my own. *Facing the Fears* by Collette Glazebrook (2007) chronicles the thrilling quest of Collette looking for her biological mother, only to discover multiple siblings who had also been adopted and one who had not and a multi-generational family history of abandonment. Again, her memoir was so original and interesting on plot alone that it disconnected itself from my own adoption experience and made me question its worthiness to be told in a memoir.

The second category included memoirs that did resonate with my personal experience of adoption. Jeanette Winterson’s *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (2011) is an example of these. It is a memoir in which I could ‘feel’ the wounds. It juxtaposes Winterson’s life with her previous literary works, most particularly, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985) and *Written on the Body* (1992). Like the memoirs above, her adoption experience eclipses my own on the plot and drama scales, but on its pages I could see clear evidence of the wounds of adoption. One of the greatest impacts of her memoir on my own work was her steady realisation that her adoptive parents were catastrophically damaged themselves and how understanding this allowed her to make peace with them. The character, Jo-Ann in my artefact, also tries to look at her experience from her biological parent’s perspective at times, and this process releases her from harbouring feelings of resentment when they fail the tests she gives them.

My research into adoption memoirs satisfied me that there was space for me to innovate within the genre.

Adoption theory and the evolution of the second voice

In *The Primal Wound: Understanding the Adopted Child* (1993), Nancy Verrier argues that ‘when the natural evolution of mother and baby is interrupted by a postnatal separation from the biological mother, the resultant experience of abandonment and loss is indelibly imprinted upon the unconscious minds of children, causing a “primal wound”’. Verrier describes the wound as ‘physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual...and causing pain so profound as to have been described as cellular’ (Nancy Verrier 1993: xvi).

The primal wound theory was the starting point of my research and the beating heart of my memoir. I wanted to write a memoir that not only portrayed my own experience as an adoptee who experienced the primal wound, but one that other adoptees and members of the adoption triad (biological and adoptive parents) and even people not affected by adoption, might identify with. While the primal wound theory was central to this aim, more adoption theories came to light throughout my practice-led research and I combined them with the primal wound theory under one umbrella – ‘adoption wounds’. Following is a brief explanation of adoption wounds and the theories and ideas that influenced the writing of ‘Darling Adopted Daughter’.

In 1971, the year of my birth and adoption, there was little understanding of the long-term effects of adoption on adoptees or any member of the adoption triad. Authorities were mostly concerned with protecting the innocent child from the stigma of being illegitimate and young women from the scorn of parenting outside the sanctity of marriage. It hadn’t occurred to them that babies may suffer from separation from their mothers immediately or soon after birth.

In recent decades, scientists have begun to understand the mental capabilities of infants in utero and in their first weeks and years. David Chamberlain, in his book *Babies Remember Birth* (1988), argues infants are capable of much deeper thought and memory retention than commonly believed:

The truth is, much of what we have traditionally believed about babies is false. We have misunderstood and underestimated their abilities. They are not simple beings but complex and ageless-small creatures with unexpectedly large thoughts. (Chamberlain 1988: 23)

Nancy Verrier theorises that if babies are capable of remembering their birth, then it stands to reason they remember what happened straight afterward:

...which is that their mother, the person to whom they were connected and whom they expected to welcome them into the world, was suddenly missing. How does this experience impact the emotions and senses of a newborn baby? We can no longer assume that babies are unaware or unfeeling. There is too much evidence to the contrary. (Verrier 1993: 5)

This is a difficult concept for anyone to grasp, even an adoptee – perhaps especially an adoptee; as in the era of my adoption, adoptees grew up without acknowledgement of any loss. I was taken from my mother at birth – she neither saw nor touched me. I discovered after meeting her that she’d been given the option to view and hold me, but had declined. From the accounts of many other biological mothers, being granted this choice was not always the case.

I have no conscious recollection of the separation from my biological mother. My first memory can be dated back to age three, and yet I have felt a heaviness of spirit, that I could only describe as homesickness, for as long as I can remember. To further confuse my understanding of the emotion, I was at home with my adoptive parents when I felt this way.

When I began to understand adoption, it crossed my mind that the feeling may be related, but as no one ever spoke to me of the loss I’d experienced, I dismissed it as impossible. How could I miss what I never knew? How could I feel a loss I didn’t remember experiencing?

An information sheet distributed by Post Adoption Support Queensland (PASQ 2013) states that the grief of those who have experienced adoption has been disenfranchised. Doka defines disenfranchised grief as ‘the grief that persons experience when they incur a loss that is not, or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned or socially supported’ (Doka 1989: 4).

In *Being Adopted: The Lifelong Search for Self* (1993), Brodinsky, Schechter and Henig argue that adoption is unlike other loss, such as death or divorce. They stress that ‘adoption loss is more pervasive, less socially recognised, and more profound’ (Brodinsky, Schechter & Henig 1993: 9). While comparing the experiences of children adopted at birth to those adopted when older, they state:

It is less traumatic, less overt, but it can shape the child’s entire personality. Adoptees who are placed in the first days or weeks of life grieve not only for the parents they never knew, but for the other aspects of themselves that have been lost through adoption: the loss of origins, of a completed sense of self, of genealogical continuity. Adoptees might feel a loss too of their sense of stability in their relationship with their adoptive parents, if one set of parents can relinquish them, they might think, then why can’t another? (1993: 12)

My first drafts were written simultaneous with reuniting with my biological father (my first piece of research). I’d met my biological mother twenty years earlier. Just like my reunions with my biological parents, the first drafts were a glossy, superficial reproduction of complicated relationships. I had to dig deeper.

Further exploration led me to Dr Betty Jean Lifton’s *Journey of the Adopted Self: A Quest for Wholeness* (1994) where I discovered her theory of the Divided Self. Lifton, an adoptee and psychologist, wrote extensively about adoption, including a memoir entitled *Twice Born: Memoirs of an Adopted Daughter* (1975). She suggests that when a baby is separated from its mother at birth or soon after, and adopted when the ‘self’ is still entwined with that of the mother, they experience a psyche ‘split’ and become a Divided Self (Lifton 1994: 51). She proposes that adopted children split into the Forbidden Self and the Artificial Self, neither of which is completely true or completely false.

I was two-and-a-half drafts into the creative artefact when I read Lifton’s theory and was surprised to discover that Associate Professor Crew’s seed, planted after our first meeting, and practice-led research had already taken me down a path of writing a narrative about a Divided Self. In hindsight, it seems crazy that even though I’d been reading about adoption trauma for decades, it was the discovery of Lifton’s theory that confirmed for me that my adoption had been a traumatic experience. It also provided me with the inspiration for the memoir’s ending, which I’d been tentatively circling for months. So strong was the disenfranchisement of adoption grief, that there was no one in more denial of its repercussions than myself.

Up until I read Lifton’s Divided Self theory and connected it to the second voice I’d begun to explore thanks to Stephen King, I hadn’t truly appreciated that separation from one’s mother and placement with strangers under a cloak of secrecy causes a trauma. Gilmore (2001a: 4) explains that trauma, from the Greek word for ‘wound’, refers to the self-altering, even self-shattering experience of violence, injury, and harm. When I gathered Verrier and Lifton’s theories under the umbrella of adoption wounds, the unification refocussed my research but I was still struggling with how to express the wounds through language.

Allow me to take a quick step back in time at this point ... back before I'd read about the Divided Self theory ... when I was still trying to work out how to portray only the primal wound in the memoir. (It seems important to jump back and forth in the re-telling because the momentum of my practice-led research unfolded in a similar way.) I was still trying to figure out how Stephen King's horror novel and the ghostly spectre of George Stark could assist me in portraying the primal wound theory at this point.

Sean McAlister in 'The explosive devices of memory': Trauma and the construction of identity in narrative' proposes:

...the representation of traumatized identity often takes the form of actual fragmentations in the construction of character, with the resulting confusion, disorientation, and lack of holistic selfhood serving to perform the experience of having an identity that is in trauma. (McAlister 2006: 95)

In his article McAlister looks at Helen Weinzwieg's novel *Basic Black with Pearls* to explore the effects of trauma on the psyche, and in particular on its construction and maintenance of a sense of identity (91). He asserts that in the novel:

...the narrator is trying to piece together her identity and carries the reader along for the ride by forcing them to experience this struggle in the act of attempting to construct for Shirley an identity out of her fragmented and discontinuous narrative. (McAlister 2006: 91)

The idea of having the reader along on a journey where the character's identity is pieced together through the narrative appealed to me. I began to explore and experiment.

My first birth certificate provided the foundations on which I built the second voice. Before my adoption, my biological mother was required to name me. She chose Teresa, explaining I was named after a kindly nurse in the maternity ward. (I would later discover my biological father's name was similar and questioned her original explanation). My adoptive parents renamed me Jo-Ann and the name Teresa was sealed by the closed adoption system for nineteen years. Jo-Ann became my narrator and I named the second voice, *Teresa*, using italics to differentiate her voice.

Initially, I thought the narrative device of secondary voice would allow me to tell two distinct stories from two perspectives. The primary memoir would be told in first person, from Jo-Ann's perspective; leading the reader through the story of her adoption and subsequent reunions with her birthparents. I saw Jo-Ann as little more than a narrator and not portraying the primal wound. The secondary voice I originally envisioned as revealing an 'other self', a darker self who would carry the primal wound. She was to be enclosed womb-like within the primary memoir.

I immediately felt the voices as envisioned weren't working. Firstly, if she never experienced the primal wound, what story did Jo-Ann have to tell? Further, having *Teresa* depict a darker character was a lingering concept from reading *The Dark Half*. It was sending the wrong message about the adoption experience. It would take time before I could find a more positive way of thinking about *Teresa's* character. Writing *Teresa* in first person made it challenging for me to distinguish the two voices and if I found it difficult, it would be even more arduous for the reader. Picturing *Teresa* as an adult – an

alternate Jo-Ann, was also not working. I was unable to feel any empathy for her story, while I so strongly identified with her.

I explored the character through freewriting to find a way around the problem. I free wrote a few pages and later punctuated and smoothed out the piece. Peter Elbow describes freewriting as private, nonstop writing:

It is what you get when you remove most of the constraints involved in writing. It means not showing your words to anyone, not having to stay on one topic, not thinking about spelling, grammar and mechanics and not worrying about how good the writing is – even whether it makes sense or is understandable. (Elbow 2000: 85)

It was the use of the freewriting exercise that fleshed out *Teresa*. I pictured her as a child and initially wrote in first person. Writing *Teresa* as a child sanctioned my empathy for her character and I was able to consider for the first time how the primal wound may feel inside an infant the moment it occurs. Writing her in first person, however, was still confusing.

For my next attempt, I turned to *The Dark Half* again for inspiration and reduced *Teresa's* voice to snippets contained inside (again womb-like) within the narrative of Jo-Ann. In *The Dark Half*, King has Stark breaking into Beaumont's psyche, and plunging a pencil into his left hand:

...and, hundreds of miles north, he could feel Thad Beaumont sweeping a Berol Black Beauty pencil around and plunging it into his *left* hand.
That was when he woke up – when they *both* woke up – for real. (King 2011: 281)

Writing *Teresa* in third person and picturing her as a child worked. I felt empathy for her character and it gave me the distance I needed.

While King's *The Dark Half* served as inspiration for the use of second voice in the memoir, it became clear I needed to pull back from the concept that *Teresa* was Jo-Ann's dark half. I needed to clarify *Teresa's* role. I felt an obligation to myself and other adoptees to be careful how I theorised about our experiences.

Searching for a new way to theorise about *Teresa* was what ultimately brought me to Lifton's theory of the Divided Self. Her book had been lurking unread on my office bookshelf for ten years and it was the first thing I picked up in order to plunge deeper into the character of *Teresa*.

My original concept outlined the use of the narrative device of secondary voice to tell two distinct stories from two perspectives. But through further research the character developed. Of course Jo-Ann experienced the primal wound. It was already everywhere in her narrative. She just wasn't acknowledging it; she didn't understand it.

Without realising it, I had already used the Divided Self as the frame for the story. Jo-Ann embodied Lifton's Artificial Self, denying her need for origins and is compliant and yet secretive. Jo-Ann tests her place within her family unit but suppresses her adoptee identity. She is afraid to acknowledge or express the feelings she suspects lurk under this façade out of the fear of losing the only family she has.

I no longer saw *Teresa* as portraying the darker side of the adoption experience. In fact, if anything *Teresa* is the light; proof that nature will have its way in

spite of how we interfere with her natural order. She embodies the second half of Lifton's Divided Self – the Forbidden Self – and her existence demonstrates how the human psyche adapts to protect itself. *Teresa* is the self Jo-Ann might have been had she not been split off. She is initially hidden from view from her family and even Jo-Ann in order to not be flushed out and destroyed.

This is where I find the magic in practice-led research. Starting with a seed, the writer practices and reads and with domino-like precision are led from one theory to another – keeping and relinquishing those theories and ideas that work and those that don't. Sometimes enormous leaps in understanding are made through connecting the dots from one theory or written exploration to another.

Reading is an essential element of the creative writing process, the timing and content of which has influenced my creative artefact in various ways. Donna Lee Brien asserts about the importance of reading for creative writers that 'for many writers, a great deal of this knowledge is gained by reading, with the central role of reading in the writer's creative process widely acknowledged' (Brien 2006: 55). Nigel Krauth (cited in Brien 2006: 55) states 'creative writers working in the academic system also attest to the crucial role of reading in writing, but often add the necessity of efficiently selecting what is most useful for their projects'.

Had I read Lifton's Divided Self theory before I'd written several drafts and explored the nature of *Teresa* and the second voice, it would not have had the same impact. Because I had already written essentially a narrative about the Divided Self when I discovered the theory, it opened the memoir up in unexpected ways.

Two of the main themes of this project were the need to find an identity and the need to belong. Initially, I envisaged the stories of *Teresa* and Jo-Ann running parallel to one another, each on their own separate journey to find their identities. I saw them depicting different accounts of the same story, but not interacting. Continued research and writing, however, revealed that the two character's voices were influencing each other and moving towards becoming plaited in some way.

Lifton's theory of the Divided Self further clarified the role of the Artificial and Forbidden Self and made it clear that the plaiting I was uncovering through creative praxis was actually an attempt to weave together the two sides of the Divided Self through the self-enlightening process of writing. Their gradual awareness and acknowledgment of each other in the narrative was a process of both characters seeking to form a new self-narrative – staking claim on a new, authentic identity.

In literary terms, the adoption wound is a metaphor for what is lost when an infant is separated from its mother and adopted into a family of strangers. What made the adaptation of Lifton's theory so natural and organic was that I'd been writing to her theory for some time without realising it. It encompassed everything I felt as an adoptee and everything I'd been trying to portray. It allowed me to discard the notion that *Teresa* was a dark character and instead I began to view her as Jo-Ann's salvation.

Magical Realism

Following my confirmation presentation, during which I briefly discussed trauma representation in JM Coetzee's *Foe* (1986), panellist Dr Ross Watkins

offered some advice on how I could use language to articulate trauma. He suggested that I could demonstrate how my ‘artefact is elliptical, perhaps circling the hole around the silence’ as Coetzee does:

By writing the memoir you are attempting to articulate your sense of loss (the ‘wound’) – In Kristeva’s terms your writing (a collection of ‘signs’) forms a poetic artifice, which accumulates meaning via the circling of the ‘Thing’ (unnamable, un-representable by the ‘signs’ – the signified and signifier do not equate) you mourn for. ‘Wound’ is simply a metaphor, which attempts to articulate what is ‘lost’. (Watkins 2013)

Artifice as defined by the *Macquarie Dictionary* (2005) is ‘a crafty device or expedient; a clever trick or stratagem, craft; trickery’. Poetic artifice in the context of my memoir is a collection of literary signs, attempting through language to articulate the Adoption Wound – the metaphor for the connection with the mother, identity and self that was split off and lost.

Paul Williams in “‘Foe’: The Story of Silence” writes:

Foe illuminates the paradox of the story of silence: “In every story there is a silence, some sight concealed, some word unspoken, I believe. Till we have spoken the unspoken we have not come to the heart of the story” (141). Friday’s mysterious ritual of scattering petals on the ocean appears to be a clue, indicating the need to descend into the space or hole in the story to see what will emerge. This hole is the heart or the eye or the mouth of the story, which opposes the tongue, for the story cannot be penetrated by verbal or sexual intercourse, but by something else: “The true story will not be heard till by art we have found a means of giving voice to Friday”. (Williams 1988: 118)

Like Coetzee’s Friday in *Foe*, I needed to descend into the hole or heart of my story, which was the adoption wound, and find a way to give voice to it; art being the means by which I would discover the words. How could I find language that could circle the hole around the silence? And how could I hope to transform the pain held inside that hole if I could not articulate it?

Fantastical writing was a device that enabled me to more effectively portray adoption wounds in the creative artefact. I began to write scenes for, *Teresa* that were fantastical in nature. In a second frenzy of freewriting, I slipped off my ‘clothes’ and let go of all the constraints and inhibition that I felt restricted me inside the rules of memoir and eventually came to see the new writing had a magical realism element to it.

Eugene Arva proposes the term *traumatic imagination* to ‘describe an empathy-driven consciousness that enables authors and readers to act out and/or work through trauma by means of magical realist images’ (Arva 2011: 4):

I posit that the traumatic imagination is responsible for the production of many literary texts that struggle to re-present the unrepresentable and, ultimately, to reconstruct events whose forgetting has proved just as unbearable as their remembering... Magical realist writing should be regarded not as an escape from horrific historical “facts” or as a distortion meant to make them more cognitively or emotionally palatable but rather as

one of the most effective means of re-creating, transmitting, and ultimately coping with painful traumatic memories. In such a context, the re-presented or reconstructed truth will not be of what actually happened but of what was experienced as happening. (Arva 2011: 5-6)

Magical realism was the second major literary tool that allowed me to write my story, because it offered the opportunity to honour and convey unspoken trauma. I had tried and failed to write about my adoption experience many times before completing 'Darling Adopted Daughter' but had found the pre-verbal trauma was at the time beyond language.

Up to that point I had been attempting to portray through memoir an account of my adoption story that took place in a realistic setting. Because I was writing creative non-fiction, my public relations/journalistic background was where I turned for writing skills. I was a slave to accurately portraying the facts as they were remembered ... in a straightforward way, but adoption wounds are not straightforward. On the surface my story was a simple one, but the trauma of adoption had tipped the cart of my life over and upset the natural order. The character Jo-Ann's storyline was no longer on the 'normal' life trajectory that nature intended. In order to articulate my adoption experience, I would also need to leave the path of 'normal' writing and upset the order of my narrative to portray it.

I was asking the reader (and myself) to consider that Jo-Ann's self had split in two as a result of adoption. I was asking them to contemplate that, despite the trauma occurring pre-consciously and pre-verbally, and the protagonist being raised in a loving family, she had experienced a lifetime of feeling empty, invisible and rootless as a result of her adoption. I had to somehow achieve this without breaking the 'rules' of creative nonfiction and risking turning my memoir into a work of fiction. I was asking the reader to believe something, perhaps too strange to believe ... after all, it had taken me forty-two years to begin to accept it myself.

If the second voice of *Teresa* had allowed me to sketch an outline of adoption wounds in the narrative, it was magical realism that put paint on my brush to colour them in. Briefly defined by Wendy Faris, magical realism 'combines realism and the fantastic so that the marvellous seems to grow organically within the ordinary, blurring the distinction between them' (Faris 2004: 1). Magical realism allowed me to use language to articulate the un-representable – the Adoption Wound. Arva posits:

The magic in magical realism – flagrantly unreal images produced by the imagination – can help integrate events from seemingly impossible (originally unimaginable) experience into more or less coherent realities within the literary text. Magic is the indispensable element by which the traumatic imagination rearranges and re-presents reality... (Arva 2011: 282)

Reaching into my imagination was the key to transferring narrative memory events that had been prevented from becoming 'narrativised' by trauma. Arva states:

The relationship between trauma, the physical or psychological pain that has caused it, and imagination reveals an extraordinary complexity: unlike the products of imagination, pain can hardly be expressed in language. Consequently, if we

can assume that imagination can compensate for the objectlessness of pain, it follows that magical realism succeeds in simulating pain because it can turn it into images, that is, perceivable objects, which language can capture and convey more effectively. The traumatic imagination thus translates an unspeakable state (pain) into a readable image... (Arva 2011: 283)

I began to re-write: a scene in which the character Jo-Ann reads a letter with non-identifying information about her biological parents was re-written from the perspective of *Teresa*. The letter destroys some of *Teresa*'s fantasies about her biological parents. Her fantasy of one day finding biological parents who looked like her and shared her interests were lost and she discovers her childish reasoning of why her parents had no option but to relinquish her was not true. The letter also dashed her hopes of ever finding out more information about them. By re-imagining this scene and adding colour with magical realism, I found a way to use poetic artifice to capture and portray adoption wounds more effectively:

She sank to the carpeted floor in the lounge area, tucking her knees to her chest and began rocking backwards and forwards. She was in a daze. She could hear her imaginary birth mother behind her calling her name.

'Teresa, Teresa, look at me.' She ignored her. She lied to me, thought Teresa. She'd been told her real mother was too young to keep her, but she was eighteen, only one year younger than her Mum had been when Christine was born. That was old enough to work, old enough to vote, she was an adult. She could've kept her. She wasn't even a vet or a lawyer or a famous writer. She was a typist.

She felt the firm hand of her faceless father on her shoulder and shook it off angrily. He was 21 and worked on a railway. That was old enough to help. He mustn't have wanted her, she thought. They didn't sound anything like her and this was the most she could ever find out about them. That realisation hit her hard in the chest. She crumpled around the fist. Her breathing became shallow and ragged. Despair set in like a thick fog falling from the roof. There was no hope of ever knowing more than this and in some ways the letter had taken more than it had given.

Her imaginary mother's face appeared in front of her, creased with worry. Teresa reached out and scraped her fingernails across it, dragging her eyes down to her mouth, her lips to her chin, creating a Picasso image out of what had once been perfection. She continued to destroy her until there were no discernible features left. The face she had imagined for ten years had just been stolen from her. Her mother was now as faceless as her father. She looks like no one. There's no one. She's no one. (Sparrow 2015)

Benito et al (2009: 164) claim that magical realism is itself an oxymoron, as it fosters the juxtaposition of contradictory pairings, only to deconstruct their apparently unsolvable antitheses. Likewise, my creative artefact juxtaposed the forbidden and the artificial in an attempt to break each other down and rebuild them into a new, authentic self ... to solve an adoption puzzle that had been

‘messed up’ before either character knew what the original self may have been. Magical realism was the perfect device to deconstruct my adoptive identity through the characters of *Teresa* and Jo-Ann. In order to muse on my life and find meaning in it, as is the objective of memoir, I had to find ways to explore the two characters and how they felt.

Debra Sparks (2005: 80) proposes that Western writers (she discusses the United States in particular) have felt uncomfortable in the realm of magical realism because of the lack of collective mythology in Western society. She presumes there is a kind of magical realism that requires some cultural reckoning and believes this is why magical realism has flourished in areas where ‘people need to reclaim their cultural identity and why “minority” writers produce much of the United States’s magical realism’ (Sparks 2005: 81).

I believe her reasonings for why many Western writers feel out of place with magical realism is precisely why it was such a logical choice in the writing of an adoption memoir. Sparks quotes Victoria Nelson’s ‘The Strange History of the American Fantastic’ (1992): “one cannot hold citizenship in two realms at the same time” (Sparks 2005: 81). She goes on to argue that ‘but, of course, some people can ... indeed, magical realism is, as we’ve seen, about holding citizenship in two realms, which may explain why, in addition to everything else, it is a popular form for ... people whose cultural identity puts them in two realms’ (Sparks 2005: 81).

As an adoptee I hold citizenship in two realms. The character *Teresa*’s realm of the Forbidden Self spins on an axis of magic and fantastic. She interprets the world around her with raw emotion. Over time, Jo-Ann’s realm absorbs some of that magic. As she becomes enlightened to *Teresa*’s existence her narrative takes on more of the fantastical properties of *Teresa*’s. She opens herself to accept that which, right up to the point of her acknowledgement, was unbelievable.

Sparks offers Franz Roh’s definition of magical realism – she contends that through its use, artists find the marvelous in the everyday (82). She writes that ‘in magical realism, we want the magic to knock us off our seats because it’s so fabulous, but we also want the magic to have purpose, a reason for being – hopefully, a reason that will address the heart’s concerns’ (Sparks 2005: 87). My use of magical realism was purposeful.

Conclusion

Joan Didion eloquently explained her reason for writing as: ‘I write entirely to find out what I’m thinking, what I’m looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear’ (Didion 1981: 20). I can’t come up with a better explanation than hers for my own reason for writing ‘Darling Adopted Daughter’, so I hope Didion, herself an adoptive mother, won’t mind my stealing hers.

When I began writing the memoir it was fuelled by a near-obsessive need to speak my own truth. When you’ve had a cork in your mouth for forty-something years, the pressure behind it to speak builds to volcanic levels. I don’t believe I could’ve harnessed the flow of words effectively on my own. Without the guidance and structure offered by completing the work through the practice-led research process, I fear my aims might never have been defined or realised. When I began writing the memoir, I didn’t understand the speechlessness of trauma or how art could help me find my voice(s). For these

enlightenments, I thank, Thad Beaumont and George Stark, Nancy Verrier and Betty Jean Lifton and a seed planted and watered on Day One by my supervisors.

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Dr Jo-Ann Sparrow is a Brisbane-based author and public relations professional. She graduated with a Doctor of Creative Arts (Creative Writing) from the University of the Sunshine Coast (USC) in 2015, writing a memoir exploring her experiences as an adoptee entitled 'Darling Adopted Daughter' as her creative artefact. Jo co-authored and published a non-fiction book about photography with Amherst Media Publishing in New York in 2007 and has written feature and news articles for a variety of publications in Australia and internationally. She has worked in public relations for more than a decade, graduating from USQ in 2011 with a Master of Public Relations and from Monash University in 2004 with a Bachelor of Arts (Journalism).

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**General Editor: Nigel Krauth. Editors: Kevin Brophy & Enza Gandolfo
text@textjournal.com.au**