

**Relinquishment and abjection:
A *semanalysis* of the meaning of losing a baby to adoption**

by

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The maternal body is a split body where childbirth is "the threshold of ...the 'symbolic' and the 'semiotic'" (Kristeva, 1981:159). In relinquishment and adoption, the mother is the site of the split between the symbolic, the social practice of adoption, and the semiotic, the personal meaning of relinquishment.

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ABSTRACT

Between 1960 and 1975 more than 38,000 mothers lost babies to adoption in New South Wales, Australia, a pattern which was replicated in other Western societies. Various theories were proposed for women's exnuptial pregnancies which resulted in their babies being taken for adoption, culminating in the discursive construction of the unmarried mother as "mad, bad, or stupid". Until the 1990s, the voices of women whose babies had been taken for adoption had been silenced by the social order which adoption practices served. It is through their voices, and through the voices of other women who remember the era of the adoption bounty, that another meaning for the loss of a baby to adoption, through the process of semanalysis, has been sought.

This thesis is informed primarily by the writings of the French postmodern feminist, Julia Kristeva. In addition the works of the post-structuralist philosopher, Michel Foucault, the German socialist feminist, Frigga Haug, and the American feminist psychologist, Michelle Fine are used as an heuristic lens through which to examine the phenomenon of losing a baby to adoption. A qualitative research methodology, incorporating feminist praxis and feminist multiple methods, has been employed.

The framework for this thesis is that of a double helix which depicts two orders, the symbolic and the semiotic, which intertwine and intersect. The symbolic order is analogous to the public social order which through its hegemonic discourses constructed the unmarried mother and adoption. The semiotic order refers to the personal space where the voices of women are heard through counterdiscourses. At the scission of the two helical strands sits the thetic phase, a point of rupture by the semiotic into the symbolic where the voices of mothers are expressed through their poetry and art.

Through the process of semanalysis, the tensions which simultaneously resist and challenge the semiotic and symbolic orders are exposed: tensions between discourse, discipline and docility; power and knowledge; sexuality and silence; power of / as sexuality; power and resistance; and resistance and / as silence. Furthermore, I examine the manifestations of mothers' resistance to silence, and their resistance as activism.

My concluding analysis involves the notion of abjection as it binds together the threads of the loss of a baby to adoption: abjection as entrapment; abjection as infertility; and abjection as / in reunion. For mothers who lost babies to adoption, their loss finds meaning in the ultimate horror: it is abjection.