

**“Like Topsy, We Grow”:
The Legacy of the Sentimental Domestic Novel
in Adoption Memoirs from Fifties America**

Elisabeth Wesseling

(Maastricht University, The Netherlands)

Abstract:

This article analyses the cultural work of adoption memoirs by stakeholders in transnational and transracial adoption in fifties America, Helen Doss and Bertha Holt. Their memoirs were instrumental in making transracial adoption acceptable in the eyes of a racially segregated society whose adoption policy had been premised upon the standard of maximum resemblance between adopters and adoptees. This rhetorical feat can be explained through their effective recycling of the tropes and commonplaces of the nineteenth-century sentimental, domestic novel. Grafting their memoirs upon the time-honoured script of a genre that is deeply ingrained in American culture, Holt and Doss also inherited the genre's maternalist bias. Analysing the nineteenth-century generic conventions and ideological assumptions that govern the life writing of these self-styled pioneers of transnational and transracial adoption serves to paint a rich picture of the ethical complexities involved in twentieth-century adoption practices.

Keywords: fifties America, life writing, maternalism, orphan trope, premediation, script, sentimental domestic novel, transnational and transracial adoption.

Like any other form of cultural remembrance, neo-Victorianism could only develop into a *lieu de mémoire* in contemporary culture through elaborate re-presentations and re-mediations of the nineteenth-century genres and media formats that shaped Victorian preoccupations. Cultural remembrance, however, is not only a matter of an intentional, deliberate re-imagining of obsolete cultural schemata. Past modes of mediation may also affect contemporary signifying practices without us being fully aware of their determining influence. In this sense, cultural remembrance is analogous to individual memory. On the one hand, individuals commemorate specific events quite consciously through specific memorial rituals. Here, we may think of the strongly pre-patterned celebration of

one’s birthday, or the remembrance of the death of a loved one through ritualised visits to the graveyard. On the other hand, the past also influences individual behaviours in the present without us being fully aware of its abiding presence, through the routines and habits that we have built up in the course of time and that we have come to experience as self-evident. We ‘remember’ these routines without giving them much thought, because we have fully internalised them. Likewise, contemporary signifying practices reiterate deeply ingrained modes of mediation that we apply almost automatically to our perceptions and representations of contemporary phenomena because they appear to be self-evident, or perhaps even ‘natural’. We follow these deeply ingrained cultural templates just as we apply the rules of our mother tongue when speaking. Where neo-Victorianism is concerned, this means not only that we deliberately refashion the Victorians into our neo-Victorian contemporaries, but also that we are the unwitting inheritors of the cultural templates within which the Victorians attempted to reconcile their conflicting allegiances.

1. Premediation and Neo-Victorianism

Andrew Hoskins and Astrid Erll, among others, have conveniently elaborated the concept of ‘premediation’ to come to terms with the largely unreflective, apparently involuntary dimension of cultural remembrance. Taking their lead from cognitive psychology, specifically schema theory, they argue that the ways in which we shape and interpret incoming perceptions and sensations in the present are pre-structured by mental schemata in which past experiences have congealed into Gestalt-like entities: “Schemata are a kind of framework and standard, which the unit of memory (mind, group, society) forms from past experiences and by which new experiences are expected, measured and also reflexively shaped”. They go on to propose that most schemata “are in fact media schemata, i.e. they are produced and disseminated within media culture (e.g. via oral speech, texts, and images)” (Hoskins and Erll 2011: 1). These media schemata *premediate* future experience and its representation and remediation (see Erll 2009).

Where narrative media are concerned, I prefer the term ‘script’ to ‘schema’ because of its greater specificity. A script is a mental schema that tells us what is to be done by whom in which order within specific circumstances (Herman 1997). Scripts need continuous maintenance, as they

are fleshed out, affirmed, criticised, and/or transformed by specific narrative artefacts such as novels, films, autobiographies, or documentaries. Scripts are always value-laden, in that they suggest not merely how to do something, but also that it is good to do it in this way, even though such values become inarticulate when scripts are passed on from one generation of media users to another. In other words, the values implied in scripts are largely tacit. When scripts fully take, we follow them semi-automatically, without being fully aware of it (Swidler 2001). Applied to neo-Victorianism, this means that many contemporary narrative practices are premediated by Victorian scripts for courtship, sexuality, family life, and the governance of self and others. A focus on premediation also implies that we move further back into the twentieth century than the conventional dating of neo-Victorianism would allow for. While literary works such as John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) are generally thought to mark the onset of neo-Victorianism, an interest in Victorian premediations may take us back to the 1950s, or even to the period between the two world wars.

The difference between the roles of premediation and remediation in the study of cultural remembrance is a matter not just of intentionality, but also of perspective. While inquiring into cultural remembrance with a focus on remediation, we study how actors in the present reinvent the past. Adopting the viewpoint of premediation, we analyse the subtle afterlife of the past within the present. The merit of the latter approach is that it may unearth implicit, largely submerged values, thereby making them amenable to ethical deliberation. The two approaches are complementary. Erll's monograph on cultural representations of the Indian Mutiny in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, for instance, demonstrates how the British press reports of the Mutiny were premediated by the atrocity writing of the Gothic novel (among others), while postulating how these premediations explain the cultural afterlife of this event in later periods in time (Erll 2007).

This article deals with nineteenth-century premediations of twentieth-century life stories about transnational and transracial adoption in 1950s America. I contend that seminal adoption memoirs have inherited some of the typical tropes and commonplaces of the sentimental domestic novel. Life stories by (prospective) adoptive parents play a crucial role in the weaving of the adoptive family. This point applies both to contemporary

practices of transnational adoption, which use all the possibilities that the new digital media have to offer (blogs, webforums, etc.) and to the first major wave in transnational and transracial adoption, namely Korean adoption in 1950s America. Adoption memoirs supply adoptees with origin stories that aim to assist them in the difficult identity work of reconciling their birth in a faraway country with their membership in a white middle-class family in the West. They also serve to legitimise and even propagate transnational adoption under the pressure of highly critical public opinion, which has always been divided over the benefits of transnational adoption, and under the close surveillance of the helping professions (social workers, paediatricians, family counsellors, psychiatrists) that monitor adoptive family making in modern Western welfare states.

In 1950s America, it was a daunting challenge to make the idea of transracial and transnational adoption acceptable in the eyes of a racially segregated society that basically only acknowledged domestic adoptions. Various military, political, and economic factors converged after the Second World War to turn transnational adoption into a mode of child transfer of such numerical significance that we may legitimately regard it as a form of migration (Hübinette 2004, Yuh 2005).¹ However, this does not mean that such adoption was uncontroversial. On the contrary, stakeholders in transnational and transracial adoption had the science-based helping professions to contend with, besides a widespread racism. Before Korean adoption gathered momentum in postwar America, modern American adoption had acquired the shape of a science-based and expert-governed practice in the first half of the twentieth century, which was premised upon the norm of maximum physical, intellectual, economic, and religious resemblance between adopters and adoptees. The helping professions monitored the adoption process from beginning to end. They selected prospective parents whom they deemed suitable for raising children, they classified these parents into specific categories that were subsequently matched to adoptees who had been categorised likewise, they coached and counselled the newfangled adoptive family, and they inquired into the development of adoptees through outcome studies (Herman 2008).

For obvious reasons, transracial and transnational adoption could not possibly comply with the standard of maximum resemblance. Hence, it stood in need of apology. Self-styled pioneers of transnational adoption, such as the Nobel-winning author Pearl S. Buck and the evangelicals Helen

and Carl Doss and Bertha and Harry Holt, rose to the occasion by setting up lobbying groups that struggled to reform adoption law, by seeking publicity through popular magazines, newspapers, radio and TV shows, and by publishing memoirs of their own adoption experiences, styling themselves as model adoptive families.² In particular, Helen Doss's memoir *The Family Nobody Wanted* (1954) turned out to be a real hit. It sold over 500,000 copies, went through twenty-four printings, was translated into seven languages, and was serialised by *McCall's* and disseminated by popular book clubs such as Sears Peoples Choice Book Club and Scholastic Books. On top of all this, it was adapted to the television screen twice (in 1954 and 1975, both for ABC prime time television).³ Many readers of Doss's bestseller have testified that they decided to adopt themselves after reading her memoir.⁴ Similarly, Bertha Holt's autobiography *The Seed from the East* (1956) became a major means of propaganda for the Holt adoption agency, and also helped to finance it.⁵

Although the prominent public personae of the Holts and Dosses cannot be credited with (or blamed for) triggering the first major wave of global adoption (Pate 2010), they played a crucial role in destabilising the paradigm of resemblance that had governed adoption up to that point. In other words, they were instrumental in the moral and political legitimisation of transnational and transracial adoption. The question is how their memoirs sorted this rhetorical effect. Briefly put, my answer will be that Doss and Holt managed to represent this mode of family making through the lens of a nineteenth-century literary genre that is deeply ingrained in both British and American culture, namely the sentimental novel. In other words, they did not confront the scientific establishment head-on through explicit rational argumentation, but through implicit narrative persuasion or seduction, catering to plots and values that are taken for granted and are likely to provoke tacit consent.

Literary sentimentalism loomed large on both sides of the Atlantic in the nineteenth century. In Victorian England, it was epitomised by the work of Charles Dickens. In mid-nineteenth-century American fiction, sentimentalism acquired an outspoken domestic focus, confining itself to goings-on inside the family home. The sentimental domestic novel propagated specific values concerning the nature of childhood, family, home, and nation that developed into cultural commonplaces in the course of the nineteenth century. The genre served to contain the numerous

ideological quandaries, conflicts, and contradictions that befuddled nineteenth-century imaginings of the family. In their introduction to *Neo-Victorian Families*, Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben present a lengthy catalogue of such ideological anomalies:

An age where the family hearth was celebrated as the virtuous bower of bliss and sanctuary from the corrupting competitiveness of the outside world; and where poor families were crammed into single or two-room hovels in slum conditions allowing little room for modesty or privacy [...] some selling their offspring into prostitution for the exigencies of sheer survival as much as profit. Where prolonged childhood was ‘invented’ as a state of carefree innocence; and where poor and working class children were deemed wayward ‘savages’ and even after the 1833 and later Factory Acts, forced to work excessive hours in often dangerous conditions in factories, mines, agriculture and on city streets to feed themselves and contribute financially to the family household (see Cunningham 2006: 154-160) – if they were lucky enough to be part of one. Where under the guise of new poor laws and middle-class philanthropy the breaking up of disadvantaged families became commonplace, whether by the imposed segregation of genders, parents and offspring in workhouses; the confinement of increasing numbers of ‘deviants’ to extra-familial institutions such as reformatories and asylums; or the deliberate removal from family homes of children deemed at risk – often rendered permanent by the rescuees’ subsequent encouraged or enforced emigration. (Kohlke and Gutleben 2011: 2-3)

This passage rightly observes that nineteenth-century family values that were understood to be universal in Victorian England in fact only applied to one specific social group, the white middle class, and inconsistently at that. These ideological tensions survived well into the twentieth century. One could argue that their scope was broadened in the course of the previous century, even up to this day, in that they became operative on a global rather than a merely national scale, in the complex relationships between the

economically underprivileged ‘third world’ and the affluent ‘first world’. This field of tension obviously also includes transnational adoption, “a cultural economy of race, gender, and kinship”, as the title of Sarah Dorow’s monograph on the topic has aptly characterised it (Dorow 2006). Struggling to impose Western, middle-class, Christian kinship values on the forging of family ties with children from a sorely afflicted, war-torn Korea, adoption pioneers such as Holt and Doss fell back on the script of the sentimental domestic novel that had served comparable purposes in Victorian times. This inquiry into the premediation of twentieth-century narrative representations of transnational adoption by the nineteenth-century sentimental novel focuses on a specific subset of kinship values derived from Victorian ideology, namely maternalism. In order to substantiate these points, I will first describe the distinctive features of the nineteenth-century sentimental domestic novel in American fiction. I will then go on to describe how the adoption memoirs by Doss and Holt fit into this discursive mould, in order to summarise how these authors mobilised the script of maternalist sentimentalism to challenge the authority of science-based adoption professionals who were averse to transnational and transracial adoption.

2. Literary Sentimentalism in America

It is generally acknowledged that the sentimental domestic novel, as exemplified by classics such as Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide, World* (1850), Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), Maria S. Cummins’s *The Lamplighter* (1854), and Emma Dorothy Eliza Nevitte Southworth’s *The Hidden Hand* (1859-1869, 1888), fulfilled a central role in defining, defending, and expanding woman’s sphere in nineteenth-century America.⁶ Joe Sutliff Sanders explains how the genre tied in with an important change in American educational culture, the shift from disciplining children through physical coercion, which was associated with paternal authority, to moulding them through gentle moral persuasion and affect, an approach that appealed to motherly virtues (Sanders 2011). The sentimental domestic novel played a crucial role in demonstrating the superiority of the latter to the first child-raising mode. It was greatly preoccupied with the extent to which children are educable, and with questions concerning the best methods for educating them: “Literature, especially novels, proved an effective venue for communicating and

modeling the sort of control privileged in the empire of the mother” (Sanders 2011: 31). As the sentimental novel short-circuited the distance between the micro-level of the family and the macro-level of society (see also below, under D and E), these were issues of great social import that were directly relevant to questions about the perfectibility of society. Sentimental novels taught readers to internalise authority and to govern themselves, rather than being externally governed through bodily punishment. Once one had learned to govern oneself, one could also set an example for others. In the course of the genre’s history, the covert dialectic of power involved in this delicate balance between the governance of selves and others came to include an ever widening circle of ‘other Others’, such as blacks, paupers, immigrants, and native inhabitants of the colonies (Sanders 2011: 151, Wexler 2000: 94-127). The basic message was that these people were all the same at heart, implying that the genre’s preoccupation with self-governance and interiority could extend to all of them.

The genre’s preference for gentle moral persuasion over strict physical coercion implied strong maternalist leanings.⁷ The Victorian ideology of maternalism celebrated the sanctity of motherhood as an inexhaustible fountain of understanding, empathy, and loving care. It entailed an overtly religious veneration of domesticity and the special position of woman within the family. Maternalists felt that the ennobling force of motherhood was so valuable that it would be a pity to confine it to the family only. In their eyes, it deserved to be disseminated throughout society as a means of uplifting the poor, oppressed, and needy wherever they were found. Maternalism collapsed the micro-level of the family and the macro-level of the nation-state within a religious framework. As Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe put it,

The family state, then, is the aptest earthly illustration of the heavenly kingdom, and in it woman is its chief minister. Her great mission is self-denial, in training its members to self-sacrificing labors for the ignorant and weak: if not her own children, then the neglected children of her Father in heaven. (Beecher and Beecher Stowe 2010: 15)

The following literary features of the sentimental domestic novel substantiate its maternalist concerns, which, taken together, constitute the script of the sentimental novel:

A. The first thing to note is that the sentimental novel is a strongly *affective form*, as its name indicates, meaning that it aimed to stir, mould, and mobilise the emotions of the reading audience in order to stimulate their allegiance to social causes such as abolition or temperance (Douglas 1978). Its overall purpose was to induce compassion in the reader for those who were less fortunate. The sentimental novel aspired to change society by changing the hearts of the reading audience, providing sentimental education (Tompkins 1985). Literary sentimentalism “is premised on an emotional and philosophical ethos that celebrates human connection, both personal and communal, and acknowledges the shared devastation of affectional loss” (Dobson 1997: 266). It is all about bonding and affiliation, and, conversely, about the terrible suffering that inevitably ensues upon the rupturing of vital ties. Slavery, for instance, is essentially evil, according to Beecher Stowe’s landmark novel, because it breaks up the families of slaves and does not even allow them to enter into lasting ties with their masters, as they are repeatedly sold from one plantation to another.

B. In order to appeal to the emotions of the reader as strongly as possible, the melodramatic plots of sentimental novels are typically constructed out of highly convoluted series of *dramatic ups and downs* (Vicinus 1981). The downs in sentimental fiction invariably come down to the loss of family ties, and the ups to their establishment or restoration. Besides the theatrical genre of melodrama, sentimental fiction also partakes of the rhetoric of missionary conversion tales, with stark contrasts between the situation ‘before’ (conversion) and ‘after’ (Murdoch 2010: 15). Some form of self-sacrifice of a powerless female character or an innocent child serves to stir the commiseration of the audience to maximum intensity. The sentimental novel generally sides with the powerless and meek, who are finally liberated from the clutches of those who exploited them, if only through a merciful death.

C. Where stock characters are concerned, the sentimental novel of the domestic, melodramatic kind requires at least one devoted, loving *mother or*

female mother-substitute and *an orphan*. Orphans are ideally suited to melodramatic sentimentalism, as they embody the powerless and meek that the reader should take pity on. Through the vulnerability that follows from their lack of relatives, they function as catalysts that bring out either the best or the worst in man, shedding considerable light on issues concerning the educability of children and the perfectibility of society. As orphans are underprivileged, lacking a proper family context and all the advantages this context could entail, they are interesting test-cases for issues of educability. Orphans stand in need of redemption, or function as instruments of redemption, or both. The omnipresence of orphans in sentimental fiction and the various forms of adoption that ‘saved’ them contested the value of consanguinity as the key to family unity. Thus, orphan characters helped to blur the boundaries between the family unit and larger social wholes, demonstrating that blood ties are not necessarily stronger than the ties of the heart. Given the affective nature of the sentimental novel, which was geared towards stirring the reader’s indignation, it was but a small step from reading a book to joining a philanthropic organisation or missionary society.

Representations of motherly love tend to exemplify the appropriate attitude towards poor and orphaned souls, which stops at no boundary, freely extending itself to all who need it. The genre’s celebration of motherhood is summed up by Stowe’s rhapsody on the maternal rocking chair in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*:

For twenty years or more, nothing but loving words, and gentle moralities, and motherly loving kindness, had come from that chair; – head-aches and heart-aches innumerable had been cured there, – difficulties spiritual and temporal solved there, – all by one good, loving woman, God bless her! (Beecher Stowe 1995: 125).

Maternal love is capable of surmounting any barrier that keeps people apart in the mundane world. It is credited with great transformative power, as it can educate any wayward, ignorant, deprived, or selfish child into a well-adjusted, self-governing individual ready to occupy his or her proper place both in the household and in society at large.

To bring out the nobility of the virtuous characters, the cast of sentimental melodrama also needs to include villains, such as callous

parents (mostly fathers) or guardians, abusive masters, idle sons, or wayward daughters.

D. The sentimental novel accords ample space to *domestic realism*, in that the minutiae of household chores are divulged to the reader at great length (Camfield 2005). No detail seems to be too trivial or humble to be unworthy of representation. On the contrary, images of proper domestic order figure as metaphors for social harmony and as prefigurations of the peaceable kingdom. Household chores are thus endowed with profound spiritual meaning (see also below, under E). Material or physical well-being and spiritual well-being implicate each other in the sentimental novel. Feeding and clothing the needy is not just a matter of protecting their vulnerable bodies, but also of saving their as yet unredeemed souls.

E. The sentimental novel frequently engages in *typology or religious allegory*, in keeping with its religious subtext. From a typological perspective, scenes, events, and characters in the here and now repeat or foreshadow earlier or later episodes in eschatological history. Sacrificial characters repeat the sacrifice of Christ, proper governance of the homestead exemplifies the ideal polis, and the well-governed nation prefigures the kingdom of God on earth (Tompkins 1985). The allegorical dimension of sentimental fiction is instrumental in linking the micro-level of the homestead to the macro-level of society.

As a consequence of its affective and activist orientation, the impact of sentimental fiction extended far beyond the realm of poetics into the realm of politics, witness the much-discussed contribution of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to abolitionism. The sentimental novel did not want to stir the feelings of its audience for the purpose of revelling in feelings only. Rather, the stirring of feelings was meant as a call to action or social reform.

3. Adoption Memoirs in the Sentimental Mode

Let me now elaborate how Doss's and Holt's autobiographies employ the rhetoric of literary sentimentalism to plead the cause of transnational and transracial adoption. In such endeavours, the question invariably arises whether these authors were familiar with the genre at stake. I would answer this question in two ways. First, Doss herself clearly signals

that she knows Stowe’s work by hinting at *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in the title of her fourth chapter, ‘Like Topsy, We Grow’. The title refers to the passage in which Miss Ophelia asks the slave girl Topsy whether she knows who her mother was and who made her. Topsy famously answers, “I s’pect I grow’d. Don’t think nobody never made me” (Beecher Stowe 1995: 224). In addition, it is hardly likely that an evangelical Christian such as Holt, born in 1904, would *not* know *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. My second answer is that this question is less important than it might seem. From the perspective of premediation, it is not necessary for Holt and Doss to deliberately adapt the typical features of literary sentimentalism to their own purposes, as the concept allows for much more unreflective, semi-automatic modes of cultural recycling.

If we want to argue that literary sentimentalism premediated the adoption memoirs of Holt and Doss, it is more relevant to determine whether literary sentimentalism was an enduring, pervasive cultural presence during the period in which the two women developed their outlook on life (the first decades of the twentieth century), in such a way that these authors could have easily tapped into it without making a conscious effort to do so. Such was indeed the case. First of all, although the literary production of sentimental novels for adult audiences slackened after 1870, the torch of sentimentalism was taken over by late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century children’s literature, which resulted in widely read evergreens such as Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* (1868), Kate Douglas Wiggin’s *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* (1903), Lucy Maud Montgomery’s *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden* (1911), and Eleanor H. Porter’s *Pollyanna* (1913) (see Sanders 2011). These books reached perhaps even larger numbers of readers than sentimental novels for adults, and at a moment when readers are still very much open to persuasion. Children’s literature is a cultural force that shapes us even though by the time we reach adulthood we may not retain a clear concept of exactly how it has done so. It is more than likely that the authors under study read at least some of these children’s (or rather girls’) books as they grew up. In fact, Doss explicitly refers to *Pollyanna* in *The Family Nobody Wanted*.

Given the strong social impact that both Ann Douglas and Jane Tompkins have attributed to sentimental fiction, however different their evaluation of the social merits of the genre may be (Douglas 1978,

Tompkins 1985), it stands to reason that we also open our eyes to the after-effects of this genre beyond the literary realm. As Laura Wexler rightly remarks, literary sentimentalism continued to affect ever widening audiences after literary production had passed its peak, through the institutionalisation of its seminal works in the curricula and reading programs of (Sunday) schools, churches, hospitals, and other such bodies (Wexler 2000: 103). Moreover, melodramatic sentimentalism developed into a discursive mode that spread beyond the genre of the novel to other discourse types. Late nineteenth-century philanthropic propaganda that wanted to better the lot of pauper children in both Britain and the United States also relied quite heavily on the rhetoric of maternalist sentimentalism.⁸ This reliance is in line with the gradual broadening of the scope of sentimental children's literature during the Progressive Era, when the power of sympathy and moral suasion was used to "endorse an imperial right to impose white, bourgeois, American Protestantism" on the incoming immigrants (Sanders 2011: 151). Pauper children tended to be cast as orphans, as 'waifs', 'strays', or 'street Arabs', even if their parents were still alive. The rhetorical effects of these labels were diverse. They could be used to place these children beyond the pale of human sympathy and neighbourly love, encouraging those who had use for them to exploit them as unpaid servants, farm hands, or factory labourers, as was the custom in practices of 'placing out' (Holt 1992). Within the context of philanthropic discourse, however, these labels served to appeal to feelings of benevolent pity and to extol the transformative power of philanthropic munificence through the familiar rhetorical ploy of 'before' and 'after' contrasts.

Pauper children in the metropolis shared their fate of being staged as essentially parentless with indigenous children at the outskirts of empire,⁹ a tendency that was firmly established in the nineteenth-century imaginary.¹⁰ In keeping with the widening circle of 'other Others' whose hearts were to be touched by the gentle moral persuasion of motherly love, the culture of sentimental domesticity also played a demonstrable role in the imperial expansion of the American empire through missionary work. Karen Sánchez-Eppler has analysed how "the empire of the mother" took on imperial dimensions quite literally in (late) nineteenth-century missionary tracts and missionary stories for children. This body of literature supported an "evangelical expansionism" in which female missionaries played a significant role. America's role in late nineteenth-century missionary

practices is not be underestimated, as the United States was the world's largest source of Protestant missionaries to Asia and Africa by the 1880s (Sanchez-Eppler 2005: 186-221).

Finally, it has been argued convincingly that middlebrow female authors who rose to prominence during the 1920s and 1930s, such as Buck, Dorothy Canfield, Jessie Fauset, and Josephine Herbst, also took their lead from the sentimentalist tradition in American fiction (Harker 2007). With Buck, we clearly move into the inner circle of 1950s adoption activists; she, the Holts, and the Dosses all knew each other as comrades-in-arms who were fighting for a common cause, while it is demonstrably the case that Helen Doss knew and admired Buck's literary work. Thus, while the sentimental novel never managed to settle in the regions of highbrow literature, it reached large reading audiences well into the twentieth century, especially through its 'by-products' such as children's novels, missionary tracts, and philanthropic propaganda in the mode of sentimental domesticity, meaning that its cultural influence was pervasive. This point may help to account for the affinities between the nineteenth-century sentimental novel and the adoption memoirs under study, a list with which I conclude this section.

Like the sentimental novel, the two memoirs have an obvious *affective orientation*, appealing to the audience's emotions and social conscience in two ways. First of all, both books want to impress the reader with the plight of 'mixed race' children, whether in South Korea (Holt) or in American orphanages (Doss). While waiting for her family's presumed completion with a second adoptee through regular adoption procedures, Doss accidentally discovers that her long wait is not caused by any shortage of adoptable children in American orphanages; there are plenty of children out there waiting with equal (im)patience for a family to adopt them. These are the mixed race children that "nobody wanted". It seems as if the Dosses are the only adoptive parents who do not object to 'half caste' children, for after this discovery, her family grows rapidly, until they are blessed with twelve children from Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Korean, Mexican, and Native American backgrounds, a "one-family United Nations", as it was called.¹¹ Holt also belabours "the tragic plight of illegitimate children" (Holt 1956: 25). She describes her and her husband's attendance at the missionary Bob Pierce's lecture on the difficult situation of unwanted Korean GI babies as their road to Damascus. Lightning struck, their eyes were opened, and

they felt called upon to do something about it (Holt 1956: 24-27). The second aim these memoirs aspire towards is to instil a mimetic desire in the hearts of their readers that will compel them to do the same thing that the authors have done. Both dwell at length on the enjoyment and satisfaction that is provided by families like theirs, as they reap both moral and hedonistic rewards: "I remembered what Harry said, 'Folks think we've done such a noble thing. They just don't know how much fun it is.' And he was right. It is eight times as much fun to cover eight children as to cover one" (Holt 1956: 242). The overall message is that a family made up out of children that nobody wanted is easily transformed into the very family that everybody would want.

The heart-rending death of little Eva in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is paralleled in *The Seed from the East* by the death of "poor little Judy" (Holt 1956: 111), a Korean orphan adopted by Harry Holt on his first mission to Korea. The baby girl only lived for six months and died before he could take her back with him to the U.S. Although the Holt home front never got the opportunity to make "Judy's" acquaintance, there was a great deal of grief and weeping on both sides of the globe over her death, all of it represented in the unmistakable idiom of sentimentalism:

'Poor little Judy,' I said between the tears. 'Harry wanted so much to bring her to our lovely America. But now she is in a far more wonderful place than this, I'm sure ... in the arms of the One who experienced death to redeem us'. (Holt 1956: 111).

Bertha Holt's memoir contains a picture of the grave of the baby girl, who was born in Korea and who died there too, but with an American name and a biblical scripture on her tombstone (Holt 1956: 112).

Next, Holt's and Doss's adoption narratives are as full of *surprising twists of fate* as any melodramatic, sentimental work. Holt relates how their lives changed completely when they had already entered middle age. Before their Korean adventure, they were a settled, wealthy, middle-class family, living with six blossoming children in a spacious family home. By the end of the story, their family has more than doubled with eight Korean adoptees. Between beginning and end, there is much to-ing and fro-ing between Korea and the United States, with Harry Holt going through all sorts of breakneck

manoeuvres to move ‘orphans’ whose lives hang in the balance out of an apparently callous, reputedly racist Korea and into the supposedly safe haven of the United States. If we also take the sequel to *The Seed from the East* into account, *Bring My Sons From Afar* (1986), we learn that the family eventually ends up in a tent in South Korea, with their financial resources depleted by the construction of orphanages that were to keep Korean babies alive while their papers were being processed. Rather than a rags-to-riches plot, these memoirs follow a riches-to-rags scenario.¹² Doss’s story is about desperately desiring something, and then finally getting it in the end, but in a completely different way from how one expected it to happen: “I didn’t yearn for a career or maids and a fur coat, or a trip to Europe. All in the world I wanted was a happy, normal little family”, she states in the opening lines of her autobiography (Doss 2001: 3). The concluding lines record the following dialogue with her husband: “Carl asked me softly, ‘Well, do you have what you wanted out of life, now?’ ‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Do you?’ Carl looked ahead at his three newest children, and on his face was the look of a proud father, a happy man. ‘I sure do,’ he said” (Doss 2001: 267). Although the Doss family is neither “normal” nor “little”, the author repeatedly claims that this is the very family she had always wanted: “‘Somehow I feel that our family was meant to be just this way’” (Doss 2001: 263).

In both cases, there is a religious subtext behind the volte-face twists and turns of the melodramatic plot, in that the writers testify to the often inscrutable nature of divine guidance. “God moves in a mysterious way / His wonders to perform,” according to an often-sung hymn (William Cowper, 1774), and this point certainly also comes out in these life stories. In between the expression and the eventual fulfilment of the desire for familial bonding, the Holts and Dosses take many risks and incur many losses. The Dosses face the rupturing of familial ties when their Japanese foster son Taro goes back to live with his father and when the adoption of one of Germany’s “brown babies” (Gretchen) proves impossible because of official resistance to facilitating Gretchen’s placement with white parents.

The third affinity between the sentimental novel and these adoption memoirs lies in the memoirs’ use of the *stock characters* of sentimental fiction; both memoirs prominently feature destitute ‘orphans’ and loving mothers. In both cases, birth parents are conspicuously absent. Although it is not at all unlikely that the Korean children who were brought into the

orphanages of the Holts might still have had mothers, or other family members of some sort, this probability does not enter Holt's memoir even once. It is simply taken for granted that they are without family, and there is no record in Holt's writings of anyone ever questioning this assumption or inquiring into the specific ways in which the children were abandoned. The same observation applies to Doss's memoir. We never learn anything about the birth parents of the children she adopts, except in the case of the foster (not adoptive) child Taro, who still has his father to go back to, and one occasion on which an adoption does not occur, the case of an American unwed mother who decides after the child's birth not to go through with her plan to surrender the baby. Apart from these two cases pertaining to children who do not become part of the Doss family, all the other adoptees resemble Topsy in that they seem to have just grown. And this circumstance is not so strange, if we consider the fact that a cultural tradition of at least a century has predetermined these authors to look at deprived, non-white children through the trope of the orphan.

However difficult their start in life may have been, these 'orphans' all became living evidence of the transformative power of maternal love after their adoption. Doss records in detail how her adopted children entered her household burdened with specific developmental problems. For instance, Susie was pathologically scared of strangers, while Rita was retarded according to the social worker who handled her case (Doss 2001: 60-61). Remarkably, all the Doss children are cured of their developmental disorders quickly, as they morph into happy, playful children and companionable siblings, usually within a month, according to their new mother's record.

These miracles play an important role in Doss's struggle with the helping professions, which tend to focus on the problems rather than the promises of adoption. From the secular point of view of the helping professions, adoptees cannot be regarded as anything other but damaged goods that, if we follow the insights of psychoanalysis and attachment theory, are more or less beyond repair, for they have all suffered traumatic abandonment during early childhood. The Dosses and Holts, however, have a different tale to tell. According to their experiences, motherly love is capable of healing any trauma, curing any disorder, and transcending any difference:

As I watch these children play, as I see them meet their childhood problems and grapple with them in their childlike manner, I became possessor of the fact that human nature is universal. And I know full well that love is the key that unlocks a heart. (Holt 1956: 75)

Thus, there are no boundaries to “the empire of the Mother”: any heart may be touched by the gentle moral persuasion of motherly love. Time and again, these advocates of transracial adoption pit the power of maternal love against the problem-oriented expertise of the helping professions. The professional experts are the ‘villains’ in these autobiographical melodramas, one could say, together with all those faceless bureaucrats and racist Koreans and Americans who do not seem to care about the plight of these children.¹³

The fourth affinity is that the adoption memoirs under study fully partake of the *domestic realism* that characterises the sentimental novel. Both works teem with nitty-gritty details of the daily business of taking care of a booming family. The care and devotion that goes into the feeding, clothing, and housing of a large family on a small budget are divulged at great length, and the ways in which these adoptive mothers manage to establish some form of order and balance are reminiscent of the utopian breakfast scene at the Quaker settlement where the runaway slaves Eliza and George take refuge in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. According to Tompkins, this scene is to be regarded as a miniature of a utopian state, in which every person knows his or her own specific position and function, contributing to the larger whole of which they are all an equal part (Tompkins 1985: 142). It is illuminating to compare this image of domestic bliss with analogous passages in the memoirs by Doss and Holt:

[F]or a breakfast in the luxurious valleys of Indiana is a thing complicated and multiform, like picking up the rose-leaves and trimming the bushes in Paradise asking other hands than those of the original mother. While, therefore, John ran to the spring for fresh water, and Simeon the second sifted meal for corn-cakes, and Mary ground coffee, Rachel moved gently and quietly about, making biscuits, cutting up chicken, and diffusing a sort of sunny radiance over the whole proceeding

generally. If there was any danger of friction or collision from the ill-regulated zeal of so many young operators, her gentle ‘Come! Come!’ or ‘I wouldn’t, now’, was quite sufficient to allay the difficulty. Bards have written of the cestus of Venus, that turned the heads of all the world in successive generations. We had rather, for our part, have the cestus of Rachel Halliday, that kept heads from being turned, and made everything go on harmoniously. We think it is more suited to our modern days, decidedly.

Everything went on so sociably, so quietly, so harmoniously, in the great kitchen, – it seemed so pleasant to every one to do just what they were doing, there was such an atmosphere of mutual confidence and good fellowship everywhere. (Stowe 1995: 130-131)

Now, with Carl cooking the morning meal, with my breakfast dishes, my daily washing, and housecleaning done by noon, I was practically a lady of leisure. The three smallest boys took naps after lunch, the other nine children were still at school, and I had my afternoons to work on a college extension course. [...] When grade school let out I had plenty of time to talk with the children, and still get a casserole or stew finished for supper, along with a gallon or two of tossed salad. In the evenings I took care of the family mending, while the children sat at Carl’s feet and listened to stories, or while we all sang. Our family was always singing. (Doss 2001: 262)

I was ready for bed but I still had to make the usual rounds and turn off the light. [...] There were the usual items of apparel scattered about. I picked up a green boot, which belonged to Joe; and a brown boot owned by Christine; and in the library I found a black one belonging to Nat and one of Mary’s red ones. On the table in the library was a box of neatly piled letters, all addressed and stamped for mailing. I turned off the light and headed for the kitchen. [...] I saw freshly-frosted cinnamon rolls beneath waxed paper. These

Wanda had prepared for Sunday morning breakfast. She had also laid bacon strips in a neat arrangement across the frying pan on the stove. [...] In the dining room I was greeted with a table already set. There were eight blue Willow-ware plates and eight stainless steel bowls. Across each high chair lay a bib. I said to myself that Suzanne had done her work well. Before snapping off the light in the dining room I added to my collection two more boots. [...] I left the boots in the nursery closet and turned off the hall light. From there I went to the nursery bathroom and was happy to see Linda had done her job well, too. The round enamelware was shining brightly and the room had a slight smell of Lysol. Barbara’s neat piles of “tomorrow’s clothes” lay in the clean, dry bathtub. There were four piles of girls’ clothes in the tub, and there were four stacks of boys’ clothes on the edge. Feeling grateful I switched off the last light. (Holt 1956: 241-242)

These scenes of domestic order are all suggestive of social harmony and togetherness. Within the well-ordered households, all family members have their own tasks, while they are made to move in unison through gentle maternal guidance. In Doss’s case, the icon of joint family singing is the ultimate expression of perfect unity, as in *The Sound of Music* (1959) and the widely read memoirs of Maria von Trapp on which the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical was based. Admittedly, domestic harmony is hard work (those boots all over the place) but fun too (with the colourful boots symbolising the Holts’ cheerful rainbow family). These pictures of perfect equilibrium and peace signify how people from different backgrounds, ethnicities, age groups, and abilities could live together and contribute to each other’s well-being and happiness. The ideal world seems to be within everyone’s reach.

Finally, the *typological, allegorical dimension* is also present in these seminal adoption memoirs, although it is much more outspoken and explicit in Holt’s memoir than in Doss’s, the first being the more overtly missionary of the two. The motto of the Holts’ life work derives from the Old Testament:

I will bring thy seed from the east, and gather thee from the west; I will say to the north, Give up; and to the south, Keep not back: bring my sons from afar, and my daughters from the ends of the earth; Even every one that is called by my name: for I have created him for my glory, I have formed him; yea, I have made him. (*Isaiah* 43: 5-7)

When Harry Holt was beset by doubt about the rightness of his first expedition to Korea, he opened the Bible at random in the belief that God would guide him to an appropriate passage that contained a message specifically meant for him, as is the custom among evangelical Christians. On that occasion, he chanced upon this particular scripture, which he interpreted as divine encouragement of his work with Korean orphans. This passage, Bertha Holt fully realises, is a prophecy of the end to the diaspora of Israel. Nevertheless, she felt it also applied to their work, in keeping with the conventions of typological narrative. Within this framework, the gathering together of scattered and abandoned GI babies within the United States prefigures the end of the diaspora of God's chosen people, while it is at the same time reminiscent of America's past as an immigrant nation. The scripture from Isaiah can be easily aligned with the inscription on the Statue of Liberty, from a sonnet by Emma Lazarus: "Give me your tired, your poor, / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, / The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. / Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, / I lift my lamp beside the golden door!" In this way, the Holts construed global adoption as an implementation of their patriotic and Christian duties, staging their transracial family as the very icon and symbol of the American nation and the kingdom of God that is yet to come. Thus, the private sphere of the family and the public sphere of the nation-state mirror and define each other.

4. Combating the Adoption Professionals

Pioneers of transnational and transracial adoption were up against the scientific establishment of the helping professions, which upheld resemblance as the key to successful adoption. In other words, science-based adoption attempted to replicate the consanguineous family as closely as possible. Why is the rhetoric of the sentimental domestic novel, with its maternalist bias, such a powerful weapon in the struggle against science-

based adoption professionals? The first answer derives from the centrality of the orphan trope in the genre of the sentimental domestic novel. Imagining children from the opposite end of the globe as orphans means that they are largely divested of the markers that define them as ‘other’. Cut loose from their moorings in a different family, class, country, religion, and culture, orphans become blank slates on which one can subsequently inscribe the marks of the adoptive family’s identifications. Therefore, an orphaned Asian child is less ‘other’ than an adult immigrant from the same region. The first appears to be much more susceptible to the all-transforming power of maternal love than the second. Orphans appear to have just grown, like Topsy, and therefore seem to be there for the taking, to be moulded at will, without anybody having any prior claims on them.

Second, the emphasis on the all-embracing power of motherly love that is proper to maternalist sentimentalism provided the Holts and Dosses with the necessary rhetorical tool for profiling themselves as anti-racist, with the implicit suggestion that the resemblance-fetishists are to be placed in the opposite camp. Holt and Doss insist with religious fervour on the idea that God has created all the races of man, meaning that they all are God’s children and therefore equally deserving of love, care, and respect. Doss’s memoir repeatedly launches frontal attacks on American racism in general and on discrimination against black and brown Americans in particular, her own transracial family serving as a permanent test case for racial (in)tolerance in suburban America. A similar argument applies to the Holts, who regarded themselves as opponents of racism wherever they found it, both in South Korea and the United States. Although neither the Holts nor the Dosses ever openly accused the helping professions of racism to my knowledge, there is a persistent suggestion in their works that adoption professionals were blind to the real needs of children whose situation was desperate, preferring to focus on the perfection of their own professional standards and the protection of their own professional interests.

Third, the rhetoric of maternalist sentimentalism served to boost the authority of experience-based child-raising expertise as opposed to the science-based expertise of the adoption professionals, thereby empowering Holt and Doss to speak out against them. Their revival of maternalist values recovered an earlier stage in the history of the helping professions, which originated from maternalist organisations in the later nineteenth century, before they were placed under the regime of science. Maternalism was a

driving force behind first-wave feminism, as it supported women's conquest of the world outside of the home, albeit somewhat paradoxically. On the one hand, it subscribed to the patriarchal notion that woman's place was inside the home, where she had a special spiritual mission to fulfil. Maternalists tended to embrace this position with an almost masochistic emphasis on the necessity of female self-sacrifice. On the other hand, given that it was but a very short step from the family unit to society at large within the American cultural imaginary, maternalists wanted to spread the transformative power of motherhood throughout society, which implied that woman's work was basically everywhere. All social institutions were best run as large families where maternalists were concerned, an equation that was strongly conducive to the entrance of women into the public sphere. As Nina Baym puts it:

The domestic ideal meant not that woman was to be sequestered from the world in her place at home but that everybody was to be placed in the home, and hence that home and the world would become one. Then, to the extent that woman dominated the home, the ideology implied an unprecedented historical expansion of her influence. (Baym 1978: xxvii)

It is hardly radical to claim that woman is the 'chief minister' of the family, but when the boundaries between private and public space are dissolved by short-circuiting the distance between the family homestead and the nation-state, then this claim becomes radical indeed.

In order to spread the blessings of motherly love, maternalists organised themselves into activist societies such as the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), and missionary societies in different shapes and sizes. These organisations proved fertile breeding grounds for new social movements (Jacobs 2005), most notably the abolitionist and the suffrage movements. More crucial to our concerns, maternalism was a driving force behind the rise of the new profession of the (female) social worker, which facilitated the emergence of the modern welfare state (see Klaus 1993; Koven and Michel 1993; Ladd-Taylor 1994; Skocpol 1992). Nineteenth-century maternalists had shaped new social practices such as social work and family counselling on the basis of their experience as mothers. In the course of the

twentieth century, however, science-based expertise managed to outshine experiential expertise (Waaldijk 1996; Hering and Waaldijk 2003). In other words, a young, childless professional with a college degree came to be regarded as a more reliable source of child-rearing advice than a (grand)mother who spoke from her own experience. The shift from experience-based to science-based expertise also served to secularise the helping professions, undercutting the religious veneration of the sanctity of motherhood that was so central to maternalist sentimentalism. In other words, the twentieth-century ‘psychological complex’ (Rose 1985) degraded mothers from subjects into objects of professional surveillance and clinical scrutiny.

By reviving the maternalist rhetoric that had supported woman’s rule in the emergent helping professions, Holt and Doss attempted to regain some agency and dignity as experiential child-rearing experts, so as to entitle themselves to oppose the science-based professionals. In a passage strongly reminiscent of the panegyric on the maternal rocking chair in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Holt describes the daily ritual called “rock-a-by-time” (Holt 1956: 224). The children are gathered together every day for communal singing, with Bertha sitting in their midst on the ‘throne’ of her rocking chair, rocking the children two by two. Holt portrays herself as the very centre of the family in this scene, and as a woman whose place is inside the home. When we look back on this first autobiography from the perspective of its sequel, *Bring My Sons from Afar*, it becomes clear that neither Harry nor Bertha Holt could have possibly spent all that much time with their adopted children. After bringing eight Korean children into their own home, they felt that this was not nearly enough. From that moment onwards, they became adoption activists who were instrumental in transferring thousands of mixed race children into the US through the adoption agency they founded, which still exists today as Holt International. This work imposed highly demanding administrative duties upon Bertha, and considerable travelling on Harry, who eventually went so far as to build orphanages on Korean soil with his own hands. Thus, the Holt family was anything but a self-contained, quiet, or insular sanctuary. It is no exaggeration to state that they felt called upon to become parents to all the children who had been fathered by American soldiers in Korea. Motherhood is not easily contained within the confines of the nuclear family, it seems, but may easily develop into a world-changing force, with Bertha Holt eventually going down in

history as ‘Grandma Holt’, the founding mother of Korean adoption who outlived her husband by several decades.

Doss belabours the professional import and wide-ranging social claims of her expertise in mothering as well. She opens her memoir by emphasising the modesty of her life’s one great wish cited earlier: “All in the world I wanted was a happy, normal little family” (Doss 2001: 3). Really? In an article written for the Sears Peoples Book Club, she opens with a different claim: “As far back as I can remember, I wanted to be a writer.” Mary Battenfeld, who quotes this statement in her introduction to the reissue of Doss’s memoir, continues: “As the biographer and mother of the very public ‘family nobody wanted’, Doss implicitly challenges the postwar relegation of women to a protected and privatized home” (Battenfeld 2001: xxix). Doss’s “one family United Nations” very much partakes of the ethos that also inspired the famous photographic exhibition *The Family of Man*, a transnational ideal of world peace that extolled the American nation as a haven for immigrants in all shapes and sizes, presided over by maternalists rather than paternalists.

These authors’ recycling of maternalist and sentimentalist viewpoints on the weaving of family was by no means a unique or isolated cultural phenomenon in 1950s America. As Christina Klein has demonstrated, Cold War America’s foreign policy cultivated maternalist values in a concerted effort to present itself to the international community as a new type of imperial power (Klein 2003: 143-191). It was of vital importance to America to distinguish its containment politics from old-school, paternalist European colonialism, based on force, so as to attract newly decolonised nations in Asia as satellite states, with a view to creating a *cordon sanitaire* around communist Russia and China. The United States stylised itself as a non-coercive, non-exploitative, nonviolent, but hierarchically superior power that could provide newly emergent nations with the necessary (military) protection and (economic) support, coaxing rather than forcing them into allegiance, thereby replicating the shift in educational style that had been propagated by literary sentimentalism on the macro-level of (neo-)imperialist politics. The family unit was the ideal trope for representing a benevolent, non-coercive hierarchy, with parents enjoying the indisputable right to guide their children to the latter’s benefit. The United States posed as an affectionate, all-embracing mother, rather than a strict, coercive father, who kindly adopted the smaller and weaker members

of the family of man, regardless of race. The transracial and transnational adoptive family turned this trope into social reality, boosting America's positive image in the eyes of the international community. Klein analyses in great detail how 1950s middlebrow culture was obsessed with representing Americans in Asia; witness highly popular musicals such as *The King and I* (1951) and *South Pacific* (1958). These works celebrated the potential of Americans to transcend racial prejudice and to bond with people from other nationalities and races, even up to the point of engaging in intimate, familial relationships with them, as shown by the transnational adoption in which *South Pacific* culminates. Thus, transracial and transnational adoption developed into a social practice of great political and symbolical importance during the 1950s, performing important identity work for this hegemonic global power. Practices and representations of transnational adoption were firmly embedded within a coherent cultural imaginary that manifested itself at different social and cultural sites.

It would be historically naive, however, to abide by the self-understanding of the Dosses and Holts only when assessing the complex legacy of maternalist sentimentalism in their struggle to propagate transnational and transracial adoption as a humanitarian practice of saving 'orphans' from war-stricken areas or domestic trouble. Maternalism did not only inspire social phenomena that we still like to identify with nowadays, such as abolitionism and first-wave feminism. It also had a darker side that is much more difficult to face up to. Maternalism was an important source of inspiration for female missionaries and social workers from the United States and the United Kingdom, who felt called upon to instruct their 'darker sisters' where the skills and virtues of motherhood were concerned. Finding indigenous groups such as Native Americans and Australian Aboriginals wanting in the ways they conducted their family lives, maternalists felt no qualms about taking their children away from them so as to re-educate them, either by institutionalising them or by giving them away to white mothers whose maternal virtues were supposedly more fully developed (Jacobs 2009). Often enough, these children were removed by force, as the current epithet 'stolen generations' emphasises. The self-proclaimed antiracism of the pioneers of transnational and transracial adoption also needs to be evaluated in this light. As Laura Briggs demonstrates at length, the 'orphans' who are adopted into Western families are always somebody's children, and these unknown and invisible parents

belong to ethnically subordinate and economically disadvantaged groups (Briggs 2012). The colour-blind humanitarianism that transforms children from non-Western countries into members of Western families often has a discriminatory flipside that faces the adult representatives of the so-called donor countries. Therefore, we should not take Topsy at her own word when she accounts for her origins.

I have attempted to demonstrate how the seminal adoption memoirs by Bertha Holt and Helen Doss were premediated by a popular nineteenth-century literary genre. Clearly, their struggle with the adoption professionals was not merely a matter of an open debate over explicitly contested values. Narrative persuasion and the largely tacit transfer of maternalist values also played an important role. The merit of studying cultural remembrance through the lens of premediation is that it enables us to become articulate about the ideological underpinnings of narrative persuasion, in our case, about the maternalist bias of the memoirs under study. This examination reveals that the ethics of the first major wave of transnational and transracial adoption are complex and ambivalent, confronting us with difficult questions about the extent to which the humanitarian struggle to save children through adoption in the 1950s was continuous with and/or different from the practices that produced the 'stolen generations'. Explicating largely implicit values in scripted aesthetic and social practices serves to paint a rich picture of the ethical complexities involved in transnational and/or transracial adoption, not so much to pass judgment on it, but to prepare the ground for a more historically informed and nuanced evaluation.

Notes

1. For a detailed historical account that corrects the conventional view that Bertha and Harry Holt invented Korean adoption singlehandedly, see Pate 2010.
2. Although Buck adopted seven children transnationally, she did not really put herself into the picture as the Dosses and Holts did. Buck felt uncomfortable over her one and only biological daughter, a handicapped and institutionalised child, and her divorce from her first husband. Therefore, life writing was not her major tool in her work for the cause of transnational and transracial adoption; for this reason, she falls outside of the scope of this article.

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3. For a concise reception history of *The Family Nobody Wanted*, see Mary Battenfeld’s introduction to the 2001 reprint of Doss’s memoir (Battenfeld 2001).
 4. At the time of writing, there were sixty-four reviews of the reprint of Doss’s memoir on Google Books and fifty-nine reviews on www.goodreads.com, many of which illustrate my point.
 5. One cannot help noticing that Holt was the lesser writer of the two. Doss had pronounced literary ambitions while Holt had none, as is suggested by the fact that her first memoir was ghost-written by David Wisner.
 6. The scholarship on the sentimental or domestic novel is vast and difficult to survey. The classic feminist accounts were written by Ann Douglas in *The Feminization of American Culture* (1978), offering a highly critical view of the sentimental novel, and Jane Tompkins in *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860* (1985), who rehabilitated the genre. For more recent studies, see Weinstein 2004, Camfield 2005 (which includes an excellent bibliography), Sanders 2011, and the chapter on the sentimental novel in Singley 2011: 99-119.
 7. Maternalism has been the object of extensive, wide-ranging historical inquiry since the 1990s, and the literature on the topic is voluminous. For a state-of-the-art review of research into maternalism, see the introduction to Plant, Weintrob and Klein 2012 (forthcoming).
 8. Lydia Murdoch has analysed in convincing detail how the late Victorian philanthropist Thomas Barnardo drew upon the sentimental, melodramatic mode in his tracts and in his famous ‘before and after’ photographs of street children who were institutionalised in Barnardo homes (Murdoch 2010: 12-42). Claudia Nelson has elaborated upon the centrality of the same mode to American Progressive Era social reform that centred on lost children (Nelson 2003: 66-115).
 9. See Jacobs 2009, who describes at length how Native American and Aboriginal children were conceived of as orphans because their parents were unwed, nomads, temporarily unavailable, poor, or simply different from the norm in some way or other.
 10. The habit of construing children of colonised peoples as essentially parentless was rampant in colonial discourse at large; see Wesseling 2009.
 11. This is the caption under the photo that illustrated the article on the Doss family in *Life* magazine (1951); see The Adoption History Project at <http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~adoption/topics/familynobodywanted.htm>.

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12. This is an interesting variation on the conventional rags-to-riches narrative that, according to Carol Singley, “became the hallmark of orphan and adoption fiction” in nineteenth-century American literature (Singley 2011: 86). Riches-to-rags stories are not uncommon in the life stories of adoptive families. See, for instance, Maria von Trapp’s accounts of the fate of her adopted family, a wealthy aristocratic Austrian family that lost their whole fortune during the Second World War and had to fend for themselves as immigrants in the United States through their musical performances as a family choir (Trapp 2002).
 13. This image of the helping professions is, of course, highly debatable from a historical point of view. Adoption professionals had good reason to be critical of Harry Holt’s adoption procedures. Intent on speeding up the adoption procedure with a view to keeping alive adoptable Korean children, who often could not wait for several years while the matching process ran its course, Harry Holt became famous for promoting ‘adoption-by-proxy’, which made it possible for Americans to adopt Korean children from a distance, sight unseen. Holt did very little to screen prospective adopters, believing it was enough reassurance if he received a letter in which they proclaimed that they were devout Christians. The helping professions were appalled by this maverick behaviour, as they saw it, and felt they were proven right when, on one notorious occasion, a fifty-year-old drunken woman turned up at the airport to pick up a Holt baby (Herman 2008: 218-220).

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