

identity loss
searching



Alias Smith and...

Filmmaker Harriet McKern evokes the power of the birth certificate as she seeks to make contact with her birth mother in a journey through adoption, searching and loss

identity

The birth certificate presents itself as a bureaucratic truth, an acknowledgement used by various social institutions to prove that a person exists, or was born into a particular society, as the child of their parents. The birth certificate functions to assign an individual a name, denote where they come from and is used as an entrée to all sorts of useful things like getting a passport and a Medicare number.

My document indicates I am the natural offspring of my adoptive mother and father. This is to assist me to feel 'normal', I suppose, and on an institutional level to ensure the machinations of adoption run smoothly. The whole ethos of adoption at the time of my birth was centred around an unwanted child being saved and brought into a new family, which would become their *own* family; their *only* family.

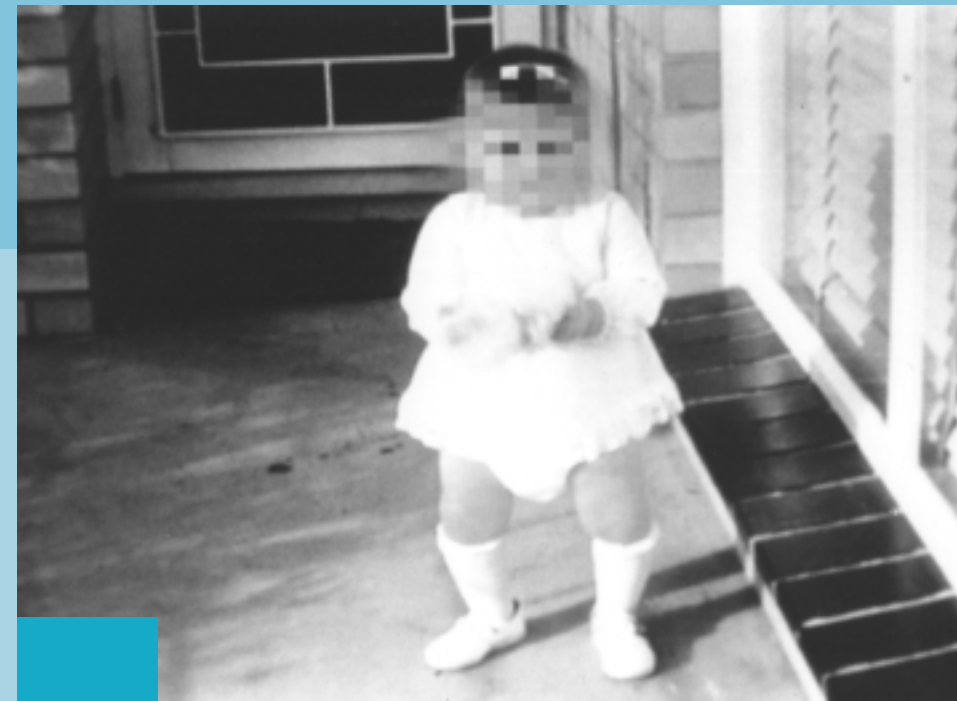
I have come to understand the birth certificate as a tool to silence, that creates a legal fiction surrounding adoption, constructing legitimacy and deliberately negating individuals' histories, eradicating their relationship with the significant 'other' or original Mother.

searching

At the time of my searching, my adoptive parents gave me a copy of the adoption order they had been supplied with. This referred to me as 'X Smith'. I assumed the 'Smith' was an alias and the X was a sign I wasn't given a name. I thought of my mother everyday and hoped that my real birth certificate would answer some questions and bring her closer.

In order to gain a copy of the original certificate I had to undergo counselling in an old bureaucratic building in North London. I sat in anticipation and imagined my mother was around the corner about to be brought out and produced to me. The counsellor told me I should understand that she may not want to meet me. I looked at the peeling paint on the window frame and in my heart of hearts knew that this was an impossibility.

The birth certificate when it came told me nothing new, except that it revealed her name and confirmed that my surname actually was Smith. I felt lost in myself and compelled to have her answer my questions, my gap, my lack. Eventually after a few years I did find a way to make contact and sent her a letter, although



← From *Loyal to My Image*, a documentary film by Harriet McKern

I was never allowed to have her address. She was now married with a new name, traced through the friends of friends of my adoptive parents.

I received a letter and in it she revealed she did not want to meet me.

loss

Thank you for your letter and for the ones before that. I'm sorry to have taken so long to answer you but apart from feeling unable to cope emotionally with this situation, I never seem to have time enough on my own with the demands of family etc. Sometimes I feel strong and matter of fact about it all and other days I find it extremely painful and that is no good to you, me or anyone here, so I have to shut it out ...

I know it is not unusual but I find it difficult to understand why a person feels the need to find his/her biological mother, especially when they have had a happy family life and have friends as you have. I can understand curiosity but for the mother who has given up the most

precious thing in life to have to think about the pain of the past it is far more distressing ...

Like if you ever killed anyone on the road you wouldn't want to be reminded of it all the time by the victim's family coming back to haunt you ... If you ever were to meet your biological mother, you may have very little in common and the whole thing could be an enormous anti-climax for you — in the meantime the mother's life could be shattered again ...

Who has been silenced here? Is it me? or her? or both? Fifteen years on I don't feel silent, but is that just a process of forgetting, repressing, 'getting on with one's life'? We are separate my natural mother and I. And so, in my case, the legal fiction of adoption has fulfilled its own truth.

For information about *Loyal to My Image*, a documentary film by Harriet McKern about adoption, mothering and personal identity see <http://www.roninfilms.com.au/video/1887209/20/1832222>