WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN YOU’RE ADOPTING:
THE RHETORIC OF ADOPTIVE PARENTAL IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

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I. Introduction

With four editions and over 17 million copies sold (and many more hands benefiting from its pages as sold copies are passed from mother to mother) the pregnancy self-help guide, *What to Expect When You’re Expecting*, has become the quintessential representation of the dominant narrative of how a family is grown in the United States (Benedikt). Beginning with conception, this book continues for 615 pages, drawing overviews of each trimester of pregnancy, then scrutinizing, in separate chapters, each month of gestation, before outlining “Labor and Delivery” as well as the postpartum experience and the role “For Dads.” Thus, the book acts to normalize pregnancy, providing a dominant narrative by which parents identify themselves, in an endeavor “to help parents-to-be worry less and enjoy their pregnancies more,” as both pregnant women and their partners, “embark on the adventure of a lifetime” (Murkoff and Mazel vii-xix, xxi, xxi, xxiii). At the same time, it constructs that pregnancy, devoting the bulk of each chapter to “What You May Be Wondering About” (formerly “What You May Be Concerned About”), posing easily hundreds of questions that parents might have, or might never have thought to ask, about the experience of pregnancy and birth, informing parental anxiety even as it attempts to soothe it (Murkoff and Mazel vii-xix, Benedikt).

But *What to Expect When You’re Expecting* is also representative of a cultural narrative that is juxtaposed to the experiences of most adoptive parents, and especially transnational adoptive (TA) parents, for whom this normalizing text is either irrelevant or even antagonistic. Karin Malm and Kate Welti found in their analysis of the results of the National Survey of Adoptive Parents that in families grown through transnational adoption, 73.9% of adoptive parents indicated that infertility was a motivating factor to adopt (194). Yet, only somewhere between 12% and 15% of women who had received infertility treatments sought an adoption
These statistics indicate that for women facing infertility, adoption remains a secondary choice, one only sought, only considered, after a variety of other, often intrusive, medical steps are taken, thus they also reflect normative anxiety surrounding the experience of pregnancy and parental (especially maternal) identity. Joanna Lovinger, a writer for Salon and eventual adoptive parent, describes that anxiety this way:

My body made it perfectly clear that I couldn’t reproduce. But instead of listening to it, I launched a war against Mother Nature. I was heeding some primordial desire that could hardly be expressed with words: the need to give birth and nurse a baby. […] Since puberty, I’d been telling myself a wonderful story. It starts with the ecstasy of discovering that I’m pregnant, then moves on to feeling the baby kick and placing John’s hand on my belly. He feels it, too. We’re madly in love. I give birth in a hospital, aided by a midwife. No medication, no complications. I’m a champ. And the most fulfilling relationship of my life begins at that moment, when I’m handed my firstborn.

This normative “wonderful story,” naturalized as “primordial," all too often must be resisted, overcome, by adoptive parents, and especially adoptive women. When they’re given an alternate story, this resistance becomes easier, as exposure to adoptive families tends to correlate positively with individuals’ decisions to adopt (Malm and Welti 189). But since only about 2% of children in the United States are adopted, such an exposure remains unlikely, both for parents seeking to grow their family and for parents who have chosen to adopt but lack an alternative narrative by which to identify themselves.

Making this alternative adoption narrative harder to construct is the lack of uniformity within adoption processes. The dominant pregnancy narrative in the United States is made possible through uniform congruities in the biological experience of pregnancy, a routine biological fertilization and conception, an average human gestational period that is easy to socially construct as a uniform and consistent 40 weeks or nine months, a range of bodily cues that can be arranged contingently, and an equally routine medical birth experience narrated
countlessly on TV screens and in high school sex education videos, whether or not the birth processes individuals actually experience is congruous with this narrative. These congruities makes the construction of the dominant pregnancy narrative, represented in *What to Expect When You’re Expecting* and elsewhere, easier and makes the eliding of the incongruities, exceptions, and deviations in each parent’s experience of pregnancy easier as well. But while performative congruity can be inferred in the social, material, and biological conditions of pregnancy, the social and material conditions under which adoption the United States occurs makes such congruity difficult, as adoption processes vary by adoption type (domestic or transnational, foster or surrogacy, conducted within a biological family or between biologically unrelated birth and adoptive parents), nation (each country offering transnational adoption having its own set of rules and regulations, paperwork requirements, and regulations on age, gender, wealth, family makeup, and even body composition of the prospective parent), adoption agency (each with its own set of applications and required paperwork for each type of adoption it facilitates and each with its own relationship to other nations through which they facilitate adoption), and state (each with its own judicial or bureaucratic process for each type of adoption and with a different judicial process by which an adoption must be finalized). As a result, in the United States, working from an overarching dominant narrative of pregnancy, biologically-grown families are all alike, while every adoptive family, without any such cultural narrative of family growth, is adoptive in its own way.

This negotiation of adoptive familial identity and difference can be seen on the The Children’s Home Society and Family Services (CHSFS) Adoption Forum. Begun in July 2005 and closed to new posts in October 2009, The CHSFS Adoption Forum was a message board in which prospective adoptive parents and current adoptive parents, particularly those who had
completed or were completing an adoption through CHSFS, asked and answered questions, made announcements, narrated personal stories, complained about problems, shared messages of support, suggested resources, and discussed issues related to adoption. In the message board, CHSFS hosted a forum for each country through which they facilitated international adoptions as well as a forum for domestic adoption and other adoption issues. One forum within the message board, on adoption from Ethiopia, received far more traffic and participation than any of the others. From January 2007 to October 2009, over 10,000 threads were added with over 117,000 total posts. This level of participation dwarfed the next most popular forum on the site, on adoptions from Korea, which contained only 1770 threads and 13,315 posts since May 2006 (Welcome).¹

This alone suggests that a rare, phenomenal, and successful community erupted in an online environment for which writing was the central interactive activity used to form relationships and build social cohesion. Several factors might help to explain why a message board on Ethiopian adoption flourished at this time and place while others did not. In 2003, Ethiopia began approving agencies to facilitate adoptions in the country, and at the time of the message board’s inception, CHSFS was one of only five approved agencies (Embassy of Ethiopia). U.S. adoptions from Ethiopia were new and experimental, while other, far more popular, countries that provided adoption services to U.S. citizens were well-established. U.S. adoptions from South Korea began shortly after the Korean War and programs in China and Russia began in the early to mid-1990s (Jacobson 20-22). In the meantime, shortly after adoption programs began in Ethiopia, adoptions from Ethiopia quickly skyrocketed. Since 2004,

¹ In fact, activity on the Ethiopia forum comprised the vast majority of activity on the message board site, comprising over 80% of the threads posted and 87% of the total posts. This despite that the site included a total of 12 threads for 16 countries through which the agency facilitated adoptions (Welcome).
international adoptions in the U.S. were most likely to occur from China, followed by Russia, Guatemala, and South Korea. Adoptions from Ethiopia were ninth in a list of twenty countries. By 2008, Ethiopia rose to become the fourth most likely site for transnational adoptions to the U.S., increasing their number of adoptions almost 600% and surpassing South Korea (U.S. Dept. of State “Total Adoptions”). In 2010, Ethiopia became second, after China, amongst the list of countries from which transnational adoptions to the U.S. occur (U.S. Dept. of State “FY 2010”).

Parents adopting from China, Russia, and South Korea could likely rely on plethora of well-circulated supports and resources, from books, articles, and websites, to community members, whereas a dearth of support and resources existed to match the increasing popularity of adoptions from Ethiopia. This may have made CHSFS’s Ethiopia forum a vital resource to meet the increasing interest in adoptions from the country.

A message board is an online site designed to facilitate public, asynchronous written communication between participants. Used in online correspondence even well before the advent of the internet and participated in by over 90 million users in the United States alone, message boards are widely acknowledged among scholars as a powerful means of social and therapeutic support because of (1) their asynchronicity, permitting users to interact at any time and fit participation into their own schedules; (2) their facilitation of communication between

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2 Although adoptions from Ethiopia have increased dramatically, this is not due only to the success of programs in Ethiopia. In part, the increase of adoptions from Ethiopia are due to legal policy in other popular countries. During Ethiopia’s increase in popularity, China, Russia, and South Korea had placed additional restrictions on transnational adoptions (Belluck and Yardley, Associated Press). The U.S. Department of State has warned parents against adopting from Guatemala until the country puts better laws in place to protect the rights of children placed for adoption (“Adoptions in Guatemala”). The popularity of Ethiopian adoption programs also coincides with celebrity adoptions from Ethiopia, such as actress Angelina Jolie’s in July 2005 (Associated Press). Such restrictions and publicity may have made Ethiopia more attractive to prospective parents just as Ethiopian adoption programs in the U.S. were becoming established. In March 2011, Ethiopia’s Ministry of Women, Children, and Youth Affairs announced its intention to reduce the number of adoptions processed in the country by 90% in order to review its practices and ensure that the rights of children and biological parents are protected (U.S. Dept. of State “Alert: Government of Ethiopia”)

individuals who are separated by large geographic distances; (3) their capacity to bring people with similar, underrepresented or marginalized experiences and identities together anonymously, lending to a sense of comfort and protection when sharing controversial subject matter; and (4) the public access to and searchability of such online communication, making the sites a resource for information even for those who do not engage in discussion (McCabe 2, Brady and Guerin 15-16, 23).

The famous self-help guide *What To Expect When You’re Expecting* and the CHSFS Ethiopia Forum are in some ways similar. Just as the authors of *What to Expect When You’re Expecting* devote up to two-thirds of its pages to Q&A (Benedikt), each categorized and situated within the month of pregnancy in which a question would presumably arise, my coding of the message board reveals that well over two-thirds of the threads on the forum have as their purpose inquiry or counsel, in which questions are asked about transnational and transracial adoptive parenting and the adoption process, situated within each participant’s place in their adoption narrative. Just as *What to Expect When You’re Expecting* remains positive and uplifting in tone, even as it delivers information that many deem anxiety-producing (Benedikt), the message board also remains affirming and uplifting while its pages engage in critical discussion of transnational transracial adoptive issues. As well, participants of the message board frequently describe and conceive it as a valuable research tool, “helpful in terms of resources, other parents’ opinions and guidance, travel information, etc.” (GinaP)³, in other words, as a self-help commodity useful in individuals’ own “research and education mode” (OliveOil).

The dominance of the pregnancy narrative represented in *What to Expect When You’re

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³ Throughout this paper, I cite the threads from the CHSFS Ethiopia Forum by username of the thread’s author, per MLA documentation style guidelines for citing electronic forums. Source citations for these threads can be found in a separate Works Cited list, below titled “Electronic Forum Threads Cited.”
Expecting is expressed, with some frustration, in the threads and replies of the adoptive parents within the CHSFS Ethiopia Forum. One author, melanie, shares a touching anecdote of how, with the help of the agency, she received information about the origins of her adopted child. Though, according to the thread post, her child was abandoned, she still inquired and received, a packet in the mail from chsfs. It did not hit me until I was opening it what it could be. Inside was a translated letter from the woman who found our son describing in detail his condition and what she did with him, and 2 amazing photos. The first of this woman, her husband and 4 kids and the second of the EXACT place she found our son….like the EXACT tree he was found under. […] We will frame the photo of her family and keep it in our living room as they are now part of our family. (“Simply Amazing”)

Underneath the care and gratitude expressed by the author, despite the expression of an extended family unit forged, by this interaction, with the family who found her child, melanie prefaced this story with a statement that both marks the message board as place of support and camaraderie and also expresses the resistance she faces at sharing this anecdote, so pivotal to the construction of her familial identity: “This forum is the first place I thought of to share this as I don’t feel my family or my hubby’s family will understand the magnitude and significance of this.” Other participants, responding in kind with 28 replies, affirm this story and the author’s experience, sure, but also affirm her astuteness at seeking out this information, both inquiring about how she requested this information and remarking on the rich heritage and identity it contributes to her adopted child and adoptive family, writing responses such as, “What a priceless thing for your son, and your whole family to be able to have” and “You and your husband have given [your child] the gift of another part of his life story,” (melanie “Simply Amazing”) both confirming the message board as a space of understanding and a space for safe adoptive familial identity construction.

In another thread, the author, Ildi, introduces herself and announces completion of her
family’s adoption application dossier, expressing both exhaustion in responding to people outside the forum about she and her husband’s adoption process and the understanding she perceives in the community to which she just introduced herself:

My husband, Aaron, and I are excited to say we’re no longer at the very beginning of our adoption process (as it seems like we’ve been telling people for forever, now). I just got back from mailing off our Dossier to CHSFS. Yay! And I knew that all of you would share my excitement, whereas other people think I’m nuts for being thrilled about a trip to UPS! (IldiandAaron “Newbies”)

More than merely affirming their beginning of the adoption process, participants reply with understanding to the particular, and frustrating, experience Ildi has had with those she encountered in her lived experience. Laurajoy writes, “we took at picture at the UPS office and they were very accommodating to these crazy adoptive parents. :),” and Katie replies, “I almost stopped people on the street telling them my Dossier was in! I wanted to jump and dance – not many people understand this bizarre emotion”(IldiandAaron “Newbies”).

What do these women fear when sharing such details about their adoption processes in their offline lives? As suggested by the passages above, often merely a prohibitive silence. Outside the forum, informed by the dominant pregnancy narrative of family growth, others may have no cultural logic to assess the significance of these milestones; they don’t know to congratulate, or at least how to congratulate, these moments. But just as often, participants in the forum may fear the questions and assertions, not necessarily made out of suspicion, but no less prohibitive, since not do they not assume congratulations are in order but do assume the right to clarify what this means, comments by which others assert their own assumptions about these participants’ adoption processes based on their own misguided cultural logic of biological kinship.

Krista Ratcliffe, in Rhetorical Listening, invokes the concept of a cultural logic to explain
the premises by which we construct arguments regarding racial and gender identity—in other words to describe the unproductive ways in which race and gender get talked about in our culture. According to Ratcliffe, a cultural logic is, “a belief system or shared way of reasoning within which a claim [particularly about racial or gender identity] may function” (33). Matthew Jackson, in an article for JAC, compares this concept to the hidden premise in an enthymeme, explaining that our fragmentary arguments surrounding race relations are laced with unspoken axioms that are implicitly racist but not conscious since they are assumed rather than asserted. In seeking understanding of these enthymemes about race, the audience assumes the unnamed premises necessary to make sense of it, thus making them complicit in the perpetuation of the premises without the opportunity to name and confront them. In a sense, the language we have and use about race carries over historical cultural logics about race, so that we work from those hidden premises even without our consent. Cultural logics such as White Supremacy or Patriarchy, according to Ratcliffe, informs the language we use, assumptions we make and voice in our language, and the claims we support about others. But these premises or cultural logics, unspoken in our statements, are so taken-for-granted that we may not notice when one’s statements are working from one of these cultural logics.

The cultural logic of biological kinship, acting as a hidden premise in people’s enthymemes about parenthood, is illustrated in the following example from the message board, where DSTAngieB, a woman who experienced, “infertility, IVF, and 3 miscarriages” describes the joy of adopting “TWO beautiful, healthy children,” but writes in consternation that,

[W]e are starting to get comments like:

‘We better save that INFANT stuff we were going to give you because you’ll be pregnant within the year!’

OR
‘Good thing you bought a crib! You’re going to need it for the baby that you’re going to have.’

OR

‘You know that now that you’re adopting, now you’ll be able to have another baby of your own. Watch!’ (“OT”)

These comments shared by DSTAngieB, as well as other forum participants’ replies to this author, reveal the cultural logic of biological kinship as well as a consequent cultural insistence upon a normative process of family growth, specifically an insistence on a pregnancy narrative and resistance to an adoptive one. These assumptions include:

1. That adoption is chosen, necessarily, after a family has quit trying to conceive a biological child.

2. That infertility is often a biological response of anxiety, alleviated when one “just relaxes.” This particular assumption is revealed in a reply by Haraldsworth: “We did get pregnant after adopting. So we proved everyone right and it is driving me crazy. I still tell people that we had the same chances of conceiving whether we adopted or not. Then they say that we just had to relax (our diagnosis would not be impacted by relaxation),” and is resisted through participants’ application of medical fact: “Yeah, right…a referral will suddenly clear up the scarring on my fallopian tubes!” writes DSTAngieB, while Vali replies by offering this response that she makes to others, “’Actually, only 4% of women who have experienced fertility challenges conceive after adoption,’” (DSTAngieB “OT”)

3. That all adoptive parents would prefer a biological child and still long for one, resisted by a participant replying to DSTAngieB, who writes, “’But that doesn’t matter to us anyway. We feel like this son completes our family’” (“OT”).
4. That adoptive kinship is fundamentally different from biological kinship and biological kinship is more authentic: “you’ll be able to have another baby of your own,” a notion that HopingToAdopt resists, writing, “These are OUR OWN children…thank you very much” (DSTAngieB “OT”). Such comments reveal what the dominant pregnancy narrative and the cultural logic of biological kinship assume about what constitutes parenthood, what real kinship means, and what these adoptive parents actually want. They also demonstrate that such language uses act as attempts to reinscribe the dominant pregnancy plotline, insisting upon a narrative twist by which the adoptive mother, unable to and now even unwilling to conceive, will still adhere to a normative familial identity. These exchanges also reveal the safe place for identity construction created in the forum, not unlike Suresh Canagarajah’s observation of online classroom environments that are used by African-American students to produce “safe houses,” in contrast to Mary Louis Pratt’s “contact zones,” in which the students find the freedom to cultivate academic identities (174).

In this research paper, I argue that the CHSFS Ethiopia Forum is used by its participants to construct an alternative narrative for constructing the experience of adoption, thus providing a mechanism for the women in the forum to construct and perform identities as expectant mothers and growing families against the grain of the dominant narrative of pregnancy. To construct this argument, I have modified Kenneth Burke’s Pentadic ratios, used in my methodology to describe the research context of the CHSFS Ethiopia Forum, reformulating those ratios using Judith Butler’s theory of performative acts. The two ratios I will focus on in particular are the Act-Purpose ratio, used to begin coding of the sampled texts from the forum, and the Act-Scene ratio, which will tie together the individual written acts performed by forum participants and the
alternative transnational adoption narrative constructed by and providing a cohesive identity for prospective parents in the forum. Based on these concerns, I have conducted the study below to answer the following research question:

How is writing used in an online community to construct adoptive familial identities?

II. Literature Review

Family and Community Literacies, Discourse, and Identity

This study may be identified as research into community and adult literacy, which Cushman, et al, describe, “as the context in which individuals develop identities as they engage in cultural, social, generational, and institutional practices of meaning making” (191). Cushman, et al, present, in particular, a set of questions that research into community and adult literacy tend to address: “How does the acquisition of various literacies impact identity formation? In what ways do communities use linguistic difference to shape their culture and social organization?” (192). These questions are similar to my primary and supporting research questions, which inquire about ways in which language and writing are used to shape identity and make meaning within an online community.

As Cushman’s review of research in this field shows, much research on literacy (especially during the 1960s and 1970s), focused on individuals’ acquisition of school-based reading and writing skills, how children and adults learn mainstream literacy out of a state of “illiteracy,” and the role educational institutions play in this process in what is called the “Deficit/Difference Model” (195, Smitherman 203). As Cushman, et al., notes, scholars have challenged this dichotomy, particularly the cultural bias implied by labeling primary discourses deficient, so that contemporary literacy research is cognizant of the differing purposes and
functions of local community literacies versus institutional and educational literacies (195, Smitherman 204-9). This is thanks in part to the work of sociolinguist and literacy researcher James Paul Gee. Gee helped to reconceive literacy, first by introducing the concept of discourse, which he defines as a group’s common, socially constructed ways of “using language, of thinking, and of acting” that generate and reflect implicit assumptions or values for that group, distinguishes each individual’s position, participation, and identity in and with that group, and distinguishes one group from another (29). He defines literacy as the “control” of a “secondary discourse,” a discourse acquired beyond the initial or “primary discourse” one acquires through one’s family and culture of origin (35). According to Gee, one needs secondary discourses to interact effectively among people outside one’s family and culture of origin. Furthermore, he explains, some discourses are dominant over others, holding a higher status, greater “social power,” and delivering “social goods” to its participants (31). The more closely associated one’s primary discourse is to a dominant discourse, the easier it is for that person to acquire the dominant discourse and benefit from the hierarchical disparity among discourses. Conversely, one whose primary discourse differs greatly from the dominant discourse in a society will have a harder time acquiring that dominant discourse and may even resist it because of sets of values and assumptions one must accept in that dominant discourse that conflict with the person’s primary discourse (31). A good example of this is the educational discourse in the public school classroom, which reflects the primary discourse of white middle-class families. Under Gee’s premises, then, children of white middle-class parents, already having learned through their primary discourse patterns of language use, thinking, and acting that coincide with the secondary discourse of the classroom, acquire that dominant white middle-class discourse more quickly and easily and thus benefit more from the social goods (i.e. higher test scores, greater educational
attainment, better job prospects, etc.) delivered to participants in that discourse (36-37, Cushman, et al. 199).

Although Gee’s concepts of literacy and discourse help to destabilize the valuation of school-based literacies and to recognize that individuals and communities construct functional and vibrant literacies outside of educational contexts, most family and community literacy research, working from Gee’s terminology, assumes a hierarchical framework for literacy, comparing marginalized discourse groups to those who, “identify with mainstream cultural attitudes” and how these identifications contribute to or impair the learning and acquisition of dominant literacies (Cushman, et al 199). As a result, the deficit/difference model leaves its trace, so that much family and community literacy research continues to focus on the agonistic difference between official, institutional, dominant literacies and family and community literacy practices (195-96).

The activity on the CHSFS message board problematizes this hierarchical approach to literacy and discourse. Although the Ethiopia forum certainly contributed to instructing adoptive parents in a secondary discourse, and although the awarding of social goods may be identified in the acquisition of the new secondary discourse emerging in the online community, its participants can largely be seen as already literate in the official or dominant sense and do not necessarily seek the acquisition of a hierarchically “dominant discourse” in the way literacy research often defines it. In a sense, these forum participants, members of a “dominant group,” instead may seek a non-dominant discourse that others may have acquired as a “primary discourse,” as a way of constructing and aligning their identities, seeking discourse practices which other minorities acquire in the home or in other intimate communities and which may conflict with the assumptions embedded in the dominant discourse. At the least, my research will
need to explore a different sort of incentive or motive, one that distinguishes between “social goods” and hierarchical dominance for acquiring a discourse.

This persistent “top-down ideology,” as well as the connections Gee makes between discourse, literacy, and identity formation to explain both the persistence of a culture’s literacy practices and the fluidity of individual and community identity (30, Cushman, et al. 199), has also contributed to the call by many literacy researchers to investigate non-dominant discourse communities for their own sake. Chief among them is Brian V. Street and Beverly Moss, who call on scholars to document, describe, and theorize local discourse communities and literacies from the ground up, to explore the distinct literacy and discourse practices that function in local communities for their own self-initiated purposes and the identity construction that takes place in non-academic discourse communities (Street 7-8, Moss 3, Cushman, et al. 197, 202). And paramount to the examination of these local discourse communities is the role discourse and literacy practices play in shaping and constructing identity, which is one of the major concerns of my research as well.

Identity, Transracial Adoption, and the Internet

As mentioned above, the level of activity on the CHSFS Ethiopia Forum surpassed by far the activity seen on any of the other forums on CHSFS’s site. Given the history of race in US adoptions, another possible motivation for this activity is that participants in the forum are adopting against the racial paradigms understood to exist in the world of adoption. Research into adoption studies reveals the complex response prospective adoptive parents have toward race. As Pamela Anne Quiroz finds in Adoption in a Color-Blind Society, despite race-neutral agency policies and federal law regarding adoption, and in fact because of an intact cultural ideology of color-blindness, adoptive parents nevertheless make “race-conscious” adoption decisions,
preferring white infants to children of color (50). Both Quiroz and Heather Jacobson, in her book *Culture Keeping: White Mothers, International Adoption, and The Negotiation of Family Difference*, see the popularity of international adoption programs in Asian, South American, and Eastern European countries in keeping with these racial preferences, as adoptive parents take on the additional economic, social, political, and bureaucratic risks attached to transnational adoption so that they can, if not adopt a white child, then at least avoid the dangers they associate with black culture (Quiroz 76-78, Jacobson 19-20). Even as white adoptive parents often insist that race does not matter, they often incorrectly perceive racial discrimination and racial divisions to be less severe amongst Asians and Latinos, and imagine a continuum of racial divisiveness within a spectrum of skin pigmentation (i.e. from white, to light-skin, to dark-skin), thus perceiving additional peril in adopting a black child (Quiroz 5, 78). And, of course, they make choices about adoption that accord with this misperception of race.4

The popularity of U.S. adoptions from Ethiopia juxtaposes these patterns. Inevitably, part of the popularity of adoption from Ethiopia is due to a normalization of such transracial familial identities, possibly creating another division between American-born black children and African children. But to some significant degree, adoptive parents considering Ethiopian adoptees are consciously choosing against the prevalent white American social constructions of race. It is this

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4 This is not to suggest that prospective adoptive parents should not consider race as part of their decision to adopt. Parents who are ill-equipped to confront issues of race may be better suited to adopt a child who is likely to match their own racial identification. But a legal and cultural stance of color-blindness causes adoptive parents to misperceive the conditions of racism in the United States as well as the level of discrimination their children might experience. While many adoptive parents misperceive Asian and Latino children as less susceptible to racism, a comprehensive study on the racial identity of adoptees from South Korea by white parents by the Evan B. Donald Adoption Institute, a non-profit adoption research and policy organization, found that the shaping of these adoptees’ racial identities were not merely impacted by experiences of racial prejudice and discrimination but were also positively influenced by parental understanding and sensitivity regarding racial issues and assistance in experiencing racial diversity and learning about racial and ethnic heritage (McGinnis, et al. 40). Thus, by misperceiving a spectrum of racial divisiveness, white adoptive parents might enter into transracial adoption without a racial awareness that enables them to respond in ways that help their children shape positive racial identities.
conscious resistance that creates a moment for transracial adoptive parents of black children to construct, rather than resist or deny, a transracial familial identity. And the CHSFS Ethiopia Forum may have given these parents a site to form racial awareness and construct racial identity whether they entered into transracial adoption from a stance of resistance or of normalization.

The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute’s review of research on identity and adoption shows that the vast majority of this research has concentrated on how children adopted into transracial families understand and shape their racial identities (McGinnis, et al). But Quiroz’s study of adoption websites reveals a potential moment of identity construction in the online writing of transracial adoptive parents. She devotes a chapter of her book to an examination transracial adoptive parents’ views of race shared on Adoption.com’s message board (83). Quoting one forum participant, “’I know for CERTAIN that my racial identity is now different. I am no longer the white mama of a black child. I am a part of a multiracial family and that IS my identity—it also allows me acceptance and access to a minority world which I would never have understood prior to parenting a black son’” (103), Quiroz points out that, “Other parents indicated changes in perceptions of society as their children grew older.” Then, citing research that transracially adopted children experience changing racial identity construction, she concludes that, “Thus, the idea that racial identification and awareness changes for adoptees […] may also be applied to adoptive parents” (104). This suggestion is as far as Quiroz goes to explore how adoptive parents construct racial identity, pointing out an opening further investigation of this subject.

Identity Construction, Performance, and Familial Identity

According to Judith Butler, identity is, instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts* […] understood as the mundane
way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding [...] self. [...] [I]f [identity] is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the *appearance of substance* is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe. (519-20)

Individuals perform their identity, acting in ways that, it is predicted, will lead others to interpret a fixed and cohesive identity. The acts chosen to constitute, to perform, a person’s identity can be, and often are, chosen within a range of acts and identities available in their cultural context. Here, Butler is concerned about the construction of gender identities, but for my study, I assume that other identity formations occur in similar ways, that we construct our ethnic, national, racial, sexual, socio-economic, and gender identities, as well as the intersubjective conjunction of these cultural identities, informed by a range of choices and negotiations within a larger discourse community, by acquiring and enacting certain performances that we, ourselves, perceive and other perceive to be coherent and whole.

Since the subject of my study is writing, I must also see writing as a performative act, coinciding with “bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds” to construct identity but also as an act that allows one to reconstruct identity in ways that deviate from the narratives given to us by our culture. Spurred by Butler’s treatment of performativity and gender, various scholars in composition studies have applied queer theory to classroom compositions to examine writing in just this way. In separate articles, Jonathan Alexander and William Banks demonstrate how written narratives perform the fiction of essentialized gender and sexual identities by asking students to write in the pose of alternate genders and sexualities and then
examining the cracks in their written performances. Similarly, Jennifer DiGrazia and Michel Boucher explore how students in their writing class contested essentialized sexual identities through multimodal compositions. These and other queer studies show how writing acts to reproduce essentialized sexual identities for others to inhabit and reflect in their own performances but can simultaneously be a site to perform and reconstitute sexual identity, especially when the space for discourse permits critique of the written performances. In this study, I argue that the same goes for familial identity and demonstrate how this occurs in the CHSFS Ethiopia Forum.

A couple of studies done on message boards helps to point out the role such online environments can play in helping to shape the identities of those with intersecting, marginalized subject positions. Though the contexts for these intersecting subjectivities are disturbing, the results are revealing. McCabe, for instance, analyzes pro-anorexia message boards, where young women marginalized by their attachment to their eating disorders go to validate and construct anorexic identities. She finds that through their discussions, the participants construct a community-specific ideology and identity, important to a group that seeks to create a positive self-image to align itself with, against a “normal world” that sets its norms against their unifying subjectivity – i.e., an eating disorder. As a result, they redefine their disorders as “normal” and transcribe practices and social values that adhere to their common identity. This is disturbing, of course, because these discursive behaviors are meant to reinforce and lead to identification with what most consider a self-destructive mental and behavioral pathology, but it demonstrates the power that online communication tools like message boards have to shape a cohesive identity for a group that shares a subject position in defiance of, or merely underrepresented in, the rest of the world. Similarly, Lisa Waldner, Heather Martin, and Lyndsay Capeder analyze the message
boards of gay skinheads, who encounter the problem of constructing identity in the interstices of two marginalized subject positions that are culturally represented as self-contradictory. The participants shape and enact a variety of rhetorical strategies that prioritize their identifications (i.e. whiteness is more essential to identity that sexuality), appeal to their common affiliation with other skinhead groups vis-à-vis their white supremacy ideology, challenge stigmas of homosexuality within white racialist groups, and continue to blame racial and ethnic groups for enacting disunity (177-78). Again, though very disturbing, and in this case leading to questionable identity construction in defiance of the values upheld in critical race and queer theories, this study illustrates the potential for message boards to bring together marginalized individuals inhabiting subject positions in contrast to prevailing cultural logics, that result in the novel construction of writing strategies and intersubjective identities. While it is clear that, as Byrne observes, these discourse communities reflect and reproduce the knowledge-base, cultural logics, and social structures participants bring in from their lives offline, it is also evident that, in the act of writing, the construction and performance of new discursive identities occur to make sense of intersecting subjectivities. Like the message boards analyzed above, the CHSFS Ethiopia Forum participants’ online identities are deeply implicated in the interstices of their racial, familial, and ethnic subjectivities and social conditions offline.

I seek to analyze how participants make use of writing on the message board to hear and let stand their intersubjective commonalities and differences while forming an empowering community, and work to construct alternative familial identities that equip them to address the changed social conditions created by their decision to adopt transracially and transnationally. I seek to discover how opportunities for familial identity reconstruction, given impetus in the interstices of TA parents’ offline social lives and identities, may be afforded in online
environments such as message boards as well as the writing that occurs there.

III. Methodology and Methods

In this study, I research the written acts which occurred in the CHSFS Ethiopia Forum using the methodology of grounded theory, developed by sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss. This methodology is a social constructivist approach to research that seeks to generate theoretical constructs and conclusions grounded in the systematic, holistic, and intense analysis of data in a complex context of research (Neff 125, Glaser and Strauss 12, 13, 124). Glaser and Strauss describe the theory generated from this methodology as “developmental,” meaning that it “facilitates the generation of theories of process, sequence, and change pertaining to organizations, positions, and social interaction” (124), thus it is well-suited to my context of research, which seeks to discover the rhetorical processes by which participants on the CHSFS message board socially perform familial racial identities as well as changes in those discursive performances of identity that constitute active identity construction. Grounded theory strikes a balance between typical theoretical research, which often relies on deductive reasoning and thin data collection, and typical qualitative or quantitative methodologies, which are often limited to describing populations or verifying the theories of others (Glaser and Strauss 112). According to Joyce Neff, grounded theory applies well to social practices such as writing since it demands “precise analytic procedures” to construct “plausible relationships” among data and sets of data, including the texts produced through the human act of writing, and leads, “to theory that is [nonetheless] fluid, open, and provisional,” (125). This fits the aims of my study well, since I intend to work from a corpus of texts to construct theory on how discursive familial identities are formed and how this may be done in an online environment, attempting to not only richly describe a community and confirm established theory but also seeks out new directions,
applications, and outcomes for that theory.

The general method by which grounded theory proceeds is called, interchangeably, “comparative analysis” (Glaser and Strauss 12) or the “constant comparative method” (112). This recursive method of research is intended to effectively generate theoretical concepts from situated, contextually rich data that is collected through more specific qualitative research practices, such as interviews, observation, and, in this case, the coding of texts. Comparative analysis begins with a researcher’s comparison between units of data until generalizable conceptual categories and their constituent properties emerge. These categories and their properties are added or subtracted, replaced or refined, as a researcher proceeds through the data, comparing each unit of data to previously developed categories, actively looks for discontinuities in the data that may indicate new categories, and records research memos indicating the reasons for decisions made and discontinuities found, until the set of categories and properties consistently and comprehensively describe or explain the data analyzed (47-48, 116-18). While doing this, the researcher will seek to articulate the properties that distinguish each category and each unit of data’s placement in that category (119). While the first couple of stages seeks to maximize the number of categories and properties, to construct a full descriptive inventory of the data, the next stage of the constant comparative method seeks to delimit that list of categories and properties, eliminating categories and properties that are irrelevant to the research agenda but also comparing those categories and properties themselves to discover deeper, more generalized theoretical concepts that explain or describe these initial categories (120-121). Through all these stages, the researcher simultaneously develops provisional theories that explain the social phenomena being researchers, finally generating and writing a substantive theory constructed from one’s findings (124).
When analyzing writing using grounded theory, it is necessary to engage in the method of textual coding and analysis, which as Neff describes it, parallels Glaser and Strauss’ method of constant comparison. Conducted in a series of recursive analytic “passes” through a textual corpus, textual analysis moves through processes of open, axial, and selective coding of texts, returned to over and over again, requiring constant reflection upon the linguistic, rhetorical, and social contexts in which those texts are produced, while demanding that the researcher remain attentive to recognizing research itself as a rhetorical activity negotiated within a discourse community (Neff 125-26). These codes act as the conceptual categories developed through constant comparison in grounded theory, whether the codes signify theoretical categories “constructed” by the research to explain properties of the texts or indicate “abstracted” categories emerging from the language of the texts themselves (Glaser and Strauss 117-18). As Thomas Huckin explains it, text analysis is a “context-sensitive” approach to examining a corpus of texts that recognizes writing as a necessarily social activity rather than as a simply as a set of formal “autonomous” decisions (84). Text analysis is aligned with grounded theory in that it proceeds inductively, beginning with the data corpus, while the analysis that occurs may be guided by “interdisciplinary” theories, that lead to “plausible interpretations,” which account for, in as comprehensive a way as possible, the entirety of the phenomena appearing in the research context (89). The method of textual analysis also coincides well with both my study since it is a method designed to investigate writing and writing practices as, “discourse communities [which] are defined primarily by texts” (84).

Both Neff and Huckin emphasize the need for a researcher to acknowledge and assert the epistemological and theoretical assumptions from which the research is proceeding (Huckin 86, Neff 128). Much of my theoretical assumptions are outlined above in the literature review, but
Huckin outlines a set of epistemological assumptions about meaning- and knowledge-making that occurs in text-based discourses that will be foundational to my approach to this research:

First, “Texts exist,” as eminently available physical evidence of a discourse community. This is not to say that such texts represent altogether transparent transmissions of thoughts or ideas but that it is assumed that writers in a text-based discourse community have something to say to others in that community, as evidenced not only in the language of the texts they produced, but also in the “thought and effort” put into producing those texts, and which must be reliably interpreted by writers and readers alike (86). Those, “plausible interpretations,” according to Huckin, are “constrained by various linguistic conventions that are manifested in the text” and are “tacitly [if imperfectly or incompletely] agreed upon by members of a discourse community” (86). This, in turn, means that such writers shape their acts of writing in order to be understood by that community and construct language conventions and rhetorical strategies of meaning-making through the social interaction that occurs in that community (87). Since texts are tangible, discretely identifiable, and function within a range of interpretations constructed and permitted by the group that produces them, text analysis contributes to a substantial degree of certainty in discovering and analyzing patterns among those texts in order to theorize about the “meaning-making practices” and identity construction of the community of writers (86).

Second, while texts are evidence of a discourse community, not all information about that community is transmitted in the written content itself. As a result, such texts need to be rhetorically analyzed, comparing content to textual and social context, language conventions, communication strategies, and the nexus between writers, readers, and the commonalities and differences narrated about their lived experiences (87). In part, this is because in most discursive contexts, writers attempt to write efficiently, trying to be as expressive as possible while
conserving cognitive and creative effort, so that much of the meaning-making and identification that occurs may appear in semiotically dense uses of words, tropes, and writing strategies, built from, “a relatively rich body of community knowledge,” making it all the more necessary to examine the context between words, passages, texts, and discursive exchanges to discern the meaning-making that occurs (87). In fact, a community of writers can make exactlying precisely choices in their writing practices, so that differences in word choice, tropes, sentence structure, arrangement, and rhetorical tactics can signal important distinctions in meaning-making and identity construction (88).

Third, writers’ subject positions, identities, and identification with discourse communities are multiple, and these multiple constructions may at times cohere and at other times conflict. While often their writing practices will indicate their attunement with the discourse community in question, they will also inevitably reveal fissures in their discursive “loyalties” (89).

According to the procedures of text analysis, a researcher must first select inroads or trajectories into the textual corpus, especially when handling a set of texts (like I am) that is far too large to code in its entirety (Blythe 207). Stuart Blythe, who writes about the procedures of analyzing digital texts in particular, describes several ways this can be done, including “criterion sampling,” where texts are selected according to some common feature, boundary, or category that defines the texts within the context of research and that relates to the types of phenomena being investigated, and “random sampling,” which allows one to reliably and efficiently map features of the entire corpus by collecting and coding a representative, randomly-selected set of texts. Random sampling can be used in conjunction other sampling methods, such as criterion sampling, to make further inroads into the corpus (207-8). Both of these sampling methods have been used here.
Having an understanding of how she or he will select and group the texts, a researcher can then engage in further analytical procedures, in the case of this research project, constant comparison via textual analysis. First, “In open coding,” parallel to Glaser and Strauss’ first stage of comparative analysis, “data are disassembled and categorized” (Neff 128). In other words, the researcher reads and analyzes some portion of the selected texts, looking for “salient patterns” (Huckin 90) or “concepts” (Neff 129) that emerge from the texts in accordance with the research agenda. This level of coding remains “hypothetical,” providing broad patterns or categories that will be empirically confirmed, refined, added to, or discarded throughout analysis (130). Next, in “axial coding,” parallel to the second stage of comparative analysis in grounded theory, each salient pattern or concept is applied and compared to the entirety of the selected texts, interpreting those texts and the codes “in terms of conditions, interactions among actors, strategies, tactics, and consequences” (Neff 130). Part of this stage includes continuing testing of possible codes to determine which ones remain stable, meaningful, and descriptive of the larger set of texts (Neff 130, Huckin 91-92). Finally, in “selective coding,” parallel to the “delimiting” stage in constant comparison, the established set of codes are cross-referenced with still more texts, possibly comparing them with different trajectories into or samples of the corpus, “looking not only for additional examples of core categories but also for examples that defy core categories“ (Neff 130). Selective coding continues the interpreting and testing that is begun in axial coding, but also seeks out contrary results or phenomena previously missed in prior analytical stages, which might lead to some additional recursive analysis (130). From these streams and stages of analytical inquiry, “a kind of ‘story line’ or interpretive frame is created,” (Neff 128) or, in other words, an open, provisional theory keenly tied to the data from which it was generated (Glaser and Strauss 42-43).
Act-Purpose Coding and Grounded Concepts

To begin my comparative analysis of the corpus of texts written in the CHSFS Ethiopia Forum, it was necessary to initially code a random sample of threads to answer the following preliminary questions: “For what purposes do participants begin threads on the discussion forum?” and “What kinds of replies does each kind of thread typically elicit?” These questions are informed by Burke’s Act-Purpose ratio, where, acts are the distinct written acts of participants in the forum (whether initiating a thread or replying to it) and purpose is what can be rhetorically imputed as the intent or reason the written act was performed. This ratio is especially relevant to this message board because pivotal to and embedded in the message board’s design is the assumption of a participant’s purposeful act of initiating a thread and thus engaging in a purposeful writing act.

The threads posted in the online forum are organized into pages of 25 threads each, ordered based on the date of the last post to each thread, from most to least recent. The Ethiopia forum contains a total of 10,201 threads (and 117,076 posts) across 409 pages. A sample of 10% of these pages (about 41 pages total), selected using a random number generator, provided 1,024 randomly selected threads—a sizeable, yet manageable, number of threads to code.

To answer the first preliminary question, “For what purposes and about what ideas, matters, issues, or problems do participants begin threads on the discussion forum?” I read the initial thread posts, engaging in open and axial coding based on the imputed purpose for initiating each thread as a rhetorical unit, as well as developing general descriptors for the content (the ideas, matters, issues or problems about which the initial thread post is written) (Blythe 209). Coding the written acts that initiated the threads in my random sample, I found fifteen distinct purposes for written acts that initiated threads on the forum. Each of these distinct
purposes have been broadly characterized as either APPEALS, written acts with the purpose of engendering replies (613 of the total threads), and SHARING, providing information without necessarily entreating replies (411 of the total threads). Written acts characterized as APPEALS have been subcategorized as either Soliciting, asking for a reply within the technological mechanisms of the message board (561 of the total APPEALS), or bidding Commitment, requesting action in response to the written act that would occur outside the forum (52 of the total APPEALS). Written acts characterized as SHARING consisted of either Unsolicited Input, written acts intended to inform or encourage (168 of total SHARING threads), or Personal Evocations, written acts intended to share variously mediated forms of personal expression (243 of the total SHARING threads). Decoding and developing an understanding of the fifteen distinct purposes for initiating threads in the forum, I then applied criterion sampling, selecting to code a category of texts most relevant to my research question. Thus, I focused on the purpose of announcement, Personal Evocations that share the completion of personal, familial, or cultural rites of passage, milestones, or events, which comprise 153 of the total Personal Evocations. Using these announcement threads, I proceed with selective coding, coding replies to the initial threads as purposeful acts themselves and comparing the content of these texts to seek patterns from which to develop provisional theoretical conclusions in order to answer my research question.

In examining how forum participants use writing to perform and construct their identities as adoptive parents it should be recognized that virtually any act of writing in the forum can be construed as some sort of performance contributing to that identity. Simple, repetitive and often very brief acts of writing, such as these announcements and the replies they garner, can appear to be common and inconsequential, but as Gee suggests about discourse, Butler suggests about
performative acts, and Huckin suggests about the coding of texts themselves, it is the very mundaneness of these acts that make them evocative and meaningful. These announcements are particularly enlightening because, as will be shown below, they can most explicitly be seen as stylized and repetitive acts, clearly adhering a form, a content, and a vocabulary, which according to Butler’s concept of performative acts, are important indicators of identity performance. Meanwhile, individual participants’ differences, variations, and permutations in engaging in these stylized and repetitive acts of announcement offer opportunities to see openings, fissures, fractures, and boundaries where the actual construction of an adoptive parental identity can be seen.

In coding the replies to the acts of announcement sampled in the forum, I found that almost all of them were *purposeful acts of affirmation*, intending to congratulate or commend the milestone, rite of passage, or event announced in the initial thread post. One exception to this was written replies of *consolation* to threads that announced personal or familial tragedies or sorrowful events rather than welcomed milestones. Occasionally, participants replied to threads with *questions*, either of the author of a thread or of another respondent, *answers* to questions asked in the thread, or with *confirmation* (usually by the author of the thread) providing direct or indirect recognition of a reply another participant wrote. These, though, were few and far between, and most reply activity was engaged in the stylized and repetitive act of *affirmation*.

**Act-Purpose Ratio and Identity Performance**

In selective coding, I use Burke’s Pentad as a heuristic to analyze the written acts in the CHSFS Ethiopia Forum in order to examine how that writing is used to perform and construct identity within the message board. Thus, it is necessary to explain a theoretical relationship between Burke’s theory of Dramatism and Butler’s theory of Performative Acts. To introduce his
theory of Dramatism and the Pentad, Burke explains that the Pentad is a mechanism for “the attributing of motives” in human acts (xv). In other words, it is a “Grammar” (xvi) for treating and interpreting human acts as dramatic, symbolic, driven and motivated by an attempt at meaningfulness. As well, Burke does not deny that a relationship may exist between Dramatism and other philosophical systems, remarking that, “One could think of the Grammatical resources as *principles*, and of the various philosophies as *casuistries* which apply these principles to temporal situations,” and allowing for certain redefinitions of the pentad’s terms as a “Grammatical” concern (xvi). Burke also makes central to his grammar a “transformability,” by which these terms can be repositioned and combined, “for the imputing of motives” (xix-xx). With this in mind, a part of this project entails rendering Performative Acts as a particular philosophical case whereby human acts are seen as symbolic of identity.

There is an extent to which Burke’s method intends not to engage real human acts themselves but merely to constitute our language about them as dramatic, symbolic events, to organize the “imputing of motives,” as it were. Butler, though, gives us a way to problematize this by conflating lived human experiences with dramatic performance. According to Butler, identity is “instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (520). Her theory borrows from John Searle’s concept of speech acts, which identifies language that enacts or creates a social reality by its utterance (519). The symbolic acts of identity themselves are not related essentially but only coterminous in how they are chosen or interpreted to adhere to a certain identity. That is, they are separate, even disparate, acts symbolic of something else. In terms of human motivation, performative acts can be said to be dramatized, and perpetuated, by the individual who performs the act (521). Like speech-acts, in which a social reality is created only insofar as an individual utters and thus insists upon its reality, “Gender reality is performative which means, quite
simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed” (527). Performative acts, “mean both that which constitutes meaning and that through which meaning is performed or enacted” and “bear similarities to performative acts within theatrical contexts,” and hence, “The body […] bears meaning […] and the manner of this bearing is fundamentally dramatic” (521).

Thus, the terms used above should suggest that there is no mere casuistic relationship between Dramatism and Performative Acts: both actively address symbolic acts and human motivation. Both concepts also regard human motivation in terms of dramatic performance. If, according to Butler, we only know what is real by what is performed or acted, then it is the act, whether it is acted bodily or linguistically, verbally or textually, that constitutes the reality.

Implementing Burke’s Pentad as a way of assessing performativity in written acts requires one to take advantage of Burke’s acceptance of a transformability of his theory and refine the relationships between terms in the Pentad that Burke assumed and elaborated. This refinement begins by taking a look at the Act-Agent ratio since it is the very relationship between a person’s acts and her identity that is at the heart of Performative Act theory. Not attempting to exhaustively explicate all ten ratios possible in the Pentad, Burke gives only enough attention to the Act-Agent ratio to show how the ratios in general can differ from one another based on the logical relationship between his terms. Burke primarily sees the act-agent ratio as necessarily causal, “a temporal or sequential relationship than a purely positional or geometric one. The agent is an author of his acts.” But Burke also acknowledges that, “acts can make him or remake him in accordance with their nature” (16). It is this recursive role between the two terms that is effectively exploited in Performative Act theory, where the act creates the agent, developing the illusion of the agent’s unified identity. In fact, based on Butler’s theory, an agent is known by her acts, which are seen, “not only as constituting the identity of the actor but as constituting that
identity as a compelling illusion” (520). Though we can distinguish between act and agent, we must know the act to know the agent, at least in terms of the symbolic identity she is creating.

The covalence of act and agent under performative act theory also impacts the Act-Purpose ratio. Though performative acts are the “acts of individuals” (523), the act itself contributing to the construction and performance of a cohesive identity, the agent mediates her acts by comparison to the individual acts of others, who may have performed them before the agent did or who may repeat the agent’s performance (527-28). Thus, both act and agent become plural: the agent is acted upon by other agents as much as she acts herself and the acts are repeated, continuous, both prior to, during, and after the agent’s acts. Since the dramatistic relationship between act and purpose is that purpose, an intent or reason, precipitates the act, a purpose for any performative act becomes the contribution to the “compelling illusion” of a cohesive identity, whether an agent’s acts conform to or defy the acts/identities of others, the intended result, the purpose, is to express an identity based upon acts that are arranged to appear unified.

Within the context of the CHSFS Ethiopia Forum, purpose likewise precipitates the acts of writing performed there. Participants in the forum can easily participate in the message board as readers only and never contribute writing to the community, but the presence of these participants is never revealed in the schema of the message board. Thus purpose in the act of writing precipitates each participant’s verifiable existence on the forum at all. As if in literal expression of Butler’s assertion that identity is “real only to the extent that it is performed” (527), one does not exist in the forum, to other participants at least, unless one writes because, due to the technological constraints of the message board, the act of writing and posting a thread or reply is the activity that textually displays one’s presence, one’s identity, in the forum. When a
participant initiates a thread, that thread is posted at the top of the forum’s thread list, along with the subject heading she wrote and the participant’s username. When a participant posts a reply to a thread, her username is posted in the thread along with her written act in chronological order of when the posts were published. Other than through these two acts of writing, a participant’s presence and identity in the forum is never seen. And since one does not write without a contextually relevant purpose for the act and the act characterizes the participant’s identity, the Pentadic term of *purpose* comes to simultaneously refer to the specific rhetorical intent of a written act within a thread and the performance of an identity itself.

**Articulations and Tropes**

Thus, my analysis and theorization of *announcements* within the sampled threads, and their relationship to replies made in the threads, will begin by examining the relationship between act and purpose, both the specific rhetorical intent precipitating the participants’ written acts and, consequently, the function those written acts play in performing adoptive parental identities on the forum. What will be shown, below, is that participants in the CHSFS Ethiopia Forum perform their identities as adoptive parents by developing tropes to identify themselves within an alternative adoption narrative for family growth in some ways equivalent to the dominant pregnancy narrative promulgated in the larger culture and represented by texts like *What to Expect When You’re Expecting*.

In using the word *tropes, I combine both Johndan Johnson-Eilola’s rendering of the concept of articulation and Krista Ratcliffe’s redefinition of trope. Johndan Johnson-Eilola,* particularly in his book *Datacloud: Toward a New Theory of Online Work*, develops a theory of Symbolic Analytic Work, examining how the design of computer systems, particularly the ways in which they represent information, affects how professionals perform their intellectual activity
In developing his theory, Johnson-Eilola borrows from sociological theorist Stuart Hall the term *articulation*, which Hall defines as, “‘the form of the connection that can be made between two different elements, under certain conditions’” (qtd. in Eilola-Johson 7). These connections, according to Hall, are “‘not necessary, determined, absolute and essential,’” and in fact, may be found to be contradictory or incoherent but are joined to serve social and economic forces, often to compel individuals to work complicity within and perpetuate unequal social and economic relations (qtd. in Eilola-Johson 7; Hall 44-46). Hall equates the concept of articulation to Saussure’s linguistic theory of the sign, where there is no essential relation between signifier (a word, whether spoken or written) and a signified (a meaning) other than a cultural complicity, within a moment of time and a specific context, for communicative convenience (Hall 47). Hall is most concerned about how articulations act, through language, certainly, but also through other human arrangements, relationships, hierarchies, behaviors, systems, and processes, to place individuals within ideological subjectivities in unrecognized deference and service to social and economic forces, as well as how those articulations, never entirely coherent and harmonious, are renegotiated (Johnson Eilola 25). What Johnson-Eilola emphasizes, perhaps more than Hall does, is that, while resistant to interference, cultural articulations are “open to change” (27), subject to interference, “fragmentation and rupture” from those individuals and communities that may (be forced to) use them (27-28). Although individuals are subsumed in socially and economically convenient roles, these “subjectivities are multiple and often conflicting,” leading individuals, in the attempt to reconcile these subjectivities-in-conflict, to alter these articulations to better serve their multiple purposes (25). “Articulations,” according to Johnson-Eilola are often, “suggestions about acceptable meanings […] that function most effectively when subjects act automatically following common sense” (89). In other words, though these culturally grounded articulations
are resistant to change (since change itself implies an inefficiency), individuals within a community or culture are not merely passive recipients or replicators of cultural articulations. Rather, since they use such articulations to make work and everyday life “run smoothly” (90), they often act to rearrange or reconstitute these articulations. The dominant pregnancy narrative, as represented by cultural products like *What to Expect When You’re Expecting*, can be seen as a sequence of articulations that help women “run smoothly” the business of *being* pregnant and *being* a family and communicating that *being* with others, while the alternative adoption narrative constructed in the CHSFS Ethiopia Forum can be seen as an attempt to rearticulate *being* a family when the subjectivities of adoptive kinship come into conflict with the dominant subjectivities of biological kinship, all so that they can more efficiently communicate and live out their familial identities.

Johnson-Eilola’s conception of articulation is useful in its own right when examining the social relations involved in technology work, but it is also remarkably similar to Ratcliffe’s definition of a *tropo*. Ratcliffe recognizes all language as tropological: words function not merely as representations of “that which already exists,” but as significations of a multiplicity of cultural meanings, including ideologies, values, and social structures, generating, “that which does not yet exist or is not yet named.” Words classifying gender (such as *male* and *female*) and words classifying race (such has *white* and *black*) “function as cultural categories through which people see, organize, analyze, and value the world” (9). Furthermore, “because such symbolic systems are culturally and historically grounded, words-as-tropes emerge and function differently over time and place” and “have histories of use and effect” not timeless or universal definitions (9).

Both Johnson-Eilola’s conception of *articulation* and Ratcliffe’s rendering of *tropo* center on social practices, including language, that make convenient and ideological associations
between words, identities, bodies, behaviors, and values, and which are conditioned upon social forces and unequal cultural arrangements rather than essential unities. Here, I will prefer the term trope to reference written acts for the following reason: Articulation is a sociological term, referring to associations between social practices, behaviors, actions, retributions, disciplines, and systems quite possibly beyond language (though they work much like language), just as Johnson-Eilola’s use of the term refers to acts of knowledge processing rather than, necessarily, acts of language. Trope identifies instead a specific kind of articulation, in which words and other signs associate bodies (skin color, phenotype, genetic kinship, adoptive kinship) with socially constructed ideas and values (including identities, social roles and arrangements, ideological assumptions, distributions of power, etc.). Like other articulations, tropes are built for communicative convenience and efficiency, shortcutting the need to communicate those values, assumptions, identities, and associations. But like any articulation, tropes also make those attached values and assumptions invisible, incommunicable, imagining them as natural rather than historical, coherent and cohesive, rather than disparate and conditional.

Thus, in theorizing how writing is used by participants in the CHSFS Ethiopia Forum to perform and construct an adoptive parental identity, I will begin by examining the juncture between their written acts and their rhetorical and contextual purposes, demonstrating how tropes, as linguistic articulations of body and identity, shape an alternative adoption narrative which forum participants inhabit to construct their identities as adoptive parents.

IV. Analysis

Tropic Construction of an Alternative Adoption Narrative

Investigating the interstices between written acts, which are the most prominent artifacts
manifest on the discussion board; the centralizing pivot of the message board’s organizational structure; and the means by which participants’ identity and presence are instantiated in the forum, and their purposes, which foreground and premeditate any written act in the message board, I have found that in the forum, particularly through threads that engage in announcement, participants have shaped a whole schema for articulating and troping an alternative adoption narrative, relevant to the particular circumstances experienced by parents adopting from Ethiopia through CHSFS and by which participants identify themselves and one another.

Selective content coding of the sampled threads reveal several milestones, of varying prominence and importance, constructed by participants to mark occasions of their passage through the adoption process. These include (1) beginning the adoption process, (2) completion of a home study, (3) completion and acceptance of a dossier, (4) receipt of an adoptive child referral, (5) approval for adoption in Ethiopian court, (6a) receiving an adoptive child’s Ethiopian birth certificate, (6b) receipt of travel date, and (7) receipt of the social report. Each of these milestones or events reflects some sort of engagement on the part of an adoptive parent in actual bureaucratic or judicial processes of transnational adoption. But the articulation of each is evidenced in the whole range of social, bureaucratic, and judicial actions taken by both the adoptive parent and the agencies and offices on behalf of or in response to the actions of adoptive parents that are subsumed (or left out) in the articulations and tropes.

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5 The term milestone, used to refer to articulations constructed in the adoptive narrative comes from one participant’s reference to court approval, who, replying to another participant, calls it, “Another milestone! Congratulations!!” (Bessrny).
generated for each of these stages or milestones. Many of these milestones are referenced
metaphorically, substituting a name that imbues a milestone with larger cultural significance;
metonymically, deferring to an associated aspect of a milestone; or synecdochically, deferring to
what comes immediately after in a process. Below, each of these milestones will be examined,
including how the community in the CHSFS Ethiopia Forum trope these articulated stages in the
adoption process.

The stages or milestones shown in Figure 1, announced by participants in the CHSFS
Ethiopia forum, probably seem fairly self-explanatory. But they are more accurately understood
as articulations; embedded within them are whole schemes individual, bureaucratic and judicial
preparations, actions, meetings, and procedures, unspoken in the announcements but understood
by the participants.

For instance, completion and acceptance of a home study involves…

• filling out an application and paying fees.
• writing a 10 page personal history for each parent (including personal scrutiny of
one’s own philosophy of parenting and child discipline; relationships with parents
and spouse; personality, temperament, and coping skills; social support system and
friendships; understanding and previous experiences with adoption; sense of cultural
awareness; and religious and spiritual affiliation—as well as what one wants in a
child).
• two meetings with a social worker, one of which is in the family’s home and includes
a home inspection (and a family who had diligently organized closets, scrubbed floors
and walls, cleaned windows, and baby-proofed rooms prior to the visit).
• receiving a narrative home study and approval from the social worker.
The home study, in turn, becomes part of a family’s dossier, an application that is sent to Ethiopia for approval by the Ethiopian government’s Ministry of Women, Children, and Youth Affairs as well as an Ethiopian family court judge. This dossier has its own set of bureaucratic and judicial measures and procedures taken: an apostille from the secretary of state in the family’s state of residence; reports from current and previous counties of residence affirming that the parents are not convicted of any crimes; proof of employment, income, and medical insurance; affidavits and powers of attorney signed and notarized; records showing approval to adopt from the US Department of Homeland Security’s Citizenship and Immigration Services; letters of recommendation from friends, etc. The same goes for each of these milestones: underneath each lie a whole sequence of social, bureaucratic, and judicial arrangements, governmental speech acts establishing, constructing, through paperwork, a collection of small realities that culminate in a penultimate speech act of adoptive kinship, none of which is explicitly communicated in each parent’s announcements on the message board. Also conspicuous, and suggesting the community’s social construction of the articulations of their identities, are the possible milestones left out of the announcements. After the announcement of a travel date or social report, participants in the forum do not announce their actual departure to Ethiopia or court approval in the U.S., which at the time was usually required because of the visa on which adoptive children from Ethiopia entered the country. The alternative adoption narrative is complete at the immediate prospect of travel, after which all other procedures are apparently deemed inevitable. In short, each milestone announced by participants in the forum can be seen as an articulation. Of all the myriad actions, decisions, procedures, intrusions, and inspections one undergoes in an adoption, these milestones are the ones that are chosen through the culmination of individual written acts in the message board to narrate one’s journey of adoption.
and with which one performs one’s identity as an adoptive parent.

But, in turn, these milestones in the alternative adoption narrative are not merely articulated; they are also troped, as language-uses are constructed to signify the articulation of bodies (in particular, the relatedness of bodies: kinship) and ideas (the meaningfulness of the experience of the adoption process) to characterize what is most valued within those articulations and reduce what needs to be said about them.

1. Beginning the Process

Within these participants’ announcements that they are beginning the adoption process, the adoption narrative itself is troped, both synecdochized and metaphorized, as a journey. The examples of a few threads in particular will help illustrate the use of this journey metaphor used to trope the adoption narrative.

In the first of these threads, the author announces beginning the adoption process, using a version of the trope to articulate this milestone. Gabrielsmom, titling the thread “FINALLY paper chasing!,” as opposed to titling it by directly referencing the purpose of writing her text, that she is beginning the adoption process, writes that, “After following this forum for over a year and a half, I’m happy to announce that we’re officially jumping in and starting the paper chase to adopt from Ethiopia:-)” (italics mine). It is not necessarily all that surprising that in a process requiring applications, affidavits, powers of attorney, and other documentation requiring notarization and apostillization, a participant would use the euphemism “paper chase” to describe the experience. But this euphemism is paired with other metaphors of movement and transportation to construct of a journey metaphor to represent the adoptive process. Gabrielsmom is not merely “starting a paper chase,” using one metaphor of transportation, but is “jumping in” to it. Still other parents perpetuate this use of language, metaphorizing movement to trope their
adoptive experience as a journey. In the two following threads, the authors announce the birth of a biological child so that the journey trope emerges as the parents discuss their need to delay the adoption process (CHSFS discourages parents from adopting a child if they are currently expecting a biological child or are in process of another adoption). In one, author Ildi and Aaron inform the message board of the birth of their daughter before promising that they hope, “to get back on the adoption track as soon as they’ll let us” (“OT”, italics mine). In the other thread, author futuremom announces the birth of her child as well as being notified by the agency that, “it’s already time to get rolling on our paperwork,” adding later that, “we have again begun the paperwork trail” (italics mine). Thus, participants in the forum are participating in sort of linguistic play, similar to the language activity Lanita Jacobs-Huey calls “signifying,” which she discovered in a listserv discussion about African-American hair. Signifying is “the recognition or attribution of some implicit content or function which is obscured by the surface content or function” (qtd. in Jacobs-Huey 97). In the listserv discussion that Jacobs-Huey investigates, participants use seemingly innocuous word choices as tropes for experiences, with the understanding that only those in the online writing community who had intimately experienced the challenges of African-American hair care would find the word choices evocative and recognize the experiences they conjure up (98-99). In the CHSFS forum, these references to a “track,” “paper chase,” a “paperwork trail,” function as more than customary euphemisms, combining metaphorical uses of the words “chase,” “track,” and “trail,” to construct a journey metaphor for the adoption narrative, with the synecdochic use of the words “paper” and “paperwork.” The metaphor of journey is combined with a metonym for a quintessential characteristic of the adoption process, each participant’s intimate experience of completing paperwork, in acts of signifying that mean more to community participants than they would to
outsiders. Such implicit understandings of a common experience are then revealed through additional signifying in replies to thread authors, for instance when Partyof4 replies to Gabrielsmom’s reference to “the paper chase,” with “let the fun begin!!;)” her winking smiley-face indicating both sarcasm and encouragement that express the complex feelings these participants have intimately and mutually experienced during the adoption process.

This signification of movement in the journey metaphor for the adoption narrative is also evident in participants’ replies to these announcements, whose urgent responses figuratively propel the authors onward to the next stage in the narrative as they progress toward the goal they seek—the point of travel and custody of their child. So, for instance, when participants announce they have a travel date or received court approval, a frequent reply will order the author to “Get packing,” or declare, “Time to start packing in earnest!” (melanieber, aimeec74) or simply affirm this act of movement in the narrative: “Happy packing!” (Heatherbean, cjustl, ChinaMom). Other replies to announcement of court approval include “It won’t be long until she is in your arms!” (ieronimo). Or earlier in the process, when a parent announces that she received a child referral, repliers may offer such affirmations as “Here’s hoping for a quick court process and travel” (mjnorton), urgently referring the author to the next milestones in the adoption narrative, moving them forward in the metaphorical journey with language of action and transportation.

2. Home Study

Threads announcing home study approval further illustrate how fellow participants, through their affirmations, urge the author on in the adoptive journey narrative. This milestone, which isn’t as frequently announced as many others, is not itself troped as some others are. In thread titles and initial thread posts, authors simply refer to it as “Home Study” or “Home Study Approval” (aerd, cathsand), naming the articulated milestone without performing further
linguistic significations. The replies to these announcements, though, immediately affirm the journey. For instance, one author, Adrienne writes, “Just got an email from Alexa- she received our draft of our Home Study. YIPEEEE:crazy: Thanks forum friends, only you know what it feels like…” (aerd77). Cathsand, who writes the first reply, responds, “Yay, you are making progress!” The replies following cathsand’s makes clear what she is progressing toward and, by implication, what she should be focused on. Brijank replies, “It is such a good feeling when you are done & on the list. Keep chasing those papers till your done…” Brijank not only invokes the “paper chase” euphemism, signifying through her choice of syntax, “chasing those papers” rather than “paper chasing,” the both metaphors of transportation and journey implemented in the adoption narrative and the intimate role the experience of completing paperwork plays in the adoptive parents’ sense of identification of themselves and with one another, but she also tropically references the next milestone in the narrative, using the phrase, “on the list,” which as will be seen, is a reference to dossier completion and acceptance. A subtle choice of language also marks how home study approval ought to be regarded. Brijank tells Adrienne about what a “good feeling” it is to be done not with the home study but with the dossier. In fact, though participants are affirmative of all these announcements, they make clear which ones are most valued. Others who respond to Adrienne continue this approach. Ddangelo and hollybreeze both write, “one step closer,” again pushing the author forward in the journey (aerd77).

Another thread announcement makes clearer the de-emphasis of the home study as a milestone in favor of the dossier, where the author, cathsand, who titled her thread “Home Study Approval!,” writes not about the homestudy but about the upcoming dossier completion: “Yeah! Now I just have to speed-demon the dossier on its way, and I'll be waiting!” Here, cathsand makes use of yet another common trope for the dossier, tying the word “waiting” directly the
dossier. She then engages in linguistic play with this trope, writing, “Can't wait to wait!” Thus, she herself, by directly referring to the dossier and repeating one of its tropes, the “Wait,” places the dossier completion stage at a higher level of importance for the adoption narrative. Participants replying to cathsand affirm this emphasis. Bonnie writes, “Congrats! That is a big step it won’t be long until you are officially waiting!” JenNC writes, “Congratulations! Can’t wait ‘til you’re waiting!” And PLFeld writes, almost ambivalently, “Congratulations – it feels good to be actively doing something,” (cathsand) suggesting the secondary importance that “something,” home study completion, plays in the adoption narrative constructed by participants in the forum.

The ambivalent affirmation and de-emphasis of the home study milestone is further evidenced by the relative infrequency of home study announcements in the sample (only three among the 153 announcements appearing in the sample), the relatively low number of replies to such announcements (about five on average compared to an overall announcement reply average of 19), and most prominently of all by participants’ narratological and tropic choices, neglecting to construct tropes for the home study and instead evoking the tropes for the next milestone in the constructed narrative, reorienting participants to the sorts of announcements, the specific acts of identity performance, the community prefers. Although this milestone appears amongst the announcements on the CHSFS Ethiopia Forum, it is de-emphasized by the community, as participants drive authors forward to the next milestone in the narrative, affirming this announcement but directing participants toward the dossier, placed at a higher level of significance within the narrative constructed by participants.

3. Dossier

As implied above, the relative importance of the dossier milestone is accentuated not only
by its frequency but also by the various ways in which the writing community tropes this particular articulation, constructing significations that reveal the symbolic value this milestone holds for participants. These tropes for the dossier milestone are distinctly synecdochic, identifying the milestone by what immediately results from it.

Two synecdoches are used to trope the milestone of the dossier, both of which refer to an action taken just after the official bureaucratic process of dossier completion and acceptance: “Officially Waiting,” or simply the “wait,” and being “on the list.” The language used within these synecdoches contains ambiguity that helps to signify various senses of parents’ experiences of the adoption narrative. In most of the sampled threads, the “Officially Waiting” synecdoche is used so exclusively to reference the milestone of dossier completion and acceptance that a participant posted a thread seeking to clarify the term. Injeramom writes,

I understand that once CHSFS accepts our dossier, we are "officially waiting" and, it seems, get on a list for referrals. What's "official" about this? At this point, the Ethiopian government still doesn't know we exist and have thrown our hearts and life savings behind the adoption, right?

By "official," do we just mean that, as far as CHSFS is concerned, we're in the queue?

I'm just trying to get it straight. Thanks.

Participants replying to Injeramom confirm her bureaucratic understanding of the term. In one sense, “Officially Waiting,” refers to the moment when CHSFS places parents on a list of families eligible to be considered for child referrals from Ethiopia, the consequence of having a completed and accepted dossier. Parents on the forum, though, select this language, initially associated with a specific bureaucratic procedure, to trope the entire articulated milestone of dossier completion and acceptance, as illustrated below, where author rebekah writes in her thread titled “Officially waiting!,”
Our dossier was accepted today and we're on the list for an infant boy, a little brother for our son Quinn and another son for us!

We are so excited, relieved, feeling great all around:)

Feels so strange to be one giant step closer - gets more real every day. Wow. Wow. Wow.

We began contemplating this adoption in late February, began the process in late March, and are gleefully waiting in time for the summer solstice tomorrow!

Happy Summer everyone! (“Officially Waiting”)

Here, rebekah makes it clear that “officially waiting” refers not merely to being officially listed by the agency but also to the entire process of dossier completion and acceptance, a sense of this trope confirmed by those replying to the author. Cathy3 writes, “Getting that dossier in was one of the best feelings for me. Congratulations!” and wschlaefer responds, “Congratulations! Isn’t it a great feeling to get all that paperwork out of your house?” But while cathy3 and wschlaefer confirm the author’s tropic reference to the bureaucratic process, still others, in their replies offer up other meanings that “officially waiting” signifies. Kecia writes, “Happy Summer and congratulations on getting past that BIG milestone,” and erica replies, “Yeah! Congrats on a huge step. We hope to be not too far behind you!” both aligning the milestone of dossier completion and acceptance, as well as “Officially Waiting” as its trope, with the journey metaphor of the adoption narrative, while Kari writes, “Congrats! It’s great to see progress isn’t?,” implying that this milestone not merely as progress forthcoming, as might be the case with an announcement of home study completion, but as progress achieved.

Yet another sense, though, possibly the most important sense of “officially waiting” to the forum participants, is suggested in the signifying in which rebekah engages in her initial post. She doesn’t merely announce a bureaucratic procedure finished but opines that, “We […] are gleefully waiting in time for the summer solstice tomorrow!” (italics mine), overturning the
bureaucratic use of the term, “waiting,” with additional significations. “Waiting,” here, is used ambiguously, both as a present progressive verb, “We […] are gleefully waiting,” and thus as a word signifying the experience of waiting out a momentous time period in the adoption narrative, and as a modifier describing the pronoun “We,” “We […] are […] waiting,” understood in another sense as we are considered to be waiting, “[just] in time for the summer solstice tomorrow!,” thus using “waiting” as a term of self-identification within the adoption narrative. Respondents to rebekah confirm the significance placed on the word “waiting” to trope the milestone of dossier completion and acceptance within the adoption narrative. Chandra writes, “Congratulations!! Hope the wait goes fast for both of us :),” and APMommy responds, “Congrats!! Here's to a speedy wait!,” both taking up the term “wait,” not merely as acknowledgement of the bureaucratic approval but as a time period in the narrative that must be endured.

The intense meaningfulness of the phrase “Officially Waiting” as a trope for this articulated milestone in the adoption narrative is so pronounced that it appears, in various forms, in most of the sampled threads announcing dossier completion and acceptance. Of the ten sampled threads announcing the dossier, nine of them explicitly reference it as “Officially Waiting” in either the titles they provided for their thread or the text they wrote in their initial thread post.

Another thread, initiated by buffalojen’s announcement of dossier completion and acceptance, illustrates the multifaceted meanings the word “waiting” has for these parents. Buffalojen exploits the ambiguity of the term in much the same way rebekah does, using the word four times, once in the thread’s title, “We are officially WAITING!!!!,” and thrice in the text of the initial post, signifying the word in different ways each time: “I can't believe it but we
are now officially *waiting*. Dan and I are just overjoyed. Finally we are *waiting* to bring our little one home. We still have a long ways to go but OMG happy dance.. we are *waiting*!! (italics mine). In the title, she appears to evoke the bureaucratic sense of the term but that she capitalizes all the letters in the word “waiting.” The second use of the word, “we are now officially waiting,” marks a status, a self-designation, an identity within the adoption narrative. The third use of the word, “we are waiting to bring our little one home,” uses “waiting” to signify a passage of time, one that others in the forum have experienced or will experience, and thus identifying with others in the forum even as she announces her good news. And the fourth use merges a couple of these senses, working as both a term of self-identification and as a passage of time.

Again, others respondents repeat these various significations of “waiting.” DaniWestRN’s reply recalls the bureaucratic articulation of the milestone: “It’s nice to see another TTCer on the waiting list. :).” APMommy emphasizes the passage of time: “Congrats! Here’s to a short wait! :)” And myla’s reply suggests the word’s role in identifying the parent within the adoption narrative and the community’s sense of identity within that narrative: “WONDERFUL! Join the waiting for referral club!” But mamasweetpea’s reply signifies “wait” in yet another sense. She writes, “Yeah! that is great news and what a wonderful thing to have behind you! Now it's just hurry up and wait a little more...at least this wait is the REAL wait!! (italics mine). Here, mamasweetpea again turns the trope back on itself once again, evoking with use of the word, “real,” in all caps, that complete phrase, “officially waiting,” but with a new signification of the word “official.”

With these examples, the full range of meaningfulness is expressed of the trope “Officially Waiting” to signify the completion and acceptance of the dossier as part of the
adoption narrative. As synecdoche, “Officially Waiting” is selected by the community to trope this milestone not only in order to simply name the articulation in reference to what was accomplished (i.e. parents virtually never wrote “dossier accepted” or “dossier completed”) but also to label the milestone in association with both the agency’s response, placing parents on a list of families who can accept referrals, and with the consequent action this leads the parents to—“waiting.” Beyond this synecdoche, though, the two terms also work ambiguously to evoke various senses of the words “officially” and “waiting,” which in turn signify variously the meaningfulness of this milestone to participants’ sense of experience and identity. Announcing and identifying oneself as “waiting,” does not merely mark one’s place, one’s identity, within the adoption narrative and thus as an adoptive parent, it also signifies a key experience in the lives of adoptive parents all participants in the forum can relate to and identify with—the time period one must wait. It also, by implication, signifies what is being waited for, a child referral, which stands in for the child itself, the goal or prize that is the result of this journey. The “wait” in conjunction with the use of the word “official” carries additional connotations. As suggested by mamasweetpea’s reference to the “REAL wait,” the word “official” is deployed as “real” and “authoritative” but also “officiated” or “finally acknowledged,” in other words, as a speech act instantiating an already “unofficial wait,” an “all but official wait,” or a “wait we knew all along we were enduring” (a wait of several years, for many adoptive parents) but that is only now recognized by those granted authority to approve parents for adoption. Thus, through the trope “Officially Waiting,” participants simultaneously truncate a range of bureaucratic and judicial procedures lived by the parents on the message board, while fusing together a range of meanings that likewise evoke a range of intimate and meaningful experiences both for themselves and for each other, all as part of constructing an adoption narrative that they can use to construct their
own identities and each other’s.

Finally, as synecdoche, the “wait” signifies at least one other meaning relevant to participants in the forum, for the phrases “waiting list” and “on the list” refer not only to a list presumably kept by the adoption agency but also to an internal spreadsheet maintained by and posted regularly in the CHSFS Ethiopia Forum. For instance, to Idli’s announcement that her family’s dossier had been accepted, Bethany4bz replies, “Glad that you joined us on the waiting list” (IdlieandAaron “Newbies”). The clearest example of this synecdochic usage of the “wait,” though, appears in Julie’s announcement of dossier completion (though not acceptance), in which she directly inquires about this internal list, asking, “Can we be added to the forum list now, or do we need to wait until our dossier is approved?” (thecarans). Luvbug soon responds, answering Julie’s question, through an act of signifying: “Yeah, someone to join me at the bottom of the list, glad you’ve joined. :) It’s just feels better when I see more names adding, which means I get to move up one step” (thecarans). Here, luvbug confirms Julie’s question with a simple “Yeah,” moving on quickly and turning that confirmation into an affirmation, welcoming her to “the bottom of the list,” as if it is understood that Julie is well aware of how the list works, despite her inquiry, and, thus, including her into this community of prospective parents though this act. Other participants follow suit, replying, “Welcome to the wait!” a phrase used frequently in response to announcements of dossier acceptance, ambiguously referencing both this particular waiting list, maintained by forum participants, and the momentous “wait” in time that Julie has joined the other participants in enduring. As suggested by luvbug, participants who disclosed that they submitted their dossier were placed at the end of the internal list, which acted as a queue, listing each participant in the order, by calendar date, in which they submitted their dossier, and thus indicating who was likely to be next in the forum to proceed to the next
stage in their adoption process. Because participants list other dates relevant to their adoption process as well, this list also allowed others to see how long others are waiting between one milestone and the next. Eventually, participants constructed another spreadsheet called the “Estimator,” which would pull data from the list to algorithmically predict referral receipt dates and travel dates based on patterns in the data provided in the list. But the list accomplishes much more than this in terms of how it frames and constructs the adoption narrative. On the list, families recorded date of dossier acceptance (milestone 3), referral receipt (milestone 4), court date (milestone 5), and travel date (milestone 6b), in this order, thus stipulating an order to the milestones that participants both anticipated and assumed, whether or not these milestones actually occur in this order for each family. The milestone data, noted above, collected on the list, also correlates with the most commonly announced milestones in the forum. Participants were far more likely to choose to announce those milestones for which data were collected on the list. Thus, the list seems to have both contributed to constructing the order of the adoption narrative for forum participant and reinforced announcement of certain milestones over others.

4. Referral

As with all of the milestones announced in the forum, participants announcing the completion and acceptance of their dossiers are quickly urged onward in the adoption narrative. Thus, buffalojen, in addition to reading replies that affirmed her “wait,” also received responses attempting to elide that distance of time between one milestone and the next. So, for instance, Heatherbean writes, “Congrats, and I hope your referral comes sooner than you think!” and Tesi writes, “Congratulations! Can’t wait to hear of your REFFERAL news!” simultaneously urging buffalojen on but also reinforcing the next performative act participants would like to see in the message board: the announcement of a child referral.
A referral is, essentially, another document. It identifies a child placed for adoption in Ethiopia selected by the agency for the adoptive family based on the preferences the family indicated in its dossier. The referral marks a decision point for the adoptive parents, who must review the referral and either accept it, proceeding with the adoption of the referred child, or reject it, and be placed on a waiting list for another referral. To facilitate this decision, the referral includes as much about the child as is known, including the child’s identifying information (with pictures, birth name, approximate birth date, gender, etc.) and a background and family history, including location of birth; date the child was placed for adoption and who placed the child; birth family’s religious affiliation, ethnicity, and language; the names and ages of the child’s birth parents as well as other living birth family members; the circumstances, as shared both by the person placing the child for adoption and by the regional court, that led to the child being placed; the regional court’s recommendation for adoptive placement; and finally records of medical examinations and medical lab tests conducted (CHSFS Ethiopia. Background). In an adjoining document, CHSFS lays out how the decision is confirmed and encourages the adoptive family to have the child’s medical information reviewed by a physician at one of several international adoption clinics in the United States, where personnel have specialized in the health, wellness, and medical needs of children adopted transnationally (CHSFS Ethiopia. “Paschke-Johannes”). After receiving a medical review, a family decides whether to accept the referral, and if it accepts, sends confirmation materials to CHSFS.

As with other milestones, this one is articulated to synecdochically elide many of the procedures above, deferring to and prioritizing the moment when the referral is received from the agency. A post by Weberfamily is typical of this deference to the moment the referral is received. Typically, participants in the forum announce a referral after they have accepted it, and
thus after they have reviewed the referral material and sought advice from an international adoption clinic. Weberfamily writes, “Hi everyone. We got a referral Thursday for the most perfect (in my unbiased opinion:-) 2.5 year old boy […] We accepted today.” While acknowledging their acceptance, the announcement prioritizes the receipt of the referral, which occurred four days prior the acceptance and announcement, and the medical review is never mentioned. Still others make little to no remark about even their acceptance of the referral, leaving it as a tacit assumption in the community. For instance, Mary announces, “we received our referral this week for a three year-old girl and 13 month old boy,” (Colette10019) marking the moment when the referral was received, and by implication the time between receipt of the referral and announcement, but making no mention of the procedures that occurred between, including the acceptance itself.

Still others chose not only to synecdochically elide these steps but possibly announce receipt of the referral prior to when medical review and acceptance had actually occurred. Tyandann begin their initial post, announcing, “So we were thrilled when we got the call today @ 11am phoenix time,” referring to the moment when the agency called to notify the family of the referral and revealing that they are announcing about twelve hours after they received the referral. Tyandann goes on to describe the twins boys referred to the family and implies that a medical review occurred, writing, “They are healthy and doing great,” but makes no mention of their final acceptance or sending confirmation of acceptance of the referral to the agency. Meanwhile, LynnnandMike announce the same day that the family received a referral, admitting that, “We are still waiting to get her medical review,” but already implying acceptance, “but she is our baby.” Here, the urgency to announce referral synecdochically elides even the actions taken to make the referral acceptance official, so they not only trope this milestone but articulate
whole institutional procedures, while even LynnandMike expresses anxiety that both agency and forum community protocol may have been breached by announcing so soon.

The urgency to announce receipt of referral, synecdochically eliding a whole arrangement of procedures, is not merely due to the excitement of a family that wants to share with its adoptive community its good news. This elision is prioritized and reinforced others in the community replying to each announcement. This is most evident in replies to a post written by mjnorton, who writes, “I have hesitated about posting this, but I do finally need to share our good news: last week we have accepted the referral of a beautiful 2 1/2 year old girl! We could not be happier.” Mjnorton explains her hesitancy as a worry over causing anxiety or disappointment for others in the forum, “I do want to say that our hearts go out to those of you waiting – especially those of you waiting for your first.” But participants who reply to mjnorton’s post not only affirm her but reinforce the community’s preference for hearing announcements of referral receipts. The first reply, from palawalla counters that, “news of a referral will raise spirits around here,” before asking, “BTW, when did you receive your referral?” again prioritizing the receipt of the referral rather than its acceptance. Cathsands admonishes, “Don’t hesitate to share good news. It perks us all up!” and Gabrielsmom acclaims, “Referrals are ALWAYS good news!!! Congrats!” Again, these are not merely encouraging affirmations but help to reinforce the writing activity preferred in the forum, and for purposes relevant to all participants, as suggested by a reply by truenorth, who congratulates mjnorton, and then writes, “Maybe your referral will unleash the flood gates on other referrals, too!” To some this might seem like a gesture relegating a referral announcement to a superstitious omen of good fortune. Such would be a rather curious gesture, though, because participants know well how the referral process works. This isn’t a gesture of hope for good luck for others. Rather, it is an act of signifying
demonstrating understanding of agency procedures, in particular the agency’s tendency to offer referrals in groups. Thus, if one participant receives a referral, then it is possible that others will soon as well. In fact, palawalla’s question, above, asking for clarification of when the referral was received, not only prioritizes the moment of referral receipt but allows participants to assess when they may receive their own. While a participant might only announce after the referral is accepted, it is its receipt that is important to the community, and thus what is prioritized in announcing the milestone, because of what it means for them. In short, the synecdochic elision of the referral milestone reflects not only individual excitement over receiving a referral but the community’s urgency to receive key dates that will help them to anticipate their own.

Like other milestones, the referral is metonymically and metaphorically troped in a number of ways. Often it is referred to as “the call,” a metonymic reference to the call placed by the adoption agency prior to sending referral paperwork (Tyandann, newmomma2b, buffalojen “Referral!!!! :lol: :lol: :lol: :lol:.”, LynnandMike, sugarhill). Sometimes, it is referred to as the “‘R’ word,” euphemizing the referral milestone particularly when referrals have not been recently announced and thus mitigating participants’ excitement and anticipation that could possibly be evoked by using the word “referral” (mjnorton, PLFeld, holli, 34100). But the troping related to the referral milestone that has the most interesting implications for the construction of an adoption narrative and the adoptive familial identities of participants in the forum are the kinship metaphors used throughout when announcing referrals. It is at the time of referral, when prospective parents receive a name and picture of a child, that they begin to refer to themselves as, “parents,” the child in the referral as “daughter” or “son,” and to sibling relationships within the family. Thus, in announcing the family’s referral, tyandann write, “we found out we are the proud parents of twin baby boys.” Kccook calls the child, “our little girl.”
Buffalojen, in describing the child in the referral, exclaims that she is, “in awe,” of “our daughter” (“Referral!!!! :lol: :lol: :lol: :lol: :lol:”). Mjnorton writes, “I am so happy to be able to say this: I have a daughter!” LynnandMike, who implied their acceptance of the referral before receiving a medical review, writes, “she is our baby girl,” implying a parental ownership that almost acts to overturn the cultural logic of biological kinship exhibited to adoptive parents in such phrases as “a child of your own.” Tracy, in her announcement, begins to sign her posts, “Tracy / DH John / 4 dogs, 1 cat, and now a baby boy!” Meanwhile, respondents to referral announcements reinforce these kinship metaphors in their affirmations. Elizajane echoes kccook’s sentiment, above, writing, “Congratulations on your new baby girl!!” (kccook). Holli affirms mjnorton sense of kinship by referring to the child as their “baby girl” (mjnorton). Often respondents reinforce the use of kinship metaphors in announcing referrals whether or not the initial poster used the metaphor. Although one participant announcing referral did not use a kinship metaphor in her initial post, j9riggs nonetheless uses such a metaphor to affirm her, writing, “You’ll be one busy mama with twins” (34100). After 4dogmomma announces her referral, Cinds replies that 4dogmomma’s current son, “will love having a little brother” (4dogmomma). And love2laughmom calls newmomma2b “MAMA!!!!!!!” (newmomma2b). That these are tropes, linking bodies through the social construction of kinship, is evident in that no court decision has been made declaring kinship through official speech act, which does not occur until the Court Approval milestone. And, of course, physical custody will not occur until much later. At this point, participants are assuming identity with the referred child tropically.

Another kind of metaphorical trope, related to the kinship metaphors above, is enacted in how referral announcements are composed. Many of the announcements are constructed to imitate the genre of the birth announcement. Meanwhile, many referral announcements tell the
story of receiving the referral, in the way a biological family might recount the experience of a pregnant mother going into labor. Frequently this imitation of birth announcements emphasize relevant dates, time, locations, health information, and (because an adoptive child is rarely a newborn) ages. Thus, LynnaandMike announce that the family received a call from their social worker at “2:28 EST,” for, “a 7 week old GORGEOUS baby girl born March 20, 2008,” and that, “She is healthy, adorable and after 9+ months we are more than relieved.” The length of the parents’ wait is another addition the participants make to the typical data associated with a birth announcement, so that, similar to LynnaandMike, tyandann note the time of the social worker’s call, “11 am phoenix time,” and announce they, “are the proud parents of twin baby boys,” who are “1 month old […] After 13 plus months of waiting.”

The most direct example of recounting the story of referral receipt is Weberfamily’s announcement, in which the participant announces the referral itself, then labels what follows, “Story:”

I had just called my program person to whine about not having a referral and discuss all the reason why other people could be getting them first. […] I just could not take it. She sympathized and said that it would happen soon enough Blah blah blah.

About 2 hours later our SW called. I thought she was calling to admonish me about my whining. NO she had a referral!

We accepted today!

Meanwhile, sugarhill’s story luxuriates in the moment by moment details of just how the call from the social worker was received, suspensefully delaying precisely what the call would reveal:

The phone range at 3:25pm and said “Twin Cities” on the caller id.. I don’t know anyone in MN, so this had to be it!! I answered the phone and the first words out of my mouth after a long pause were “Nuh-ugh”…no hello, just “Nuh-ugh!!” we called the hubby on 3 way and off we were.
It’s a BOY! 11 weeks, 9 lbs.

The milestone of referral, in particular the forefronted referral receipt, is so momentous to prospective parents and to the other participants on the forum that significant creative effort is put into how the story of referral is told. This is most evident, in an announcement made by mama2six in mid-November, in which she parodies the holiday poem “A Visit from St. Nicholas” by Clement Clarke Moore:

Twas the day after Monday and all through the house
All the creatures were stirring even the mouse.

A referral was far from everyone’s mind
And pizza for lunch was all I could find

When all of a sudden the phone did ring
Not knowing what news that ringing could bring.

I checked the caller ID screen and let out a shout
I thought, “I know what this call is about!”

Mama2six, fitting the birth announcement genre, even details the referred children’s ages and birthdays, in the approximate meter and rhyme of Moore’s poem.

As might be expected, both the referral announcement itself and its form and content are reinforced by the affirmative replies of others. Many, of course, compliment mama2six’s parody. But also revealing is how participants correct others on their method of announcement. Tyandann, for instance, titled her announcement post, “We’re sick of being #1 (Got Twins),” referring to the internal list of prospective parents maintained on the forum, upon which Tyandann was listed as first. Ali_S, remarked first about this title, writing, “I thought it meant you were having a bad day from all the waiting,” before affirming the prospective parents. Later, Eastiopian affirms that correction, writing, “I also didn’t know this was a referral post!” before again giving an affirmation. Thus, participants reveal and reinforce a code for how to make
referral announcements, preferring a clear indication in the subject heading of a post.

In at least one case, the gentle correcting done by respondents resulted in the prospective parent editing the post title, as is revealed in the replies to mjnorton’s announcement. As mentioned above, mjnorton expressed concern that her announcement might disappoint other forum participants. Respondents, though, expressed their joy at hearing the news. Later, a respondent writes, “PS, I’m glad you changed the title of your post. Shout it out, alright! :D,” revealing that the title of this post, “Okay I’ll Shout: referral!!” was edited from a previous version that apparently masked that the post was a referral announcement. The “Okay” in mjnorton’s post title is a reply to those who were entreating her to share the good news openly. Other replies to mjnorton’s announcement confirm forum participants’ willingness to correct the form and content of the announcement, directly asking mjnorton to post the date she received referral and how long she waited for referral, data prioritized in other referral announcements in imitation of the birth announcement genre. This may be one of the more prominent examples of participants shaping each other’s adoptive familial identities through their performance of the adoption narrative, where moments like this set an example for how subsequent announcements ought to be rendered.

As in replies to prior announcements of milestones, respondents urge the referral recipient on to the next stage in the journey: Court Approval and Travel Date. Often these are signaled in the same reply, such as when red4raggle replies to mjnorton’s referral announcement, writing, “Yay!!! Congrats to you! Here’s hoping for a quick court process and travel ASAP!” (mjnorton).

But respondents also engaged in acts of signification that orient the referral recipient within in metaphorical adoptive journey rather than just propelling them forward, referring back
to dossier completion using its metonymic trope, “the wait.” So, for instance, LynnandMike hear from a respondent, “The wait is finally over!” and from another, “The nine months of waiting have been well worth it!” And, punctuating simple replies of “Congratulations,” tyandann hear frequent affirmations of “worth the wait.” Again, these are not simple variations of congratulations. Rather, these gestures toward both past and future stages of the adoption narrative socially orient participants’ position in the narrative, signaling their identity as prospective adoptive parents, and also reinforce how pivotal the Referral milestone is. In remarking, so frequently, that it was, “worth the wait,” participants are rendering the referral as a metaphorical reward for waiting and persisting, for enduring the uncertainty and doubt every prospective adoptive parent presumably feels. By remarking, “worth the wait,” participants are confirming for themselves and for each other that the adoptive journey is indeed worth it, even before achieving its intended results, adopting and bringing home a baby boy or girl. The gesture, in short, constructs the significance of the milestone, marking referral receipt, rather than any other moment in the adoption process, rather than, even, related moments, such as referral acceptance, as a pivotal one, a milestone long and hard sought after, from which there is no return.

Announcers and respondents alike metonymically signify referral receipt, referring again to “the list,” which this time refers specifically to a list internally generated by the prospective parents in the forum. Metonymically associating the referral to the list is how tyandann choose to announce their referral receipt, titling their announcement, “We’re sick of being #1,” signifying the fact that they were first on the internal list of forum participants and thus predicted on the list to be the next to receive a referral. Similarly, Colette10019 metonymically signifies in reference to the list while making her announcement, writing, “We’ll be giving up our #1 spot as we
received our referral this week.” Respondents engage in acts of signifying, through linguistic play understood only by intimate participants in the site, in reference to the list as well. For instance, Gabrielsmom replies to Colette10019 announcement, writing, “So glad to see you vacate the spot,” not only playing off of Colette10019’s signifying but revealing she herself understands the signification and thus is intimately part of the forum community. This, of course, is one thing that signification like this accomplishes: it qualifies participants’ intimacy with and within the forum community. Few, if any, outside the community would recognize what this reference to the list refers to or its relationship to referral receipt, especially since ambiguity exists between the list kept by the adoption agency and the internal list kept by forum participants. To recognize that this reference is to the internal list without further explanation signals to each participant who uses and understands this act of signifying that they have intimate connection to the community. But more than this, the internal list becomes another element in the metaphor of the adoptive journey. If a family on the list receives a referral, its name is moved to a different part of the list spreadsheet and other families are moved up the list of those who are next predicted to receive a referral, so that the list itself becomes a sign of both the adoptive journey, as participants journey up the list, and reinforces the significance of the Referral milestone in the lives and identification of participants in the forum, since referral is one of the pivotal tools the editors of the list have to make predictions about who is next to move on in their milestones. As a result, then, the list itself becomes a sort of map of the metaphorical journey, which participants can use see where they are and how much longer it may be.

5. Court Approval

Together, Court Approval and Referral may represent the climax of the adoption narrative constructed in the Ethiopia forum or a precipice from which participants view where
they have been and can see where they are going. The two are the most common enactments within the adoption narrative, accounting for over half of the announcements in the forum related to the adoption narrative. Whereas other milestones may be left unannounced by individual participants, these two are the least likely to be overlooked. Both signal an official approval—first the referral, which indicates the adoption agency’s acceptance of an adoptive family into its Ethiopia program, followed by court approval, which indicates Ethiopia’s approval of the adoptive family’s pairing with the referred child. Court approval marks the point at which the Ethiopian government hands over legal guardianship to the prospective adoptive parents, though custody does not occur until a family has traveled to Ethiopia, received the child, and is granted a visa for the child through the U.S. Embassy. The referral and court approval are also associated because each have a connection to pictures provided of the referred child. As part of the referral, a family receives several pictures of the referred child. At this point, though, families are not permitted to distribute this picture online. Upon receiving court approval, since the family has legal custody of their child and thus authority over making decisions about the child’s identity, the adoptive family is finally able to share those pictures online, so that, as a result, where the referral is treated like a birth announcement, court approval acts also as that moment when the first baby pictures are taken and can be distributed to far-flung family and friends. Or, in this case, other participants on the Ethiopia forum.

When announcing court approval, participants increasingly use metaphors of kinship to identify themselves and their adoptive child. Court Approvals are frequently announced, for example, as “WE ARE OFFICIALLY PARENTS!!!” (Heatherbean) and “We are through court.....our sweet and amazing son is O.U.R.S.!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” (cmmxv8). This, of course, continues the metaphors of kinship are already used when announcing earlier milestones, particularly when
announcing referral receipt. At times, these metaphors of kinship are expressed through verbal gestures of parental ownership, such as when Sarah_C writes that the referred child, “is officially our baby girl.” At other times, these metaphors are expressed through relational terminology, as when Christine and Mike call the referred child “our daughter” (ieronimo). In these metaphors, though, participants add the ambiguous metaphorical play on the word “official” seen regarding dossier completion and “the wait,” that this is official confirmation of something understood all along, even something destined. The word “official” is deployed as “real” and “authoritative” but also “officiated” or “finally acknowledged,” in other words, as a speech act instantiating an already “unofficial” state of being. Such statements also act as tropes, signifying what is valued in this milestone—the recognition of kinship—eliding a whole series of actions and procedures that must occur before the child is placed in custody of the parents and given full authority to act on behalf of and in care of a child that is one’s “own.” Although such metaphors of kinship may be used earlier in the adoption narrative, the “official” status that court approval offers to this metaphor is significant to participants, as suggested in the threads they post both prior to court approval and when announcing court approval. For instance, wendy, announcing her court approval, writes, “I just heard from Alexa that we made it through court today. She’s finally our official daughter [I knew she was ours when I first saw her picture and got her info} [from the referral].” Here, wendy makes evident the sense of “official as “officiated” and “finally acknowledged.” Another participant, Lovesandz, makes this distinction even earlier in her adoption narrative when she announces that her family has begun the adoption process. Loveandz, choosing to adopt special needs children, had advanced knowledge of their prospective children, but writes, “I don’t want to say a whole lot about the kids we are praying for to bring home, because they are technically not ours” (italics mine), again suggesting the
significance of court approval officiating parental identity before metaphors of kinship are fully appropriate.

Court approval is so highly and effectively troped in the forum that these kinship metaphors almost stand in for any reference to court or court approval in the threads themselves. For instance, Johanna only uses the word “court” in the title of her thread, which continues, “May I introduce my son.” She follows up this metaphor of parental ownership and relationship with language signaling relationship in her initial post, writing, “And my new title is JoMama (The judge in Ethiopia said so …:D).” Such inventive uses of kinship metaphors are aggressively reinforced by respondents, who pick up on Johanna’s play on her own name through additional acts of signifying, writing replies such as, “Congratulations, Mama” and “HE has a fabulous smile, JoMama!” (Johanna).

This, of course, is not the only example of others in the forum reinforcing a participant’s performance of a parental identity through metaphors of kinship, often in a similar way to those who responded to Johanna, through acts of signifying, picking up on and repeating language in the initial post. So, for instance, when africamom announces, “We’re through! I’m officially a mommy!!,” others reply, “Congratulations mama!,” and “YAY mom!!!!,” one respondent even inquiring, “How does it feel to be ‘officially’ a new mama?” Again, a similar exchange occurs when Kecia announces court approval, writing, “I’m officially a Mom today!!” and receiving replies in turn, of “Congratulations, Mommy!!” (n84kas). In fact, this is a repeated sort of transaction in many thread, suggested a stylized performance, part of the process of identifying within the adoption narrative constructed in the forum and identifying as an adoptive parent.

Because, beginning with court approval, parents can finally post photos of the referred child, the photos themselves and references to “pictures” also act as metonyms for court
approval. One of the clearest examples of this occurs when one participant, Bessrny, announces, not that she has received court approval, but rather a court date. Rather than say that she is anticipating receiving court approval, she writes, “Hope it won’t be too long before I can post the baby’s picture up here.” Bessrny ought to know just how long this will take. She wrote this post on 2 Apr. 2008 and identified her Ethiopian court date as 22 Apr. 2008. But what she expresses here is her anticipation for court approval, which, choosing to refer to that moment metonymically instead as the point in which she can post photos of her child. Metonymic reference to the court approval milestone continues, of course, in the court approval announcements themselves. For instance, Javafamily, who announces both a travel date and court approval, titles her thread “Travel Date, pictures……..,” “pictures” standing in for court approval, since participants recognize that court approval is required before one is able to post photos of their child. Beyond this metonymic reference to “pictures,” Javafamily only needs to use a metaphor for kinship within the initial post, writing, “It is such a wonderful time to be able to announce to you that we have two lovely, beautiful and sweet little girls.”

As with other milestones, participants announcing court approval continue to metaphorize the adoption narrative as a journey. Participants frequently refer to this milestone as making it “through court” (cmmxv8, Sarah_C, ieronimo), “flying through court” (africamom), suggesting transportation, and at times even refer to it as a “hurdle” (DSTAngieB “Laissz le Bontemps”, wendy), suggestive of traversing an obstacle in a journey.

Similar to the announcement of other milestones, enhancing the journey metaphor, replies frequently direct participants to a later milestone, synecdochically propelling them forth in the journey, such as when amjohnson replies to Christine and Mike, writing, “It won’t be long until she is in your arms!!” (ieronimo). At this point in the adoption narrative, participants will
often signal the next step in the journey themselves, such as when tammyh titles her thread, “One step closer,” and when cmmxv8 ends her announcement with “Next Stop Africa!!!!,” again at this point deferring to when she will travel. By deferring to when they get to travel, skipping over other articulated milestones, participants suggest the significance of court approval that makes it the most common adoption narrative announcement in the forum, some just referring to remaining milestones as, “the home stretch” (alejohnson, ieronimo, tammyh).

6a. Birth Certificate and 6b. Travel Date

Announcement of the milestones of Birth Certificate and Travel Date lay bare the threads of articulation in the adoption narrative constructed in the CHSFS Ethiopia Forum. Although the Ethiopian birth certificates of adoptive parents’ children would be received by CHSFS shortly after court approval, prior to assigning a travel date, participants’ announcements of birth certificate receipt was closely associated with announcement of the travel date so that the order these milestones take in the adoption narrative is ambiguous. And, in fact, the placement of the travel date as a milestone was itself ambiguous at one point. Travel dates were announced as distinct and separate milestones throughout the range of dates available in the sample, possibly a reflection of the fact that the internal list denoted travel dates and the Estimator predicted them, thus reinforcing these announcements. On the earliest available dates, in mid-2007, though, travel dates were also often announced along with court approval; in a few cases, some participants even announced their travel date prior to court approval. Receipt of a birth certificate as a milestone began to appear in late 2007 and early 2008, at which point the birth certificate and travel date were usually announced together. Only in early 2009, nearing the last of the dates available in the sample, was the receipt of birth certificates announced separately from other milestones. Clearly, the ambiguity in the order of these milestones reveals the rearticulations that
occurred within the forum as the bureaucratic procedures of the Ethiopian adoption program at CHSFS changed. At one point, CHSFS was so certain that courts would approve of child placements on time that they offered travel dates before court approval. Later, notification of court approval, receipt of a birth certificate, and assignment of a travel date happened in close proximity, even within the same call from the social worker. Court approval authorized CHSFS to provide referred parents their child’s birth certificate, though other administrative delays could cause receipt of a birth certificate to be delayed. Finally, as the popularity of CHSFS’s Ethiopia program increased and more prospective adoptive parents sought to participate in the program, a backlog was created, since CHSFS could only bring so many families to Ethiopia each week, increasing the wait between court approval and travel. Thus, earlier on, when adoptions through Ethiopia proceeded more swiftly, the timeline for these milestones, and the milestones themselves, were often truncated, and receipt of the birth certificate was elided in announcing court approval and a travel date. As the adoption process through Ethiopia slowed down, and CHSFS received and delivered Ethiopian birth certificates well before they were able to supply a travel date, participants in the forum, through their announcements, changed their articulation of these milestones in the adoption narrative. All of this created some ambiguity in the order of these milestones in the adoption narrative constructed in the CHSFS Ethiopia Forum, as families altered their written performances of these milestones to meet these bureaucratic permutations, and tailored those milestones based on their own preferences and community priorities.

As mentioned above, threads in mid-2007 reveal early rearticulations that associated the announcement of court approval with the travel date. For instance, in an announcement by Chinamom on 25 June 2007, both the milestone of travel date and of court approval are entirely blended. Chinamom titles her thread, “July 20th Travel Date – edit with photos,” leading with the
travel date but indicating, by reference to photos, that court approval was granted. Her initial post, though, reverses these, leading with the court approval, “Our case went through the courts today,” and is followed up by notice of a travel date, “we have a travel date of July 20th! Hooray!” But when these milestones were articulated in one announcement, it was more likely to see one prioritized over the other. So isaiahsmom, posting in 15 June 2007, titles her thread “TRAVEL CALL!!!!!” not even hinting that the call from her social worker also included notice that her adoption was approved in Ethiopian court until she writes the initial post. Meanwhile, melanieber, posting in 6 July 2007, emphasizes court approval in the title of her thread, “She is ours!!!!!!!,” and writes at the end of her initial post, “I leave on July 26th!”

Again, as bureaucratic procedures changed, so did forum participants’ articulation and enactment of milestones. So by late 2007, participants like ckoneill began associating the announcement of a travel date with the announcement of birth certificate receipt. Ckoneill titles her thread “TRAVEL DATE!!!!!!” but also announces in her initial post that, “We received our BC’s.” Likewise, RosieF717, posting on 19 Feb. 2008, references the travel date in her thread title, but writes in her initial post, “I am so excited. Lindsay [the adoption agent] called me at 11:20am with by BC and travel date.” By April 2009, participants such as jbice and cjustl include reference to both the birth certificate and travel date in their thread titles, “BC and travel!!!!!!!!!!!!!” and “BC and tentative travel date :D,” respectively. These threads mark a change in the articulation of these milestones, participants beginning to both recognize and articulate receipt of their child’s Ethiopian birth certificate as a milestone in its own right.

By the beginning of 2009, participants were announcing birth certificate receipt as an

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6 Throughout this time, many other participants posted announcements of court approval and travel dates independently, either choosing one written act and not performing the other, or announcing both independently as they reached the milestone.
independent milestone. On 2 Jan. 2009, dkbcnns titles her thread “BC Received!!!!!!” and writes in her initial post, “WE GOT OUR BC!!!” Her initial post also reveals the bureaucratic conditions present that drew out the birth certificate as a milestone. She asks at the end of her initial post, “So does anyone know the timeline from BC to travel?” (dkbcnns). Whereas participants previously received a travel date along with the birth certificate, dkbcnns’ question demonstrates that this has changed. Bonnie suggests why, replying “Usually you get your travel date very soon after your BC […] It all has to do with [U.S.] embassy dates – and when your’s is scheduled” (dkbcnns). CHSFS restricted the number of families that traveled each week based on how many U.S. embassy appointments they could make in a week—usually around ten. As the popularity of CHSFS’s Ethiopian program increased, it took time to schedule travel dates that fit within these constraints.

Still, given the relative importance of the court approval date and the travel date in the list and the Estimator, it is notable that birth certificate announcement are not entirely subsumed under these more prominent articulations, that it appears at all as a distinct milestone. But its eventual appearance as a milestone in the adoption narrative constructed with the forum is a result not only of bureaucratic constraints but also of the significance it plays as an official speech act. For biological families, the birth certificate, as a legal document, is a taken-for-granted, a largely invisible step—even though it is an official speech act marking birth, relationship, and citizenship—because in a biological articulation of family, kinship never is in doubt, affirmed as it is by a visible pregnancy, a trip to the hospital, the naming of a child, and, if necessary genetic testing. Birth certificates, in the dominant culture, are invisible because they are ubiquitous. Although they officiate, the absence of one does not cause question, does not
invalidate kinship, only needed, at most, to authenticate identity and citizenship later in life.

But for the adoptive family, the Ethiopian birth certificate can be essential to begin to establish kinship even as the Ethiopian birth certificate lacks power as a speech act to confirm identity and citizenship that US birth certificates have. On a bureaucratic level, the Ethiopian birth certificate will simply be one of many documents used to by parents to establish their child’s identity as a US citizen, which also requires a US certificate of foreign birth, a US court-ordered adoption decree, and a passport, leading to a social security number and a certificate of citizenship for their child. All of these speech acts are invisible in the dominant culture, made entirely unnecessary by a US birth certificate, but are explicit in the context of the adoptive family. The receipt of an Ethiopian birth certificate, which lists the adoptive parents as mother and/or father, not grounded in the biological cultural logic of family formation, may be virtually meaningless to others that the adoptive parents encounter in lived experience outside the forum because to biological families, birth certificates are *mere* official speech act, a trace or remnant of unquestioned kinship, not the very marker of that kinship. The forum gives a place to proclaim and get positive response to the significance of such milestones from those also constructing their lives around a non-traditional, non-normative, family formation, creating meaning around the moment.

The significance of this speech act in helping to construct an adoptive familial identity is revealed in participants’ announcements of birth certificate receipt. In fact, the troping of this milestone is quickly stylized, participants announcing not only that the birth certificate was

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7 Certainly, like gender identity and despite the possibility of genetic confirmation, biological kinship and the biological family unit is also an articulation. This is visible when one compares the nuclear biological family arrangement, an “intact” family with father, mother, and children live together in one household, arrangement to the single-parent biological family arrangement, where paternal kinship can be in doubt, in dispute, and must be confirmed through additional, extranormal measures taken to confirm the legitimacy of the posited articulation.
received but telling the story of *when* and *how* it was received. For instance, MNmom writes, “I can’t believe we finally got it --- birth certificate at 10:30am this morning,” reveling, if ever so briefly, in the details of *when* and *how*. Other participants repeat the stylized performance of birth certificate announcements. For instance, dkbcnns, mentioned above, writes in her announcement, “I just opened the email and I cannot tell you the thrill to my heart to see our names listed as Lidetu’s parents! I could just sit here and cry (I probably will too)!”. Dkbcnns takes a moment to express how she received the birth certificate and what it means to her, highlighting the significance this official speech act can play in constructing an adoptive parental identity by providing visual authentication of the parental role. This significance is affirmed by truenorth, who replies to dkbcnns, writing, “*Seeing* the BC was one of those moments where you really realize that this is happening, huh?!” (italics mine). Jbice, in her birth certificate announcement, confirms the role it plays in constructing her adoptive familial identity, by simply writing, “We’re finally a family!!! WOOOOOHOOOOOO!!!!!!!!!!!”

Still, announcing the travel date was consistently more prominent as a milestone than birth certificate receipt.⁸ Travel date announcements were not only reinforced by their presence in the list and the Estimator, but also by what travel dates promised for forum participants who wished to interact outside the forum. Since families adopting through CHSFS typically travelled in groups, the travel date indicated who in the forum participants may travelling with. Within the forum, participants intentionally arranged and planned these face-to-face encounters, driven to meet in person the people they constructed their adoptive familial identities with online. Rebekah, announcing her travel date, highlights this well, writing, “We are set for April 3rd as

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⁸ In my sample, 24 announcement threads highlighted assignment of a travel date, while only nine highlighted birth certificate receipt.
well! Looks like a great group is forming – Tesi, Amanda, who else?” (“TRAVEL DATE”). Here, rebekah not only remarks enthusiastically on the group she may travel with, she is confirming which participants are in the same travel group as she is. Respondents to rebekah not only confirm her report of names or add their names to the list but also confirm flight plans, since participants taking the same airlines to Ethiopia will likely be on the same flight, with the same layovers.

Again, as in the announcement of previous milestones, participants announcing travel dates continue metonymically and synecdochically to reinforce the journey metaphor for the adoption narrative. As with court approval announcements, respondents to travel date announcements often alluded synecdochically to participants’ future trip to Ethiopia, but respondents to travel date announcements also reinforced the journey metaphor by signifying more immediate stages in the “journey,” referring to packing suitcases and emphasizing that the travel date will arrive quickly or that the “wait” would be over soon.

Much of the synecdoche involved in reinforcing the journey metaphor, encouraging participants to focus on a common goal, refers to parents’ trip to Ethiopia. So, for instance, Partyof4 affirms Kate’s announcement of a travel date, by writing, “Congratulations!!!! You are another step closer!!!!!” to travel. MNmom also affirms Kate’s announcement in similar fashion, writing, “We’re almost there!!!” More than just signifying the moment of travel, though, other respondents signify, and redirects participants to, the parental custody that occurs on the trip. Melanieber engages in this act of signifying in her own announcement, writing, in apostrophe, “Mommy is coming sweet baby!!!!!!!” A respondent affirms this written act, writing, “I bet you can’t wait to get her into your arms.” In another thread, McSturm engages in synecdochic signifying, reinforcing the journey metaphor, in reply to MNmom’s announcement,
writing, “Get there and GET HOME!” This act of signifying plays on a common euphemism used by TA parents, “to bring home” their child, as an alternative to a phrase used in the dominant pregnancy narrative, “giving birth.” Thus written act, “Get there and GET HOME!” not only suggests a journey and the return, but implies who the adoptive parent will come home with.

One common synecdoche for the travel date is the phrase, “get packing.” For instance, cjjustl, to announce her travel date, writes, “Hopefully our travel date will be confirmed soon and we can get packing!!!!” Respondents reinforce this written act with playful signifying acts of their own. Stacey replies to cjjustl, affirming her announcement of the travel date, by simply writing, “Happy Packing!” while Eastiopian replies playfully with, “Can you stuff me in a suitcase & take me with you? ;)” In a similar fashion, when kykatie announces her travel date, bonnie signifies, writing, “WooHoo! Time to get serious about the packing.”

Finally, participants announcing and responding to the announcement of travel dates also continue the journey metaphor of the adoption narrative through synecdochic acts of signifying that minimize “the wait,” the euphemism for the seemingly interminable time between dossier acceptance and custody of one’s child. Laurajoy, replying to melanieber’s announcement, alludes to “the wait” itself, writing, “what a long time coming.” In another thread, Juls replies to davidandtheresa’s announcement, writing, “It,” referencing the travel date itself, “will be here before you know it.” Meanwhile, jpederson replies to jbice’s announcement, writing, “The next few weeks are going to fly!,” even gesturing toward the flight adoptive parents will take at the end of “the wait.”

7. Social Report

The announcement of receiving a Social Report marks the last leg of the adoption journey
as told in the adoption narrative constructed in the CHSFS Ethiopia Forum. Interestingly, participants in the forum do not announce travel itself. They announce when they’ve received a travel date, and thus when they expect to travel, and many, following that up, announce shortly before travel that they’ve received a social report. A few parents may report back either during their travel or afterward. But the purpose of such threads seem to be to offer forum participants a travelogue or anecdotes about the trip, a means of offering advice to those who may be travelling soon or simply a status update that travel to Ethiopia and receiving custody of one’s adoptive child has gone well. In relationship to the adoption narrative, they are a sort of postscript, a reflection upon the metaphorical journey, from a family whose adoptive identity is complete, and the journey a success. Thus the social report milestone acts, within the journey metaphor, as the final signal of the last leg of the journey, a point of no return, where it is silently acknowledged that other forum participants won’t hear from the parent until travel is complete and she is living in the midst of her completed and abiding identity as an adoptive parent in an adoptive family.

Replying in her own announcement of receiving her social report, mama2six answers another respondents question, “Social update – what’s this?” (“Social Update”) describing both the document adoptive parents receive and characterizing the significance of the social report milestone in the adoption narrative. In response to the question, mama6six writes that the social report is,

the update you (usually) get prior to travel. Sometimes it comes right after you are assigned a travel date, but it seems it is now sent RIGHT before you travel. It includes your children’s routines, preferences, info on their personalities and many pictures. It was about ten pages long for each child. (“Social Update”)

By parenthescizing, and thus deemphasizing, “usually” and explaining that the social report comes after one receives a travel date, often “RIGHT before” one travels, mama6six puts significant effort into orienting the social report, articulating its place in the adoption narrative
and how participants in the forum will experience it—as a milestone that marks the journey. Indeed, some may receive the social report quite some time before travel, hours before travel, or even after they have arrived in Ethiopia, but by the end of mama6six’s description of the social report, she articulates its position in between receipt of the travel date and the date itself, insisting on, rather than a necessary sequence, the community’s preference for its sequence.

More photos of the adoptive parents’ Ethiopian child⁹ are offered in the social report, which are likely the only ones the adoptive family have seen since the referral and often reveal, visually, the health and well-being of the child during the intervening months. Thus, to enact the milestone, participants will often comment on their child’s characteristics, either directly stating or implying their physical or emotional well-being. These photos, then, are a centerpiece of the signifying that occurs during this milestone, many participants remarking in their written performance of this milestone on their child’s well-being and personality based on the pictures themselves. For instance, shellielliott writes, “We received the social report today for our little boy! It is amazing how much he has grown and changed since the pics we received at referral.” Respondents to shellielliott’s thread emphasize the importance this visual confirmation of the child’s wellbeing and thus reinforce the mutual performance of the social report milestone. Giganpd replies back, “it is truly amazing how much this document means, right?,” reinforcing its significance not only for shellielliott but for other adoptive parents in the forum, while KCpdx replies, “It makes our little ones seem REAL, doesn’t it?” (shellielliott). This sense of REALness is as much about constituting a sense of, “an abiding” parental “self,” to draw from Butler (519), for there is no doubt that the children themselves are real, only that the kinship between adoptive

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⁹ Participants in the forum report receiving as little as eleven photos and as many as eighteen (shellielliott, truenorth).
parent and adoptive child is.

Many other participants, of course, announce their social report, in a similar, stylized way, remarking either on their child’s apparent wellbeing, their apparent personality, as expressed in the still photos, or both. Kgessert announces her social report, noting that her child has, “a fun funky little personality,” a sort of personification of a nevertheless human child who the parent has never met. Jules, making her announcement, comments that her child, “actually looks chunky! :D,” remarking on her physical wellbeing (JulesJ). Jules does not even need to note, in her announcement, that she has received photos. This is understood by other participants, engendering the reply from keithandshel, “Enjoy your new pics,” and from Dntincinci, “More pics…you can’t go wrong with more pics!” (JulesJ).

The photos also characteristically elicit written performative acts expressing love for the child. Shellielliott, after discussing the photos she received, writes in her announcement, “WE are so much in love with this little boy it almost hurts!” And truenorth writes, even more playfully, in the beginning of an announcement, “O.k…so do they have a hospital they put people in when their hearts just explode from too much love?,” and continuing, “I feel like I’m being let in on an age old secret that every parent knows but could never explain to someone who is not a parent—and that is that the love you feel for your child is outrageous!” This announcement seems to go further than sincere expression of emotion, as entirely appropriate as that is for these parents; it is also a performance identifying this affect as a distinctly parental love and thus performing themselves as parents, prior to physically meeting and receiving custody of their child. Respondents, of course, affirm and reinforce these performances of parental affect. Replying to truenorth, sebastianseven writes, “I remember the first time I thought, ‘I would run out in front of a Mack truck for this child.’ Wow.” And bray23 writes, “I totally remember that feeling you
described! I was so overwhelmed.” Participants who have brought children home reinforce this performance of parent love, affirming and encouraging prospective parents’ adoptive parental identity as adoptive parents who have experienced the same intense emotion.

As mentioned above, within the adoption narrative constructed in the forum, this milestone is treated as the last leg of the metaphorical journey, even when it is not literally the last milestone for each participant, even when (as is the case, for instance, in kgesserts’ announcement thread), the participant’s travel date has not yet been confirmed. In this milestone, the journey metaphor is reinforced through acts of signifying, participants announcing their social report suggesting excitement or anxiety in anticipation of travel and respondents routinely advising calm. So, when kgessert writes in her announcement that, “Now I want to get on a plane immediately,” shellielliott replies back, “Congrats and try to put the pictures down tonight and get some sleep!:)” When Jules writes, “Who asked recently when the ‘deer in the headlights’ feeling came? […] NOW I am hyperventilating!,” PLFeld responds, “Just breathe… it will be wonderful” (JulesJ).

Mamasweetpea most vividly provides the sense that the social report represents the last leg of the metaphorical journey, as the moment within the forum just before travel itself, as she writes in her social report announcement, titled “Leaving on a Jet Plane!!,”

To those of you that are waiting, it is soo hard. The unpredictability of it all is overwhelming. This has definitely been one of the hardest, yet most wonderful things I have ever done. It will stretch you to your very limits and beyond, but it is so very worth it. As the tears of sheer joy streamed down my cheeks reading her social report, I could say, with out a doubt, it was worth every moment of the wait because this child is my daughter. So hang in there. Your time will come, it really will.

As she describes the trials of the metaphorical journey, she emphasizes that those trials are worth the goal of bringing home their child and references, euphemistically, “the wait,” signaling that
the social report marks the end of that wait. Similarly, melanie, in announcing her social report, explains that, “the ’bumps in the road’ were so overwhelming at times. […] it takes a toll on your mental health, marriage, work and family. But these precious children are so worth it all,” metaphorizing adoption through the trials and rewards of a journey. Sebastianseven, replying to mamasweetpea, affirms and reinforces the troping of the social report as the last leg of the metaphorical journey, “What an exciting adventure you’re about to embark on,” signifying not only travel but the adventure of parenting itself, reminiscent the earlier quoted passage from *What To Expect When You’re Expecting*, referring to pregnancy as, “embark[ing] on the adventure of a lifetime” (Murkoff and Mazel xxiii).

**V. Conclusion**

It would be one thing if these announcements existed in and for themselves. But to fully conclude, in answer to my research question, that participants used writing, in the discursive environment available to them in the CHSFS Ethiopia Forum, to constitute a performative framework, which I call the adoption narrative, around which participants enacted and constructed their intersubjective adoptive familial identities, it is fruitful to exhibit evidence that the adoption narrative, articulated and organized in the forum, was also used by participants to orient and signify other aspects of their lives. Although we cannot see beyond the written acts in the forum to see what the adoption narrative means to the participants outside the forum itself, we can see, through other written acts performed within the forum, that the adoption narrative became, for some participants at least, a narrative scaffold by which to tell stories of their lives otherwise unrelated to adoption. In both exemplary threads below, their authors announce familial milestones unrelated to the adoption narrative and in writing their initial posts seek to frame these milestones within the adoption narrative: one participant announcing a death and the
other one announcing a birth.

On 25 June 2008, Footiesfamily writes in her thread titled “As we say goodbye to the one we love…”

With incredible sadness, we buried my dad today. He was 68 years old and died from Non-Hodgkin’s Lymphoma. Healthy, the way he ate put most people to shame and exercised everyday. He was diagnosed at Christmas, just days after we sent in our application to CHSFS. For me, I was a true daddy’s girl and my heart is broken.

As I begin to pick up the pieces, hopefully the joy of our new son will help. Amy called during the funeral to say that we made it through court. Aklilu is truly ours. I knew that this forum of friends would understand…

That Footiesfamily chose to grieve her loss in this discussion forum, with a community of participants she had probably never met in person, is telling enough. It suggests that a vital and intimate social network had been build up by these transnational adoptive parents in an electronic site principally intended to crowd source the collective knowledge of adoptive families as they navigate a bureaucracy and novel life circumstances that were not yet well supported by other resources and materials—to offer a place to ask questions and get answers. In addition to this, participants in the forum forged digital friendships, across the United States, with people they had never seen face-to-face, sharing personal concerns, insights, photos, blog links, and other media in a time in which Facebook was still only newly introduced to the public beyond colleges and universities. Within the forum, though, Footiesfamily is also constructing her adoptive parental identity, and as she does this, she frames her father’s death, an event outside her subjectivity as an adoptive parent, within the adoption narrative, highlighting where her father’s illness coincides with beginning the adoption process (milestone 1) and his death with her family’s court approval (milestone 5). In the process of announcing her father’s death, a life event not germane to the topic of the discussion forum, and sharing as well her grief, she even
engages in the tropic activity indicative of these articulated milestones, referring to, “the joy of our new son,” and declaring that, “Aklilu is truly ours,” thus constructing her adoptive familial identity using the metaphors of familial relationship and parental ownership commonly practiced when announcing court approval, even signifying, through the use of the word “truly,” the complicated linguistic ambiguity participants express surrounding the officiality of court approval. The adoption narrative thus acts as a schematic for orienting personal evocations with participants’ shared experience in the forum, while Footiesfamily constructs an identity for herself, through the adoption narrative constructed in the site, as an adoptive parent in an adoptive family so thoroughly that it becomes a means of orienting other live events unrelated to adoption.

In affirmation, respondents engage in acts of writing to demonstrate their empathy and identification with Footiesfamily’s loss. In doing so, they reinforce this practice of orienting one’s life across the adoption narrative while repeating such a practice in response to their own lives. Cndmom, relating the death of her parent to the milestone of dossier completion, writes, “My mom died the same month our dossier went to Ethiopia. It has helped make the anniversary of her death a little less painful” (Footiesfamily). The next respondent also orients her reply with one of the milestones, thus tying her message of empathy to Footiesfamily’s expression of grief through the adoption narrative constructed on the site and referring to court approval purely through one of its tropes, writing, “I am so sorry for your loss. I pray that you will have peace in your hearts. What a bittersweet moment, to hear that your child is officially ‘your child’ at your father’s funeral” (Footiesfamily). As these affirming replies build, it seems a new stylized performative practice is formed, acknowledging and orienting grief within the timeline of the adoption narrative, as another respondent chimes in: “I lost my father this past fall (20 days after
we got our referral). My heart still breaks […] allow yourself to embrace the joy and anticipation of your new child even though you grieve” (Footiesfamily). As a result, Footiesfamily’s announcement of her father’s death becomes another means for participants to construct their adoptive familial identities, intersecting articulations of the adoption narrative with their other subjectivities, in this case not only as adoptive parents but also as daughters themselves.

Similar intersubjective performances can be seen in a thread announcing a very different life event: a birth. It might not be strange that someone would want to announce a joyous life event such as a birth in a close-knit online community focused on issues related growing families, but childbirth could complicate identification in the forum for both bureaucratic and ideological reasons. Bureaucratically, CHSFS maintained a policy about when and how families with biological children could pursue adoption. Mothers who became pregnant before they received a referral for a child from Ethiopia were expected to delay the adoption process until their child was a year old, a delay that could stretch longer than a year and a half. Such a delay could be heartbreaking for a family who has invested time, energy, finances, and their very identities into adopting a child. What’s more, CHSFS tried to maintain family birth order, only permitting families to adopt a child from Ethiopia who was younger than the children currently in the home. This, as a result, could restrict the age of children who could be adopted from Ethiopia by a family who has recently given birth to a child. These bureaucratic restrictions could contribute to ideological complications for participants in the forum. Because childbirth took a family out of the adoption process, it could bring to question whether a participant can identify as an adoptive parent in the forum at all. As well, an enthymemnic anxiety persists,

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10 Part of the reason for requiring families to wait a year after childbirth was to mitigate the restrictions created by their birth order policy.
informed by the cultural logic of biological kinship, in particular the assumption that adoptive parents would prefer a biological child and still long for one, about whether childbirth will end a parent’s pursuit of adoption.

On 1 Jan. 2009, Ildi and Aaron write in their thread titled, “OT – our bio babe,”

I’m hoping you’ll allow me to share the news of the birth of our daughter, Makeda Lillyanne Felice. All 9 lbs., 1 oz of her joined us yesterday via C-section, 11 days overdue.

We learned of my pregnancy with her about 1-2 months before we would have gotten our referral from CHSFS. We’re hoping to get back on the adoption track as soon as they’ll let us. (IldiandAaron “OT”)

Ildi and Aaron’s birth announcement provides a curious contrast to Footiesfamily’s death announcement. Although Footiesfamily is careful to perform her adoptive familial identity, associating her announcement with milestones in the adoption narrative, she provides no indication that this forum was not a place to share her grief over her father’s loss. Such an announcement is not necessarily germane to the topic of the forum, but it also does not come into conflict with the subjectivities of adoptive kinship. In contrast, Ildi and Aaron’s announcement suggests an anxiety wrought from announcing a live event that comes into conflict the adoptive subjectivities articulated in the forum. Ildi and Aaron designate in the title of the thread that their announcement is “OT,” an abbreviation for “Off Topic,” hedging their announcement by admitting that it is not germane to the focus of the discussion board. They hedge further, writing, “I’m hoping you’ll allow me to share the news,” not an entirely unusual way to begin such an announcement but a linguistic construction that is never used in the forum by adoptive parents announcing referral receipt, an equivalent milestone in the forum to childbirth, in which

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11 Since cultural logics such as that of biological kinship are dominant in the culture, they can inform the reasoning and claims of all members of that culture. In this case, even adoptive parents can draw their conclusions based on biological kinship, in spite of themselves, because of the persistence of the cultural logic of biological kinship.
participants would even imitate a birth announcement. Idli and Aaron are then careful to orient their child’s birth within the adoption narrative, writing, “We learned of my pregnancy with her about 1-2 months before we would have gotten our referral from CHSFS. We’re hoping to get back on the adoption track as soon as they’ll let us” (Idli and Aaron “OT”). This is a performative written act, practiced in what could be a moment of doubt, in which Idli and Aaron demonstrate that they are still identifying themselves as an adoptive family using the language for the articulations constructed in the site, and emphasizing that they continue to pursue their adoption just as soon as they can, mitigating the assumptions of the cultural logic of biological kinship that could still be broiling in other participants’ minds. Even, identifying their child’s name, “Makeda,” quite usual for a birth announcement, is an act of signifying that performs the family’s identity as one who will continue to pursue an adoption through Ethiopia since, as forum participants will likely know, “Makeda” is an Ethiopian name, which Idli and Aaron gave to their biological, non-Ethiopian, child.

Despite the subtle anxiety expressed in Idli and Aaron’s initial post, and possibly because of their performance (as well as the camaraderie Idli and Aaron have already likely built up within the forum), respondents enthusiastically affirm Idli and Aaron’s announcement. Beyond the rounds of “Congratulations!” offered in the thread, several respondents also request that Idli and Aaron post pictures of the newborn child, (Idli and Aaron “OT”) when typically participants only shared pictures of the adopted Ethiopian children, either from the referral, from the social report, or after they brought their children home. Finally, one respondent, Kari, explicitly identifies the anxiety expressed in the initial post and diffused by participants’ replies, rearticulating the milestone of childbirth within the narrative for familial identity constructed in the forum, “Of course we want you to share that good news! Good news is good news, regardless
of whether your family grew by adoption or biologically. :)” (IldiandAaron “OT”). Thus, Kari voices and inscribes an alternative assumption in the cultural logic of adoptive kinship: In contrast to the assumption embedded in the cultural logic of biological kinship that sees adoptive kinship as fundamentally different from biological kinship and biological kinship as more authentic, an assumption of the cultural logic of adoptive kinship is that there exists a variety of methods by which a family can be grown and that adoption and childbirth are two of those options.

Thus, just as *What to Expect When You’re Expecting* represents the pregnancy narrative of family growth dominant in US culture, so that biological familial identity itself is framed and understood based on a story of pregnancy, adoptive parents participating in the CHSFS Ethiopia forum use the writing afforded by the electronic site to construct for themselves an adoption narrative that comes to frame the whole of their familial identity and how to interpret unrelated life events. This adoption narrative places adoptive familial identity on a sequence or timeline, allowing participants in the forum to construct their identities through a series of progressive articulations, beginning with the start of the adoption process itself and ending with the receipt of a social report, which signals participants’ embarkation on the final leg of the metaphorical journey constructed to communicate progress through the adoption narrative. To enhance this identity construction, participants shaped and repeated stylized written acts and tropes, metaphorically, metonymically, and synecdochically aligning their bodily identities with that of their adoptive children, linguistically forging kinship before they received guardianship and custody of their children, and tropically aligning themselves with others in the forum by forging their common identity as adoptive families.
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