

"Rhetorical Constructions of Identity in Transnational Adoption: Reading and Performing the 'Waiting Period' Online"

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I propose presenting on the rhetoric of adoption, specifically the performance of adoptive parenthood manifested in online support groups such as Adoption Forum and Guatadopt.com. My insight is that social networks such as these, in conjunction with adoption agencies, play a significant role in the identity formation of the prospective adoptive parent, particularly in the case of transnational adoption with its various stages, uncertainties, and setbacks during the "waiting" period. In a reading that is equal parts analysis and critique, I wish to characterize the normative character of the discourse that is performed by prospective (and post-prospective) adoptive parents. Observing what is said (and not said) by posters to Guadadopt's Forum, I will examine a cross-section of "waiting parent" discourse, e.g., testimonials, news, and queries. In doing so, I will argue that this site--and by extension other such sites--performs a powerful regulative function in the construction of adoptive parents' identities in a transnational context. The dimension of critique emerges from a concern that the representations of adoptive parent identity to be found here are not always expressive of the cultural, ethical, legal, and economic complexities germane to the transnational adoption process.

My own story: My wife and I adopted our daughter, Magdalena, in Guatemala in 2004, after a year or more of paperwork and much uncertainty. My 'insight' about rhetorical constructions of identity arose from finding myself unable (or unwilling) to accept the norms of the online discourse community that we relied upon for factual information and for points of reference during the process. In particular I was resistant to the language of entitlement and cultural bias that marked much discourse. Indeed, as happy as I am, I remain conflicted about my participation in transnational adoption as it is currently practiced between the U. S. and Guatemala. To date, I have not written about adoption in my professional capacity as a scholar in rhetorical studies or from more personal perspectives as a father, husband, citizen. I would like to both.