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## Chapter Nine

### Through the Lens: Family Videos, Adoption Stories, and Instrumental Truths

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Here, we look at some scenes from our family videos, how they work as stories that construct family, and the implications for teachers and others working with children. The scenes are a series of everyday moments with an added layer of self-consciousness provided by the camera (Tillett, 2017). The shots, the moments, are choreographed and curated to a various degree for the camera. But also, beyond that, life itself, raising children, is a series of moments choreographed and curated. There are moments that we stage, moments that we let emerge, moments that narrate (or record) into the family story, and moments that we create as part of a worthwhile life. This is the curriculum of a family life, constantly in construction, constantly self-correcting, constantly making conscious choices. This is the curriculum of a family who has adopted, creating a living story, facilitating moments of care and joy. These videos, these stories, these moments perform functions both personal and public (Combs & Freedman, 2012; Jones, 2005, p. 125). They tell and they refuse to tell. They play a role in a carefully managed "becoming" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987). Each story is a lever, a working operation—we continually recreate and retell these stories. We retell—they are not just mine to do with as I please. But the "we" doesn't magically sync up to agree to tell the same stories either. These are the cherished, constructed, and curated moments of a family formed through adoption. They show a living "assemblage" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987) of the family as it self-renews, self-invents, and self-constructs. They show joy, wonder, love, and caring. They show

a protective space where children play with each other. They show a mom, a dad, a brother, a sister, and a sister engaging in a life worth living. The children rush to get mom so she can see the moon through the telescope.

Adoption here is the very thing that makes the family and the moments possible. It is the basis of everything that comes after. Adoption is complicated and yet simple. Various reasons converge to create the conditions of an adoption. Through the act of adoption, various backgrounds are “entangled” (Barad, 2007). Proceeding forward involves a complex grafting of these backgrounds. Because the relationships and the backgrounds are not static, it involves continual reinvention. Adoption can be the “and... and... and...” that Deleuze and Guattari (1980/1987) describe. Living together is constantly transformational. We grow hand in hand. “[T]wo becomings interlink and form relays...” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987, p. 10). The new relationships that adoption forms are mutually cogenerative—we grow together, affecting each other, supporting each other, loving each other. A complex interdependence is continuously reshaped. Adoption offers the radical possibility that new rhizomatic “root threads” can “stretch out” and “make offshoots” (Lenz Taguchi, 2016, p. 43). Adoption offers new connections among roots. “To be rhizomorphous is to produce stems and filaments that seem to be roots, or better yet connect with them by penetrating the trunk but put them to strange new uses” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987, p. 15). There is “no dualism... [t]here are knots of arborescence in rhizomes, and rhizomatic offshoots in roots” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 20). It is messy. New juxtapositions, overlaps, and relations stretch between tracings of race, culture (Anagnost, 2000, p. 391), class, and family structure. “Transversal communications between different lines scramble the genealogical trees” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987, p. 11). That may sound complicated. And yet, what could be simpler than loving another human being without reserve, without limits? (Derrida, 1992/1995).

But we must be careful here, as we do not want to essentialize adoption as some sort of universal event that always means the same and has the same effects. Instead, what we are describing are versions of what adoption can be. We are describing versions of adoption that work for us. We are offering “a slew of concepts. They do not fit together in a neat system. This is not a package deal. They are offered as a repertory to pick and choose from, to recombine and refashion, in the hopes that they may be found useful...” (Massumi, 1992, p. 54). We are assembling “instrumental” truths that takes us places—truths that we “can ride” (James, 1907/1978, p. 34). We put forth truths that may be “better for us to believe” (James, 1907/1978, p.42). We assume “...a pragmatic embrace of meaning...” (Massumi, 1992, p. 45). After all, “The vital question for us all is, what is the world going to be? What is life eventually

to make of itself?” (James, 1907/1978, p. 62). This writing, this remembering, this story-telling must be ways to explore these instrumental truths and their possibilities. “The question is not, Is it true? But, does it work?” (Massumi, 1992, p. 8) What “new possible narratives” (Lenz Taguchi, 2016, p. 39 referencing Stengers) can be constructed? What “preferred stories” can be developed? (Combs & Freedman, 2012) “[B]eyond critique..., what new possible realities... might be envisioned...?” (Lenz Taguchi, 2016, p. 39).

Out of untold hours of video, I somewhat arbitrarily chose to write about our first family trip to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. I say somewhat arbitrarily as there are two main reasons that I think I chose this segment. First, the trip is one of my fondest memories. I cherish those moments and that time of my life when the kids were that age. Second, the video sticks in my mind partly because I watched it repeatedly trying to figure out why there was a technical error as I dubbed it from tape to disc. The error remains, I never could resolve it.

Trout! Trout! Trout! Trout! Trout! The kids are bouncing themselves up and down back and forth on a bench in the kitchen as they chant it. In the video, the words are oddly not in unison with their open mouths, it is like a badly dubbed movie, and somehow the pacing is off. But it is still enough to remember a joyous occasion where I had bought trout and was cooking it for dinner and the kids chanted in excitement. What is remarkable about it is perhaps how unremarkable it is. It stands there, a moment recorded, but it also stands there as one of many moments—as one that just happened to be recorded. That is, not only is this moment wonderful, but it stands in for so many more wonderful moments, for a whole series of wonderful moments, for a whole childhood of wonderful moments. Maybe the technical glitch only adds to it... it implies that there is something more, that the whole story isn’t there, that it was even more real, more raucous, and more memorable. It implies rather than captures.

But that isn’t how the video of the trip starts.

The scene opens with Anne leaning over the back hatch closing on the minivan. “Wait, show it again, I missed it.” She is already lifting the gate. “Oh, it won’t shut?” I go over to help without shutting off the camera. There is a closeup of the suitcases and a paper bag with a round metal teapot in it. My hand is visible as I lift the paper bag and then a duffle bag. “Here, Alvin.” He looks at me with big eyes as I hand the duffle bag up over the back of the back seat to him. More closeups of the bags as we shove them in. “OK. Do over,” Anne says.

There are two acts of staging here. The first is the staging for the camera, as evidenced by my request to show it again because I missed filming it.

The second is in the staging of the trip itself. The duffle bags and suitcases, the paper bag and the teapot, are all parts of a carefully coordinated “material practice” to provide the logistics for a family vacation. These anticipated moments of family, these “new possible realities” don’t just happen, they are painstakingly constructed materially piece by piece, as well as with “desiring discourses” (Lenz Taguchi, 2016, p. 39), as shown in the next clip where it is evident we have built up anticipation for the trip through prior discussion.

The camera investigates the side of the van. The frame shows my daughter, Brittney, who is in pigtails. “Are you guys ready? Where are we going?” My daughter, Brianna, is shown first who is in braids. “To Michigan... to Lake Michigan,” she says. “No, we’re not,” Alvin replies. He is shown in the backseat. Anne is standing next to the passenger door, now wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat. She bats her eyelashes at the camera, turning her eyes away. The side door of the van shuts. In the reflection of the van window is the back porch of our Chicago bungalow. The scene runs as the camera enters the front seat. Closeup of a portion of the steering wheel. Cut to the keys being placed in the ignition.

Slow pan from left to right showing the kids swinging next to a huge blue lake. Cut. Brianna is up above the line of the lake’s horizon on top of a metal slide, swinging on the railing. Cut. The camera is at the base of the reflective slide. Brittney slides down barely missing the camera it seems. Alvin is next. “Woooooh!” At the bottom, he leans over and scoops up some sand and puts it on the bottom of the slide, a couple times. Brianna is visible only in the upside-down reflection on the slide. She is at the top and yells, “Yeah!” as she slides down with her feet under her, knocking off the sand.

The kids are wading into the waves, holding up their shorts with both hands. They form a tight triangle on the screen, just below a horizon separating blue from blue. The shot is blurry but eventually comes in focus.

All three kids are crowded next to the door. Brittney and Brianna look up at Alvin’s hand as Anne, just behind them, reads off a combination, “5....” Cut. Anne is holding a key. Alvin puts the lockbox back on the doorframe. The door opens. “Waaahaahaaa,” Alvin says. One of the girl’s squeals. The kids run into the house. Anne smiles/laughs into the camera. Many squeals. The camera follows, bounces around, shows a handrail as it goes upstairs. Brittney jumps onto the far twin bed belly first. Brianna lies sideways on the middle twin bed. Alvin sits on the edge of the one closest to the camera.

The camera pans from left to right. Alvin is holding a camera looking at it facing to the left. Brittney is next to him facing out toward the green water. Brianna has her right hand extended looking straight up to the rocks, seeing if she can get dripped on as we drift under the ledge.

Brittney is snuggled in to Anne's right side, Brianna is snuggled in to Anne's left. They have their jackets on, the wind is blowing as the boat moves forward. The gray waters of Lake Superior and the horizon to the light blue cloudy sky are visible behind them. Brittney waves to the camera, blocking her face. Brianna holds up her palm in protest of the camera, blocking her face. They move away from Anne, intruded on by the camera.

Most of the time, our adoption operates like this, simply as a basic fact, as a basis of everyday realities and relations, as an unremarkable ("instrumental") truth. Family is "a rhizome of actions—caring, providing, teaching, protecting, guiding—rather than individuals defined by universal characteristics" (Hendricks & Koro-Ljungberg, 2015, p. 278) such as being adopted. Family operates in a self-creative capacity—loving, sharing—as modes of operating in the everyday. Brother and sister and sister slide down slides, wade in the water, ride a boat, share a room, and bounce on a bed. Daughters snuggle up to their mother. It is as pure and uncomplicated and beautiful as that.

Brianna is looking up in to the camera. She says, "You should see it. It's awesome." "Want me to go get Mommy out here? With our shoes on," Brittney says. The camera looks down at her. "OK. I'll go get her," Brianna says. The camera shows Alvin with a towel draped over his shoulders leaning over and looking in to a telescope. Alvin investigates the camera and says "Dad..." and something else that can't be heard clearly. The camera follows the line of the telescope up to the blue sky and shows a half moon, taking a moment to focus. Cut. We are looking through the screen. Two big pine trees frame the shot. In the middle we see the telescope from behind, pointing up, with Alvin's round head silhouetted against the sky beside the telescope, looking through the finder, then leaning over, the back of his neck and head forming a diagonal across the screen as he investigates the lens. He briefly looks at the camera and continues, turning the lenses, then crouches and gets behind the telescope to look through the landscape lens.

The children are part of constructing the scene. They point to what is "awesome." They enlist other actors—getting "Mommy out here." They use tools (the telescope) that magnify the importance of an element. They ponder the moon. The children are active agents in the creation of the experience of family.

The camera is stationary. In the left half of the frame, there are two steps going up to the left from the bottom middle of the frame; from there the stairs turn toward the frame and all that is visible is a half wall with a railing on top going steeply and diagonally up to the left. Two ski poles are mounted on this wall at crossing angles. In the right half of the frame is a large opening in the wall into the kitchen. On the opening ledge is a box of tissues, a small

leg lamp, a bottle of bug spray, and some napkins. In the kitchen the ceiling light is on, there are blue ruffled curtains above the window to the outside. Through the window, the birch trees are visible through the dark blue shadows of more distant trees, and peeking out underneath those, the blue of the lake. Occasionally there is a sliver of Anne working in the kitchen. What is remarkable about the shot is what we don't see. The children are not visible and yet we hear them squealing and screaming with delight. My voice-over, while the kids continue to laugh and yell, on the video says: "So we've been putting them together, to bed about a half hour or an hour early so they can have giggle time. That's what you're hearing now." The scene continues, the shot still stationary. You can hear them talking, but you can't quite make out the words. Alvin especially is laughing hysterically. The muffled words and the clear laughter continue.

Sometimes as parents we chose to let our kids just be kids and have fun among themselves. We watched or listened from a distance. In fact, we had encouraged the kids to go upstairs nightly for this "giggle time" after it occurred spontaneously the first evening. And now we could hear the squeals and screams of laughter and delight, of something that was probably just so hilarious because mom and dad were not there, in the room—something just over the line, like a fart joke or underwear or something about butts.

These are the ("preferred" (Combs & Freedman, 2012)) stories we tell. These are the moments we live. We construct these stories and these moments. Through our daily "desiring discourses" and "material practices" we work to produce "new possible realities" (Lenz Taguchi, 2016, p. 39). Of course, our family members are not the only ones with agency in the construction of family. Family is a social construct connected to many other social constructs, all with deep roots. Yet, we take the roots, "connect with them by penetrating the trunk," and "put them to strange new uses" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987, p. 15).

So, what are the implications for teachers and others who work with children? Teachers should not only allow but facilitate the creation of meaningful and positive stories of family no matter the form that the family takes. These stories are not created in isolation; they are created of, by, and for the family. The stories do not have to focus on origin tales (of being adopted for instance—but that is an option if it is a story the child wants to tell). Just telling and remembering stories of family works to solidify the family as a unit (an "assemblage" as Deleuze and Guattari would call it). Teachers should offer students ways to connect with various roots and put them to "strange new uses" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987, p. 15). That is, the form of family, of roots, should be fundamentally open-ended. From a teacher's point of view, it

is a matter of suspending teacher preconceptions and listening to, and encouraging, stories of daily life that function within the family unit as “instrumental truths” (James, 1907/1978, p. 34)—as truths that serve a function—of assurance, of caring, of belonging, of sharing, of helping, and of loving. That does not mean forcing students to write positive stories about their mother (as you do not know the nature or even existence of that relationship), but rather extending the definition of family enough that students can write about people who care for them. Teachers are obligated to enable students to co-construct stories of family that show the unique ways that they belong.

Teachers can help students to construct family by helping students to construct stories of family in whatever form it takes. While a simple show-and-tell or a journal writing can allow students to tell a story (which can be meaningful and serve a purpose), to assist, as a teacher, in the construction of stories involves aiding in carefully selecting topics, and slowly building up outlines and then paragraphs into story forms—with time for students to co-construct their stories with family if possible. The teacher must have an eye toward the potential of stories when topics are being selected and developed.

The teacher must also understand that often the most powerful stories are shared and co-constructed through multiple tellings and changing iterations. Rather than attempt to staticize a singular history, the story should be a moment in time of a living (oral) history that is constantly in flux and making new connections. As times change, needs change, and so do the “preferred stories” that serve those needs. Stories aren’t just told of the past; stories are constructed as the present unfolds—not as an additional layer onto reality, but as a fundamental and intertwined part of what actions are taken and therefore of what happens. As in the above videos, the choices that made the family and the family vacation possible were conscious and intentional interventions in daily life. Stories aren’t just about what you did, but about what you are doing, and what you are going to do. Stories of the past and the present and the future overlap onto each other to construct a complicated narrative that informs what a family should do now. A teacher’s efforts then can help construct the story of family that a child lives each day. With that, there is enormous opportunity, enormous responsibility, and enormous danger. To minimize danger and increase opportunity, a teacher must be in tune to “new possible realities” (Lenz Taguchi, 2016, p. 39) that may be quite different from the teacher’s own stories of family. Through the thoughtful sharing of stories, teachers must create a classroom culture of acceptance, celebration, and support of the diverse forms and functions of family. Teachers must create a culture of caring where the classroom itself works as an extended family.

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