

Appendix: Critical Adoption Studies with Nia

SPEAKERS

Hannah McGregor, Nia, Marcelle Kosman

[Witch, Please Theme Music plays) (Dance of the Priestesses by Victor Herbert Orchestra]

Marcelle Kosman 00:09

Hello and welcome to Witch, Please, a fortnightly podcast about the Harry Potter world. I'm Marcelle Kosman.

Hannah McGregor 00:16

And I'm Hannah McGregor. And Marcelle, it is a hot one, like seven inches from the midday sun. Is this a cool reference? Good. So I want to talk about tips for keeping cool in The Sorting Chat.

Marcelle Kosman 00:30

That is a beautiful idea, Hannah. I love tips. So how are you doing it? How are you surviving?

Hannah McGregor 00:37

I'm just not wearing any clothes. That's my top tip.

Marcelle Kosman 00:39

Oh, I wondered if that's why we had such a closeup of your face and none of your shoulders or your upper torso, you're just naked.

Hannah McGregor 00:47

You always have this much of a close up of my face. It's like a weird function of the webcam. I got a really cheap, bad webcam and it will only show my face at this intense proximity. But also I'm only wearing a sports bra and Lululemon yoga shorts, but in my defense, I've had them for 20 years. They're vintage.

Marcelle Kosman 01:11

Love it.

Hannah McGregor 01:15

But I gotta say that is my hot tip for keeping cool especially when you are maybe a person who for whatever reason has some anxiety about showing your body to the

world. Like a fat person or a trans person or, you know, in whatever way a person whose body is going to be subject to the gaze when you exit into the street.

Marcelle Kosman 01:42

Subject to the gaze.

Hannah McGregor 01:45

With a “Z” not with a “Y”. The bad one, not the good one. Anyway, my hot tip is: fuck it; wear fewer clothes. **[Hannah laughs]** That’s my really hot tip. It feels better to not have a lot of clothes on you. And then everybody can see your sick tats. **[Marcelle laughs]** Marcelle, what's your tip?

Marcelle Kosman 02:08

Well, I just made a purchase.

Hannah McGregor 02:12

[Hannah laughs] That’s the Marcelle Kosman story.

Marcelle Kosman 02:14

I just made a purchase. I am nothing if not always trying to improve my life by buying a new thing. Very millennial of me. I bought a dog pool. **[Marcelle laughs]** I bought a pool for dogs.

Hannah McGregor 02:27

Sorry, what's the difference between a dog pool and a kiddie pool, which is for kids, not cats. Despite the misleading name.

Marcelle Kosman 02:35

I'm not entirely sure because most of the reviews for this dog pool were from people who are like my kids love it. So this is not an inflatable pool, it's like cork or cardboard or whatever coated in like it's foldable it's coated in like PVC plastic or something. Maybe it's not human grade plastic. I don't know. **[Hannah laughs]** But listen- we're not-

Hannah McGregor 02:54

Everybody’s like, I love putting my children in here.

Marcelle Kosman 02:58

We're not drinking the water out of it. We're just gonna sit in it.

Hannah McGregor 03:02

Oh, your toddler's drinking the water out of it.

Marcelle Kosman 03:06

[Marcelle laughs] And, and I think because it's designed for dogs, it's thicker because dogs have claws, right? So here's my hot tip. Okay, if you're gonna buy the dog pool, just know that you're gonna think that the large is too big. And so you're going to try to get the medium but unless you only have a balcony, please get either the large or the extra large. If they have a double extra large you should get that one because it's a lot smaller than I thought it would be. **[Marcelle laughs]**.

Hannah McGregor 03:43

Did you get the medium?

Marcelle Kosman 03:45

I got the large because they were out of stock of the medium. And I was like-

Hannah McGregor 03:48

Can you fit your human body into the large?

Marcelle Kosman 03:52

Yes, if I sit cross legged.

Hannah McGregor 03:56

Okay. **[Marcelle laughs]** I'm considering getting a dog pool for my balcony but this is not... What can I say? You're an influencer.

Marcelle Kosman 04:03

[Marcelle laughs] You know what? My dream is coming true. **[Hannah and Marcelle laugh]** Exfoliating gloves and dog pools.

Hannah McGregor 04:27

Hot.

[Witch, Please Theme Music plays]

Critical adoption studies is a new field for us. So we are excited to be joined by a brilliant guest. But first let's go over some earlier conversations that have laid a foundation for this episode in Revision.

Marcelle Kosman 04:40

Since we're talking about kinship and family structures, let's start with our episode on motherhood. Our special guest Erin Wunker joined us to talk about how the representations of women and mothers are conflated with such regularity that we really need to intentionally prize them apart in order to examine the respective and shared essentialisms of those tropes. In that episode, Erin reminded us that representations of motherhood and literature are deeply shaped by race and class. So where motherhood might be a conservative or restrictive trope for middle class white women, for Black writers, Indigenous writers and writers of color representations of motherhood can be radical, expansive, and liberatory.

Hannah McGregor 05:27

So that episode, of course, built on a bunch of earlier conversations about the importance of intersectional analysis. Our episodes on class, feminist literary theory, queer theory, and critical race theory, for example, all drew attention to white supremacy's insistence on centering white heteronormativity as the default and norm from which all other subjectivities deviate. Our episode on historical memory illustrated this beautifully as our guest, brilliant guest, Shira Luri, explained that the people with a vested interest in maintaining the status quo are often the very people with the political, social and financial capital to shape historical meaning, because they build all the statues and name all of the schools. And so they shape historical memory into simplified narratives that shockingly justify those positions of power.

Marcelle Kosman 06:28

Naturally, this has us thinking of our episode on the Nation-state where we looked at Benedict Anderson's oft quoted rarely read thesis on "the imagined community". In contrast to nationalities that formed around shared culture and vernacular, we looked at British imperialism as an example of an increasingly obsolete dynasty, mimicking the characteristics of popular nationalism in order to shore up its waning legitimacy.

[Hannah laughs] In other words, British imperialism placates the British subjects, saying, It's okay that the English lords are naturally superior to you, because you are naturally superior to these people over here, go and rule over them. And as we know, imperialism has devastating genocidal consequences.

Hannah McGregor 07:21

This show is a bummer.

Marcelle Kosman 07:22

No, it's a fun one. **[Marcelle laughs]**

Hannah McGregor 07:26

We have also unpacked numerous, let's say, toxins spread via imperialism in our episodes about eugenics, the prison industrial complex, queer theory, disability and mad studies, animal studies, centaurs and house elves. Wow.

Marcelle Kosman 07:45

To name a few.

Hannah McGregor 07:46

We've looked at how Western ideologies have reshaped kinship networks to make reproductive heterosexuality compulsory. We've talked about how Western medical models of illness and disability pathologize bodies rather than centering care, and in our most recent episode on anti fatness, our guest, Aubrey Gordon talked about state interventions into families where the well being of children is determined by their body mass index, a metric never intended for children and widely seen as unscientific, inaccurate and racist.

Marcelle Kosman 08:27

I gotta be honest with you, Hannah. I think writing these revision segments is really starting to radicalize me.

Hannah McGregor 08:32

Good. Let's keep that unlearning going and meet our guest!

[Witch, Please Theme Music plays]

Marcelle Kosman 08:46

Summer break may be on the horizon but our quills are sharp and our parchment is fresh. We're ready for transfiguration class!

Hannah McGregor 08:54

We have another thrilling guest today. Nia, pronouns (they/them) is a Chinese American adoptee, artist and perpetual student. They received a master's degree in performance studies from Texas A&M University, and a bachelor's degree in literature and theatre from New York University Abu Dhabi. They currently attend CUNY School of Law and intend to practice some kind of public interest family law. Welcome, Nia.

Marcelle Kosman 09:22

Welcome.

Nia 09:23

Thank you for having me.

Marcelle Kosman 09:22

Thank you so much for pitching this topic to us.

Hannah McGregor 09:28

We're really excited to talk about critical adoption studies with you but, you know, in our general way of starting a conversation with a new guest is just to ask, what is your relationship to the Harry Potter series?

Nia 09:42

Well, when it first came out, I was pretty little and I was very scared of movies. And so I didn't actually read them until I was like, I don't know 12 or 13 when the fifth book was coming out, and then I got very into, I don't know, Mugglecast fanfiction, sort of around the end of High School. And then I guess since then, you know, with JK Rowling becoming a TERF, things have gotten a little dismal. But it's an important part of my, I don't know, literary past.

Hannah McGregor 10:12

What a shared origin story for so many of us. Loved it. It was really important. Completely devastated. So, yeah, that's just, that's just where I'm at.

Marcelle Kosman 10:23

Well, Nia, you are here as our expert, could you tell us what critical adoption studies as a field is? Where does it come from? Etc.

Nia 10:35

Sure. So I would describe critical adoption studies as a field of scholarship that explores how power operates through adoption as like a legal, political, and economic institution that severs and creates familial bonds. It's also interested in narratives of adoption, and how those narratives construct understandings of kinship, motherhood, reproduction, identity, race and nation.

Hannah McGregor 11:01

Okay. So it's called critical adoption studies. What is it critical of?

Nia 11:07

Well, so the field is a reaction to adoption studies, which preceded it and adoption studies was really examining adoption from a psychology and social work perspective. They're really interested in questions of nature versus nurture, and also interested in

understanding the psychological and emotional impacts of adoption on adoptees, adoptive parents, birth or first parents. And there was a kind of like, medical intervention element of it of like, you were having behavioral or psychological issues, because of your experience of adoption. How can we fix that?

Hannah McGregor 11:42

I gotta say, hearing you say, Oh, it's this field that looked at nature versus nurture, just gave me a sort of, a racist shiver. Like, just that framing immediately made me be like, Oh, no.

Nia 11:57

Yeah, there's definitely aspects of that, where in some ways, adoption is kind of like prescribed as a social remedy for children who were of color, poor, and like, would have "better lives", quote, unquote, with white adoptive parents.

Hannah McGregor 12:11

We touched on this a little bit in our discussion of sentimentality. But this concept of impressability, which is like a 19th century pseudo scientific concept, was that like, white people are more impressible. But people of color are more impressible when children and that was used as a justification for sort of, like forced adoption out. Cuz, cuz the idea is that you can, like, you know, I mean, its the idea of nurture versus nature. That you can, like, reshape children, which is sinister. Let's just leave, I'm just gonna say sinister, because I feel like probably you have a bunch more very smart things to say about it. So what in particular, did those early critical adoption studies scholars critique?

Nia 12:57

Yeah, so it might be helpful here to talk a little bit about the history of adoption, and how critical adoption studies sort of emerged from that. So critical adoption studies really emerged in response to this rise in transnational adoption in the 1990s. And to developments in approaches to adoptive parenting in the 1970s. And so just so everybody's on the same page, what transnational adoption refers to is when children who are born in one country, which is referred to as the sending country, are adopted by parents who live in a different country, which is referred to as the receiving country.

And I just want to preface by saying it's important to recognize that Asian, African and Indigenous children were removed from their birth families through European, US, and Canadian settler colonialism a lot through history. This isn't a new phenomenon. But the practice that people often mean when they're referring to transnational adoption, sort of begins in the aftermath of World War II and the Korean War in the 1950s.

Hannah McGregor 13:56

What happens in the wake of World War II to make this sort of new phenomenon emerge?

Nia 14:01

Basically, soldiers who were in World War II or in the Korean War, went abroad, had children, and some of those children were orphaned. And so there was a sense of responsibility to bring those children back to the US. There was a small but significant population of Black German children who were adopted by African American communities in the US. And that was notable because the Black German children were actually expelled from Germany because of their race. And then in the Korean War, there were a lot of mixed race Korean children who were adopted to the US, and that actually sort of opened the doors for Korean children who were not mixed to also be adopted to the US and to Europe.

Marcelle Kosman 14:40

Okay, so that's the 1950s. Fast forward a little bit into the 1970s. What is the shift that we see there?

Nia 14:49

Yes. So I'm also sort of primarily talking about the US because unfortunately, like many disciplines, critical adoption studies has centered on US politics and is trying to move away from that. But basically before the mid 1970s, there was what is known as an "as if" approach to adoptive families where the idea was trying to totally assimilate the adoptive child into the family, into the culture, and nation of that family, and to very deliberately erased the child's past and the child's birth or first family. So, but then the shift after this point is to try and allow for some exploration of that birth culture and to think about more hybrid identities.

Hannah McGregor 15:35

Okay, so we shift from this idea of like, you have to pretend that, like, you have no birth parents, you came from no culture, you, like, only belong in this family that you were adopted into. And then there's a shift in which it's like, oh, that's a wild thing to ask of a child.

Nia 15:55

Yeah, I even, I would say, becomes sort of normalized that adopted children are supposed to be curious about their birth parents and maybe even search for their birth parents.

Hannah McGregor 16:05

Okay. Does that become its own kind of pressure or expectation? Like when that narrative shifts? Or that sort of best practice shifts? Like, is there still the sense that like, Okay, well, here's the right way to do it?

Nia 16:18

Yeah, I mean, I think, for every adoptee, their relationship to birth parents and birth culture is different. I think that you can kind of spin the search for the birth parents in two different ways. On one hand, there is a sense of maybe having relationships that are outside the white nuclear family, and sort of embracing identity, that probably is drawing on ideas of multiculturalism and identity politics that are also coming to mainstream popularity in the 1970s.

But on the other hand, there's also a kind of conservative turn here to thinking about family as being about blood, or about genetics, and sort of believing that finding your genetic parent will tell you something about you because there's something essential about that biological connection.

Hannah McGregor 17:10

That's so interesting, that double move of like, on the one hand, destabilizing the sort of like, closed unit of the white postwar American family. But on the other hand, the thing that disrupts it is a kind of biological essentialism that is like, yeah, but like family is about whose genes you share.

Marcelle Kosman 17:35

Mhm. So we've done the 50s, we've done the 70s. How about the 90s?

Nia 17:39

Okay, so in the 1990s, transnational adoption really accelerated. For instance, immigrant orphan visas, issued by the US Immigration and Naturalization services, nearly tripled from 1991, when they issued about 7000, to 2001, when they issued about 19,000. Within this decade, 139,000 children were internationally adopted to the US, with more than 50,000 of them born in China or in Russia.

Marcelle Kosman 18:06

Because the 90s is the decade of my childhood that I remember with, you know, the greatest clarity, I feel like I also remember that period, being a period where there were a lot of powerful celebrity women adopting children from all of these other places to show how worldly and good they are. This is me trying to remember, like, what was the

cultural narrative? I don't remember the actual narrative, just like, what are the impressions that I had as a kid?

Nia 18:41

Sure. So I can sort of speak generally. I think that transnational adoption plays really well into ideas of American exceptionalism and sort of rescuing children from poor countries where they are imagined to have pretty dismal life expectations, right? I think there's also a sort of market logic to it. Domestic adoption has a lot more hoops for adoptive parents to jump through. And birth parents have a lot more control over who adopts their kid. They can negotiate for some sort of open adoption, potentially. Whereas birth mothers and first mothers in the Global South, generally speaking, don't have that kind of power to negotiate with Western white parents. To speak more personally, I'm adopted from China. I was adopted in 1994, which was kind of close to the beginning of the sort of main wave of US-Chinese adoptions, and sort of the big narrative around adoption from China had to do with the one child policy.

Hannah McGregor 19:46

This is a narrative I very much remember from my childhood. Yeah.

Nia 19:50

Yeah. So the one child policy was passed in the late 1970s to sort of prevent population growth from overwhelming welfare systems and the State Planned economy in China, and it was a policy that for the most part, limited families to having one child. Of course, like in many policies, it was unevenly enforced.

Hannah McGregor 20:10

I was about to say, I bet wealth really played a significant role in how heavily that was enforced. Huh?

Nia 20:17

Yes, absolutely. There was also, you know, sort of the human rights abuses that you imagine with like, sort of population control. Forced sterilizations, taking children away from parents who already had a first child...

Hannah McGregor 20:30

The other narrative I really remember from the time was that, you know, because of the way that a lot of family inheritance worked, like a lot of families were like, if we can only have one child, we need a son. Because we need somebody who's going to like, stick around and continue to run the business or work on the farm. And so my sense was that there were a lot more girls getting adopted out.

Nia 20:55

Yes, most of the children who were adopted were girls. And while there is some truth to this, sort of like cultural preference for boys, Kay Anne Johnson wrote this book called *China's Hidden Children*, which really sort of complicates that narrative where she talks to a lot of parents in China, who would have really liked to have kept their girls but they were very afraid. And some of them went to very extreme lengths to try and hide and protect their second or third daughters. But absolutely, that is the narrative that circulated in the US and in the UK. And I think it, again, made adopting from China seem like this very, like ethical, easy choice.

Hannah McGregor 21:34

Basically, like a feminist act.

Marcelle Kosman 21:37

Yeah. Save the girls.

Hannah McGregor 21:40

Yeah, I think it was Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who coined that phrase, that there's a particular sort of incarnation of colonialism that takes the shape of white women saving brown women from brown men. That's her phrasing, which is that sort of colonial Imperial enactment on the part of white women of this kind of like, we'll come and save you because we have feminism here and you don't, which becomes a sort of like, pseudo feminist justification for ongoing acts of imperialism. So you were part of the sort of 1990s moment, did you experience as a child this like shift from the the "as if" model to the the new approach?

Nia 22:28

I think my experience was very grounded in the more contemporary approach to adoption. My parents belonged to this organization called families with children from China, which was for adoptive parents and their children. And we would celebrate Chinese New Year. I took Chinese folk dancing lessons. I also tried to learn Mandarin multiple times throughout my childhood, to little success, unfortunately. **[Nia laughs]**

Hannah McGregor 22:52

[Hannah laughs] The use of the word "tried" there.

Nia 22:55

[Nia laughs] But I guess what I would say is that I think that there was a sort of like, fairly superficial encouragement to engage with China as this sort of beautiful ancient

culture. But there wasn't necessarily anything about, say racial consciousness or like what it means to be Asian American, or building relationships with Chinese American immigrant communities.

Hannah McGregor 23:17

Very, like a multicultural food festival version of politics.

Nia 23:21

Because I think diving deeper into some of these, like, global inequities really challenges this kind of transcendent love narrative of adoption, where it was wholly good that we adopted you. Your life is absolutely better here than it could have been anywhere else. And I think sort of understandably reckoning with that it's very painful for both adoptees and adoptive parents.

Marcelle Kosman 23:45

So Nia, this history of transnational adoption that you've talked us through that brings us to critical adoption studies as a field, would you be able to talk to us a little bit about, you know, the incorporation of social justice movements and how that's maybe shifted the narrative and impacted not only the way that the field works, but maybe also the way that we think about transnational adoption, like socially and culturally outside of academia?

Nia 24:13

So I'd say one of the main interventions of critical adoption studies is to try and include birth mothers. The field has historically, especially in adoption studies, privileged adoptive parents, which makes sense, they were the adults who had the power. And as adoptees grow up, they can also participate, but it's very difficult to bring birth mothers into the conversations, especially if they're not English speaking and not even identifiable, necessarily.

I think this also speaks to putting adoption in a global context, trying to dissent the US adoptive family, which is typically imagined as this white middle class family with white parents and bipoc children, often from a different country. And I guess I'd say like the central complexity I think that critical adoption studies is trying to grapple with is that adoptive families can be loving and in some ways subversive of bio normative narratives of family. But they're also created through structural violence and traumatic separation.

Hannah McGregor 25:16

Yeah, yeah. And I feel like that recognition that transnational adoption is sort of always already entangled in the violences of imperialism and globalization and white supremacy and late capitalism, is a really hard thing for people to grapple with, in the same way that you, you know, that any recognition that your efforts to be a good person are always still going to butt up against the systems in which you are irreconcilably entangled.

You know, like we, we really, particularly, I think, in a, like, Western understanding of autonomy and self determination, like we really want to be able to just make good choices our way out of complicity. To be like, Yeah, but but we're good. And it's like, okay, yeah, like you might be really, really working towards harm reduction, but you can't "good intentions" your way out of globalization. You just, you just can't, it's just the reality of the world. And it's, I think, better in many ways to be willing to live in that complexity, than to always be trying to find some silver bullet that will fix everything.

Nia 26:44

Yes, I would absolutely agree. And I think that there's a sort of conflation of, well, your life is great, right? You have all these access to resources, you have a lot of freedoms. Maybe you would, maybe you wouldn't have had that otherwise. But really, there's no, nobody's harmed by this. And I think it's really important to separate the outcome from, was what happened fair and just?

Hannah McGregor 27:09

When we look at the folks and critical adoption studies, who are moving in more of that social justice or activist direction, like what is the activism oriented towards? What are people in the field sort of working to change?

Nia 27:25

I mean, there are a variety of perspectives as one can imagine. I think some people are interested in sort of reforming adoption, fostering surrogacy, some people think it is just inherently unethical, basically, under capitalism and white supremacy for any of these sorts of kinship structures to exist as they do. And then there are also some, I think, interesting projects trying to think about like, do adoptive children have a right to know their birth parents? Like do parents have a right to parent children? And it's really complex, because sometimes these parties have honestly conflicting interests.

Marcelle Kosman 28:06

Yeah. Okay, I know that in the next segment we'll talk specifically about Harry Potter. But one thing that we haven't really touched on yet is the way in which all of these politics around adoption, whether it's domestic or transnational, how we see those

represented in popular culture, right? So do you want to talk a little bit about, like, maybe the literary tradition of adoption?

Nia 28:34

Yeah, sure. So I want to draw a little bit on Marianne Novy's *Reading Adoption*. And in this book, she's thinking about how adoption plots often move towards an end that defines what true family is for the central adopted character. And she talks about how in older literary traditions like *Oedipus Rex*, or *Winter's Tale*, the real family is the biological family. The adoptive family turns out to be this fiction. And in the case of *Oedipus Rex*, it's like quite tragic fiction.

Hannah McGregor 29:06

Yeah, it's bad. [*Nia laughs*] Yeah. Yeah, but you're right, like a lot of these classical texts are like, you will inevitably find your quote unquote, real family and the adoptive family will have turned out to be like, essentially a sort of long lie you were told.

Marcelle Kosman 29:25

I mean, the character in a *Winter's Tale*, her name is Perdita. Like she's lost. Her name means lost child and then through-

Hannah McGregor 29:34

Oh my god, spoilers!

Marcelle Kosman 29:35

Sorry, for folks who haven't read the 500 year old play. Then she's found.

Hannah McGregor 29:42

Okay, yeah, that checks out.

Nia 29:43

Yeah. And then Novy also looks at novels like *Oliver Twist*, *Anne of Green Gables*, and *The Bean Trees* as stories that really confirm adoptive parenthood. And so she kind of lays out how there's sort of three categories of stories. There's the tragic adoption where you then have to go and look for your birth parents and it ends poorly. And then there's this sort of happy reunification. And then there's the happy adoption. And her book is really about trying to pull those apart because she feels as an adoptee, that those are not really representative of how she experiences adoption.

Marcelle Kosman 30:23

That the complexities of real life, not well mapped into literary, I hate the word theme, but literary themes-

Hannah McGregor 30:34

Tropes?

Marcelle Kosman 30:35

Tropes. tropes, tropes.

Nia 30:38

Yeah, yeah. And I think she's also able to sort of pull out some of the nuances of the stories that don't necessarily fall into these three categories as well.

Hannah McGregor 30:47

I immediately have a powerful desire to discuss that Anne Marie McDonald novel, *Fall On Your Knees*, but that's not what we're here to talk about. So maybe-

Marcelle Kosman 30:58

That's funny because I really want to talk about *Annie*.

Nia 31:01

Oh yeah. *[Nia and Marcelle laugh]*

Hannah McGregor 31:02

It's a real shame. It's a real shame, everybody, but I'm gonna have to insist we talk about Harry Potter.

Nia 31:09

Yes, let's do it.

[Witch, Please Theme Music plays]

Hannah McGregor 31:20

Like a parliament of Strigidae scooping up field mice for breakfast, let's scour this book series in OWL's. *[Sound effect of an owl hooting]* Marcelle, what the heck does Strigidae mean?

Marcelle Kosman 31:31

Well, I tried to find another word for owls for this opening line. And so I had to look up what the genus is. **[Marcelle laughs]** Anyway, I found that there are two families of owls. There's "true owl" and then and then there's-

Hannah McGregor 31:45

False owl?

Marcelle Kosman 31:46

[Marcelle laughs] Which seems wrong. **[Marcelle laughs]** Anyway, so the "true owl" is the Strigidae. **[Sound effect of an owl hooting]** Okay, Nia, in your notes, as we were prepping for this episode, you had identified a number of different areas in the Harry Potter series that we could unpack through a critical adoption studies framework. So I would love it if you took the lead and told us where we're gonna start.

Nia 32:17

Okay, so first, I want to look at Harry as our central orphan protagonist and think about how he comes into true family. And that I want to talk about Voldemort's relationship to family as a foil to Harry.

Hannah McGregor 32:30

Oh, man, yes.

Nia 32:33

From there, we can think about how both Harry and Voldemort stories show how institutions fail children and families.

Marcelle Kosman 32:41

Yes, dang. If that's not fair, yeah, yeah.

Nia 32:45

And then I want to think a little bit about why adoption isn't an option narratively for either Harry or Voldemort.

Marcelle Kosman 32:52

All right.

Nia 32:54

And then to wrap up, I want to just talk briefly about the work of Lumos, which is an NGO co-founded by JK Rowling. And its relation to Harry Potter's ideology of family.

Hannah McGregor 33:03

Wow, I've never heard of Lumos. And this roadmap, I mean, really into it. Okay, so let's, let's start with Harry. Here's what we've got, like a classic British orphan story of like, you had good parents who loved you. And then they died. And now you are with bad people who hate you. That is like-

Marcelle Kosman 33:29

Oh, they died tragically too, they died of fault not their own.

Hannah McGregor 33:33

They were very in love. I mean, they died trying to protect you. They wanted you. They, like all of this sort of ideal model of what the family should look like. Right? Like, they're perfect. They are perfect parents. You know, we talked about this with Lily, like the most perfect thing a mother can do is die for her child. And then, obviously, rather than going to like another family that will also do their best. It's like you've got a perfect birth family, or you've got nightmare abusive parent figures who lock you in an attic often, in this case, under the staircase. *The Little Princess* was one of my favorite books as a kid. And it's very much like this, you have a wonderful, rich father who loves you and will save you at some point. But in the meanwhile, you will live in an attic with no dolls.

Nia 34:31

Yes, absolutely. I think that the orphan sort of narrative does a lot of work in creating protagonists who are very independent, seem to be like individuals who sort of, through their suffering and maybe personal acts of kindness, then deserve the status quo, wealth and class privilege that they come into at the end. And that was always supposed to be theirs based on their birth.

Hannah McGregor 34:58

Yeah. Right. Yeah. Not only do you have real birth parents who loved you dearly, but surprise, they also had a ton of money!

Marcelle Kosman 35:09

I just thinking how radically different the story of Merope would be, if we thought about, like, the fact that she wanted her child, you know, because of the fact that she dies just after giving birth with our narrative about Merope and Tom Riddle, Jr. or whatever, is not one of like, well, she wanted him.

Hannah McGregor 35:35

Isn't there a whole thing about like, well Merope didn't want him enough, like Lily, like she died of sadness. And that's not a thing you do if you're a good mom. If you're a good mom, you can only die of wizard.

Marcelle Kosman 35:46

Yeah, I think that's a realization that Harry comes to and that's when Dumbledore is like, Oh, are you feeling sorry for Voldemort? And he's like, no!

Hannah McGregor 35:57

[Hannah laughs] No! Anyway, it's interesting in the context of sort of the muggle versus wizarding to think about that, like, kids who are raised in one culture in the other, right, so like, Harry's being raised by the Dursleys means like, they do not tell him that wizards exist, like they cut him off from every aspect of who his parents were, what the wizarding world is, the possibility that he might also have magic. Is there like a pained adoption metaphor at work in that?

Nia 36:36

Well, I guess because the sort of racial ethnic metaphor of muggles and wizarding folk it's pretty messy, it's difficult to parse. I think you could do it two ways. Like on one hand, there is like, especially around Indigenous children, this historical separation of children from their tribes, from their families, and the really painful sort of cultural genocide that that basically enacts. And so you could read the Dursleys as kind of enacting something similar, isolating Harry from the magic world from his true history. They lie to him and tell him that his parents died in a car crash. On the other hand, I also feel like wizards are kind of pretty powerful and they certainly have more power than muggles, in a lot of ways.

Hannah McGregor 37:29

Like in the adoption metaphor, the Dursleys are like the white middle class family, who has adopted this child who is like different and stigmatized, but then within the larger metaphor of the series, muggles are very clearly meant to be the like, sort of minoritized, the racialized, I mean, unclear, but that is a really good example of the way that that sort of analogy of muggles to wizards flip flops through the series.

Nia 37:57

I think muggles are boring. Muggles are bigoted. The wizarding world has for Harry, well, the wizarding world has a sort of like neoliberal multiculturalism, where like muggles, we don't want to harm them. They are kind of cute sometimes, but also, they're totally separate from us. And I think when you think about Harry's actual parentage, Lily was a muggle born. Pretty unclear.

I mean, we know that her relationship with Petunia deteriorated. But her relationship with her parents, her other family, her friends, all of that just doesn't exist in the book. And so I think you could also read this in some ways as like the series saying, well, muggle culture is just inferior. Muggle relations don't give you anything of value in and of itself, and for you to come into your true potential, you have to go to the magic world where you can practice magic and inherent loads of gold.

Hannah McGregor 38:53

Classic.

Marcelle Kosman 38:54

So back to your roadmap. Nia, where are we?

Nia 38:58

So we've talked a bit about culture, I think also the importance of blood really comes through in Harry's story.

Marcelle Kosman 39:04

Yes. Oh, yes.

Nia 39:06

Like, Lily's sacrifices actually manifested in his blood. And he has to stay with the Dursleys even though they are terrible to him, because of this blood protection. And then if you look in the series about the alternatives that exist to the Dursleys, you have Hogwarts, which is an institution and so I don't think that the books really consider that as an adequate replacement for family. I mean, it provides shelter and food and education and pure friendships. And it is sort of like the peak of wizarding culture, you are learning how to be a wizard there. But I think the way that Hogwarts functions is sort of a lot of what we were talking about with *The Little Princess*. This is the place where you prove yourself through your acts of bravery, and you're recognized as part of this long lineage of exceptional white men.

Marcelle Kosman 39:54

I think too, like we see these snippets of Voldemort trying to stay at Hogwarts throughout the summer and being denied, right? So whatever's happening in the background of the story, like, by no means are children allowed to live there permanently.

Hannah McGregor 40:12

Yeah, it is not, it is an educational institution. Even that sort of limitation of Hogwarts as a replacement of family comes through in the way that Harry loves being there. But being one of the kids who stays there through Christmas is kind of a bummer. Because like, even though it is great to like, like, it's kind of an equalizer for him. Like it gives him a place where he can prove himself and like become important and part of a community and like, have friendships and all of these, you know, and stable adult figures. Just one McGonagall. Just one. Mmmm. Hagrid? **[Nia laughs]** Yeah, yeah, like stable ish adult ish figures ish. But there is still the sense that like, well, it doesn't replace having a family because like, you need somewhere to go at Christmas and during the summers, and he has to go back to the Dursleys.

Marcelle Kosman 41:05

And somebody needs to give him permission to go to Hogsmeade. So we also get that like that whole third book where McGonagall is like, Absolutely not. I cannot give you permission. I am not your guardian.

Nia 41:19

Right. Then we do have Sirius coming in as a potential family member. But he can't really be a father because he's kind of reckless. He treats Harry as James.

Marcelle Kosman 41:31

He's got so much trauma. Yeah. So much unmanaged trauma.

Hannah McGregor 41:40

There is a lot of cultural suspicion around a single man adopting a child. Like, that is not a model we see for the most part. It is not treated, as you know, for all of these very sort of gender essentialized reasons like, well, women are naturally caring. Men obviously don't have the capacity for nurturing. So what are they going to do with that child? Like, part of what makes Sirius not an appropriate family replacement is that he can't, like the Weasleys are a family because they're like, a heterosexual reproductive, biologically related family, but like Sirius can't be.

Nia 42:26

Yes, I think so. I also think that there's a kind of like, queer coding to the marauders as a family, a found family. And I mean, you've talked about it in the Order of the Phoenix movie, how Sirius is just really into Harry, like, I think there's a sort of subtext of that just not being appropriate.

Hannah McGregor 42:43

Yeah, a possibly sinister subtext. So the way that that is framed, and Sirius's inappropriateness as a guardian is framed, which is a shame, because those two would have had a really cute family together.

Marcelle Kosman 42:55

They would have. Yeah, I want to add, too, the way that we often see Sirius and Molly butting heads about appropriate ways to raise Harry, and one of you very smart humans was talking about how the Weasley family is like, heterosexual reproductive family. And Molly, mom's the hell out of that family. Like, all we see her do is stereotypical mom stuff. And so the idea of Harry being Sirius's God Son, and him being a potential guardian, and the tension that exists between those two parent figures is really thickly coated with politics. And I don't know what to say about it, other than there's a lot to unpack.

Hannah McGregor 43:50

Okay. Just speaking, because we are on the topic now of the Weasleys, who are like, obviously, sort of, ultimately, when it comes to finding a family, they are like, the family that Harry finds. But Nia, you've got a point here in the notes that I was like, Holy shit, I absolutely didn't think of that, which is that the series basically needs to take like, the slightly queer notion of chosen family and be like, don't worry about it. We made it legitimate through marriage and heterosexual reproduction.

Marcelle Kosman 44:26

[Marcelle and Nia laugh] Tell us your thinking.

Nia 44:31

Yeah, yeah. So I guess where I see Harry Potter thinking about family generally, is that it's trying to situate itself somewhere between family is about choice and behavior, and family is about blood. Because blood isn't enough. If you're crappy to somebody. That's not your end goal family. But at the same time, it's very important for your family to be people who share your culture, your magic culture, and to do that culture appropriately, which means that they are tolerant. They're not supremacists. And what cements the sort of relationships that have grown organically through actions of care, and through shared culture is intermarriage and children, and replacing these bad blood relations with good blood relations.

Hannah McGregor 45:17

So it's like the Weasleys are a good wizarding family. They're a representation of what is good about the wizarding world. And thus, Harry and Hermione who do not have pre-existing biological connections into the wizarding world, Hermione, because she's

muggle born and Harry, because he is orphaned, just need to marry into the Weasley family.

Marcelle Kosman 45:38

And then Harry and Hermione get to be in laws, they get to be siblings in law. How nice.

Hannah McGregor 45:45

So we do, for all of that complexity, ultimately have a vision of Harry, getting a family, by the end of the series. Voldemort fares less well. A little, a little less well, and I feel like part of it is that whole thing, where like, he is orphaned. He is raised in an institution, not in a household. And then he's not, from what I can tell, like, he's not sort of adopted by anyone. Like, does he have to go back to the orphanage during the summer?

Marcelle Kosman 46:19

He does. Yeah.

Hannah McGregor 46:21

Yeah. So he just bounces from institution to institution, which is a different kind of experience for sure.

Nia 46:28

Yes, I think what's going on with Voldemort is both that, like his nurturing situation has been terrible. He's in Hogwarts and in this orphanage, but also there's this kind of like, tracing back to blood that there's something just inherently antisocial and anti familial about being descended from Slytherin, being conceived through a non consensual relationship between Merope and Tom Riddle Sr. and that sort of this dysfunctionality, he then reproduces himself by having this child with Bellatrix, who is also orphaned and also raised by a non parental figure who doesn't like her and just wants her for the money.

Hannah McGregor 47:10

Yeah, so we get, you know, sort of the other version of the orphan story like, you know, raised by the mean family, the sort of Cinderella thing, like raised by the mean family who treats you like garbage, or raised in truly the bleakest imaginable orphanage. And that's what we get from a young Tom Riddle of like, we're not given a ton to work with beyond Harry's description of Dumbledore's memories. And then like little anecdotes. So the orphanage is bad, and he also grows up, not knowing he's a wizard. That's another characteristic of the orphanage. Why does Dumbledore keep letting these kids be raised in these awful contexts, where nobody tells them they're wizards?

Nia 48:01

How I make sense of that is that Dumbledore almost functions as an embodiment of the institution. He's not like a real person who can adopt somebody, he is the voice of the institution.

Hannah McGregor 48:12

That is a really good framing, like he acts as an extension of Hogwarts and so he can come to you once you are accepted into Hogwarts. But before that, you have no access to Dumbledore. So via Voldemort's unhappy childhood, and via sort of, you know, its contrast to Harry's at least sort of ultimately happy connection with the Weasleys we've got a pretty clear like, you can't be raised by an institution. Like that's not gonna do it. You're gonna need a family.

Nia 48:48

Yeah, I think that even in some ways, like perhaps Harry Potter is more radical on this, like it tends to be the criminal justice system that like imprison's Sirius and traumatizes him and separates him from Harry, is ruining a potential loving relationship. I also think that Hogwarts as an institution is pretty unsafe for children. *[Hannah laughs]*

Marcelle Kosman 49:09

Seems to be.

Hannah McGregor 49:10

It does. It does seem to be. Yeah. *[Marcelle laughs]*

Nia 49:14

The housing system seems to encourage at least some children to be indoctrinated into wizarding supremacy.

Hannah McGregor 49:20

Yeah, that's a flaw to the sort of pedagogical design of the school, for sure. *[Marcelle laughs]*

Marcelle Kosman 49:25

But then that other house, Gryffindor, is also like, in order to belong here you need to do increasingly dangerous things-

Hannah McGregor 49:34

Basically training kids for a wizarding military, essentially. *[Marcelle laughs]*

Nia 49:40

Yeah, yeah, definitely not the nurturing parental guidance that children need.

Hannah McGregor 49:46

No, no.

Nia 49:48

And I think we see this explicitly in Book Five when Umbridge comes in and Hogwarts, which was operating under sort of Dumbledore's benevolent, autonomous state becomes just an extension of the state. And one that is politically against what Harry's standing for.

Hannah McGregor 50:06

So let's talk about why when we know adoption is like a thing, and was a thing in the 90s, was an escalating thing in the 90s. Why are neither Harry or Voldemort adoptable? Or like why that's not even presented as a narrative possibility. It doesn't seem imaginable in the logic of the books.

Nia 50:29

So I think for the Dursleys, it's coming from just not caring about him enough, they could adopt him, but they don't, they're neglectful. And then because he has this blood connection with them that he needs to preserve, logistically, it would be difficult for him to live with somebody else, and therefore be adopted by somebody else. And then I think we can also think about this on a more symbolic level where Lily is the perfect mother and you can't have two mothers. So for her sacrifice to still carry forth he has to remain an orphan.

Marcelle Kosman 51:00

Mm hmm.

Hannah McGregor 51:01

Yeah, that is really, you know, and he's also gotta do the "chosen one narrative" thing. And it's like, harder to be a brave chosen one battling your way to the metaphorical Grail if you've got stable parental units, who will really be like, Please don't go fight a wizard. Don't. You're a child. As Molly keeps trying to do.

Marcelle Kosman 51:27

She tries. So then what about Voldemort? Is he not adoptable because there's just something bad about him? Is that the subtext?

Hannah McGregor 51:01

Is that the subtext? *[Hannah laughs]*

Nia 51:38

That's kind of what I think, I mean, like, he doesn't have any sort of blood protection. I think in both of these cases, Dumbledore was like, Yeah, I can't do love. I'm just gonna, like supervise you from afar, which, again, going back to the institution, not working out for either of them. Like, that doesn't help Voldemort. And Harry sort of talks about the pain of that in the Cursed Child as well. And I think that Dumbledore is just like, I don't know, this kid. He's too, like creepy and weird. And like it would be unsafe to subject a good family to raising him, which is another sort of problematic trope was the horror orphan.

Marcelle Kosman 52:11

Yeah, that narrative of like, well, you don't want to subject a good family to a child that is “fill in the blank” with like, whatever hateful stereotype of adoption.

Hannah McGregor 52:27

Yeah, but that does. It's like the orphan can be a hero or a monster, like that sort of stream of like, it can't be either he's the chosen one who's just waiting to find out about his secret heritage and all the money waiting for him, or he's like, a sinister child, who would endanger a family that adopted him. Like, are these two extremes of the same weird cultural narrative around orphans.

Nia 53:00

Yeah. And I think you see that in real life that's like hesitancy to adopt children, who have trauma, who have continuing relations with family members who are unacceptable in some way to a sort of like, middle class, properness.

Hannah McGregor 53:18

Or kids who are still connected to that, like part of what makes Voldemort and Harry quote unquote, “unadoptable” in the logic of the text is that they are irrevocably connected to the wizarding world. So like they can't be fully rested out of that context by whatever, you know, a muggle adoptive family. Which, I mean, this book loves biological essentialism, this series loves biological essentialism, and it loves, ultimately sort of reinforcing and I like quite conservative understanding of what counts as family.

Marcelle Kosman 53:55

Mm hmm. Nia, you had brought up Lumos. Do you want to talk just a little bit about what Lumos is? And-

Hannah McGregor 54:06

Yeah, like, how that's connected to what these books have to say about adoption?

Nia 54:09

Yeah, sure. So in 2005, JK Rowling and Baroness Emma Nicholson, who is also a known TERF.

Hannah McGregor 54:17

We know from *The Sound of Music*, you cannot trust a Baroness.

Marcelle Kosman 53:20

Never.

Nia 54:21

Yes. [*Nia laughs*] They co-founded an NGO called Lumos and Lumos works to prevent family separation in about a dozen different countries. And I just want to say, I don't really know how involved JK Rowling is in any Lumos's operations. And I don't know how effective Lumos's work is. I will note that they talk about wanting to educate themselves about transphobia on their website, so that at least is cool, potentially. But so they're specifically working to get children out of institutions and back with their families, and they're doing this through policy work, and also by shifting funding for orphanages to funding for sort of community based care.

And so something I sort of think is interesting about this is that those goals are fairly consistent with critical adoption studies about economic and political inequalities that produce adoption, especially transnational adoption. And you can sort of see the anti institutionality of Harry Potter sort of resonating with this mission. But then I also think that in protecting families of origin, birth families, first families, it can partner in a really weird way with sort of a bio normative understanding of family that views the capacity for biological motherhood as this sort of essential womanhood.

Hannah McGregor 55:47

Woah, yeah, yeah. Because it does all sort of, we can't talk about adoption without thinking about kind of the treatment of the mother as a figure, and this sort of like, you know, one of those really TERFy through lines, is this kind of like, the magic of your womb.

Nia 56:10

Yeah. So I guess what I want to leave people with is that I think adoption sort of poses these ethical questions that don't fall easily into sort of like a progressive stance and a conservative stance. As I've said before, I think like children, parents, adoptive parents, they often have conflicting interests and rhetoric, especially around what would be in the best interest of children.

It's so easily weaponized for many different arguments about kinship and bodily autonomy. And so I'm not even saying that Lumos's work is bad, necessarily. I just think it's important to consider why TERF's might champion an effort to end family separation. And if you believe that, generally speaking, family separation should be ended, which I do, I think it's really important to promote that stance from a place that isn't naturalizing biological reproduction, or cultural essentialism, or gender or the nuclear family.

Hannah McGregor 57:02

It's a really tricky thing to be like, here is a sort of stance or a movement, that the substantive changes are a thing that I agree with. But the reason why some people are moving towards it is quite insidious, and is often around activist movements difficult to navigate. I think about this in the context of BC environmentalism. There's a huge environmentalist movement in British Columbia that is working against deforestation. And those deforestation movements are predominantly white, do not collaborate with the Indigenous nations whose land they are, quote, unquote, protecting, don't acknowledge the actual like, right to make decisions about how that land is used.

So it becomes like, again, I also would like the trees, probably to not be cut down. But I don't agree with the way you're going about it. And the way that you're talking about nature seems profoundly colonial and it's just, you know, it's complex to detangle, particularly these issues that don't have an obvious here's the progressive stance, and let's just all get on board with it.

Marcelle Kosman 58:27

Thank you so much, Nia, for joining us, and talking us through these incredibly complex issues. It was awesome. Thank you.

Hannah McGregor 58:35

Thank you, and thank you for your roadmap, we kind of followed it.

Nia 58:40

I think we did a really good job. *[Hannah, Marcelle, and Nia laugh]*

[Witch, Please Theme Music plays]

Marcelle Kosman 58:56

Thank you, witches, for joining us for another episode of *Witch, Please*. If you have questions, comments, concerns, or praise – especially praise – come hang out with us at @ohwitchplease on Instagram or Twitter. We're also on Patreon at patreon.com/ohwitchplease, where you can get all kinds of exclusive perks including a sneak peek, *already available, right now*, this very second of our new podcast. Been feeling anxious about what's going to happen when we're done with Harry Potter? No need. Patreon has all your answers. Nia, if people want to learn more about your work, more from you, where can they find you?

Nia 59:39

My friends Marika, Keira and I made an immersive audio choreography called Caress in which listeners follow a series of movement prompts woven into stories about caregiving and Asian femininity. So if you'd like to try that out, you can find the link to the audio file on our instagram: [caress.audio](#)

Hannah McGregor 59:58

That's awesome. So good.

Witch, Please is, surprise, surprise, a *Witch, Please* Production, and is distributed by Acast. You can find the rest of our episodes—and soon, the rest of our *podcasts*—on Acast or at ohwitchplease.ca. And there are a bunch of other things you can do at ohwitchplease.ca: like our monthly newsletter and our transcripts, and our merch and our reading lists. It's a good website. Websites are cool. Go look at it.

Marcelle Kosman 1:00:30

Speaking of websites are cool thanks to everyone on the *Witch, Please* team, including our digital projects coordinator Gaby Iori **[Sound effect of a “BOING”]**, our social media manager and marketing designer Zoe Mix **[Sound effect of a record rewinding]**, our sound engineer Erik Magnus **[Sound effect of chimes]**, and our executive producer Hannah Rehak, aka COACH! **[Sound effect of a sports whistle blowing]** Special thanks this week to our guest producer, AJ Jaramaz, who is filling in for Coach while she is on vacation.

Hannah McGregor 1:01:11

Mhm. And we have been on our best behavior. Sorry, AJ, this was our best behavior. **[Sound effect of a sports whistle blowing]** At the end of every episode we shout-out everyone who left us a 5-star review on Apple Podcasts, so you've gotta review us if you want to hear Marcelle *singing in the rain, just singing in the rain!* Sorry, no snapping on the mic, Hannah!

Marcelle Kosman 1:01:33

Thanks this week to: OfftheCally, Nebfab

We'll be back next episode to append these appendices. But until then:

Nia 1:01:45

Later witches!

[Witch, Please Theme Music plays]