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"*You Will Be Missed You Know, but This Is No Place for You to Grow*": A Critical Metaphor Study of Pre-Adoption Narratives

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[*“You Will Be Missed You Know, but This Is No Place for You to Grow”*: A Critical Metaphor Study of Pre-Adoption Narratives]

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[Abstract] *This article discusses (pre-)adoption narratives by investigating a selection of children’s picture books featuring multi-ethnic families. The research examines both textual and pictorial resources, focusing specifically on the use of metaphors as a tool of cognition which may help an audience of young readers understand and become acquainted with unfamiliar notions connected to the process of interracial adoption. Attention is also devoted to the identification, interpretation, and explanation of recurring metaphors in the books as a means of framing (pre-)adoption experiences, i.e. foregrounding certain aspects of the target domains and backgrounding others. The analysis has revealed an almost ubiquitous presence of the journey metaphor in the sample of books.*

[Keywords] *interracial adoption; adoption narratives; critical metaphor analysis; multimodal metaphor analysis*

[1] Aim and Background

This study investigates the role of verbal and visual metaphors in children’s picture books about interracial adoption, presenting a case study involving a sample of five stories published in the USA. Whereas recent years have witnessed a significant increase in the production and sale of books for young adoptees (Garcia Gonzales and Wesseling 2013, p. 258), research that examines them, especially research investigating interracial adoption publications, is rather rare (Jerome and Sweeney 2014, p. 681). Against this backdrop, this paper aims to contribute to filling this gap, as it recognizes the important part children’s literature can play in helping youngsters who have been adopted make sense of their present and past reality (Sun 2021, p. 232).

Stories featuring adoptee protagonists provide repertoires for identity construction (Garcia Gonzales and Wesseling 2013, p. 258) because they act as mirrors through which the latter can see their selves reflected (Sims Bishop 2012); the narratives included in books about adoption are thus a tool through which readers can interpret the outside world as well as present themselves to it. Since picture books can be turned into valuable resources, adoptive parents are interested buyers. Oftentimes, besides purchasing and reading them to their children, they also feel the need to write (and sometimes even illustrate) stories with adoptee protagonists (Bergquist 2007, p. 30). Their intent is to increase the number of narratives available to adoptive families and to provide them with a more widespread representation. Parents of children adopted interracially are particularly committed to inventing and circulating narratives about racially heterogeneous families, as multiethnic households are much less frequently acknowledged in literature and cultural media products (Satz 2007).

Previous research on adoption books for children has revealed that the latter are not particularly creative, in that they are:

shaped by deeply ingrained narrative templates or “scripts”, that is, normative sequences of specific actions that are performed by certain types of characters in a set order within given circumstances. [...] In literary terms, scripts are substantiated by stereotypical plot structures, motifs and metaphors recycled from one story to another. (Garcia Gonzales and Wesseling 2013, p. 258)

The fact that (interracial) adoption stories do not display significant variations may make them easier for young readers to understand, assimilate, and memorize. In particular, the presence of recurring tropes based on analogy (e.g. metaphors, similes, metonymies) has been identified as a recurring trait of these books, which seems to favor children’s comprehension of their narratives; this kind of trope is typically relied upon in order to make sense of and communicate unfamiliar concepts in simpler and more accessible terms. Metaphors, in particular, seem to play a significant part in the communication of abstract or unknown notions within picture books, as they occur both in verbal and visual form (Lakoff and Johnson 1980).

In light of the above, this study aims to isolate patterns in metaphor use in a sample of five illustrated children’s books focusing on interracial adoption. Drawing on the assumption that metaphors (especially conventional metaphors) tend to go ‘unnoticed’ and are highly persuasive tools of cognition (cf. section 2), the paper intends to determine which metaphorical configurations lie at the basis of pre-adoption narratives, and to explore whether they occur frequently and across different stories, as their incidence may have a remarkable influence on young readers’ framing of their early life experiences and their arrival in their multiethnic families.

The paper is organized as follows. After outlining the data set and the methodological framework adopted in the research, the study will look at the most recurring verbal and visual metaphors of the pre-adoption picture books selected for the analysis, how they are realized and how they activate networks of meaning. The identification and interpretation of these metaphors will be followed by considerations on their potential impact on adopted children’s coming to terms with their past, on their and their families’ ongoing process of identity development, and, more generally, on how the interracial adoption process is commonly viewed.

[2] Sample Selection and Method

As previously mentioned, the analysis was conducted using a sample comprised by five children’s picture books, which are the following:

- 1] *A Mother for Choco* by Keiko Kasza ([1982] 1992)
- 2] *Horace* by Holly Keller (1991)
- 3] *The Red Thread* by Grace Lin (2007)
- 4] *Red in the Flower Bed* by Andrea Nepa (2008)
- 5] *Forever Family* by Kelley and Lindsey Bullard (2017)

A Mother for Choco is the story of a baby bird who wishes he had a mother, so he decides to search for one. He meets some grown-up animals but no one seems to be right for him until he is adopted by Mrs. Bear. *Horace* is the leopard son of tiger parents. Every night his mother tells him the story of his adoption, but he never hears the final part of the story because he falls asleep. One day, feeling that he does not belong with his adoptive family because of his different physical appearance, he runs away to be with other leopards, but he is very happy when his parents find him and ultimately goes back home with them. That night, he is finally able to stay awake and provide his own ending to the story of his adoption. *The Red Thread* contains a frame narrative in which a couple of adoptive parents read a fairy tale about adoption to a little girl and a secondary narrative in which the fairy tale is told. *Red in the Flower Bed* describes the journey of a little poppy seed that is carried by the wind and finally lands on a patch of earth where it takes root and blooms with other colorful flowers. Finally, *Forever Family* is set on the “Gotcha Day” (i.e. the anniversary of the day on which a child is adopted) of the protagonist. His parents tell

him the story of the days preceding his arrival and their first encounter, highlighting the central role played by God’s will in their becoming a family.

The sampling process complied with a set of formal criteria: first, all the stories must contain interracial adoption narratives about the lives of the protagonists before and when they are placed in their new families. Secondly, these books are addressed to a target readership of adoptees between ages 4 and 8. This age span was picked as it has been identified as the moment in which adoption language starts being used in families and children begin to form their adoptive identity (Jerome and Sweeney 2014, p. 682; cf. also Brodzinsky 2011). Finally, all picture books were written by American authors in English and for an English-speaking audience.

The data set was also built with a view to obtain the best possible representativeness. Since many picture books about interracial adoptions feature animal protagonists, three out of the five books chosen for this analysis are about little pets. The remaining two books, which are centered on human characters, are about an African-American (*Forever Family*) and an Asian (*The Red Thread*) adoptee. These texts either promote a religious view of adoption or spread popular legends about individuals destined to meet and form a family together. A balance between books created by adoptive parents and by professional writers was also sought; *Red in the Flower Bed* and *Forever Family* were penned by authors who had adopted children, whereas the other three stories were written by professionals. Lastly, the selection is chronologically varied, as it includes books published in all of the past last four decades. During this time span and especially since the mid-Nineties, when the *Interethnic Placement Act* (1996) and the *Adoption and Safe Families Act* (1997) were passed,¹ formal hindrance of interracial adoption has been removed and the formation of multiracial families has gained momentum.

The book sample constructed using the abovementioned criteria was examined from a discourse-analytical perspective. A compound methodology was applied to the chosen texts, which included tools for the exploration of the verbal component as well as the visuals, on account of the paramount role the latter play in children’s picture books. The theoretical tenets of Critical Metaphor Analysis (or CMA; Charteris-Black 2004; 2005) were combined with those of Multimodal Metaphor Studies (Forceville 1996; 2006; 2013) in order to verify the presence of patterns of metaphor use in the books, both in words and in images. Although dealing with different semiotic resources, Charteris-Black’s and Forceville’s models can be jointly applied to the study of social constructs such as adoption narratives, because they both recognize the framing function of metaphors (cf. Semino 2008) and start from the premise that the choice of the source domain (i.e. the semantic field metaphorical items are selected from) strategically calls attention to some aspects of the target domain (i.e. the entity or conceptual meaning described by the metaphor) while downplaying the importance of others (cf. also Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Recourse to metaphors is so widespread that both text producers and recipients are often unaware of the presence of this kind of trope. Although they may be ‘overlooked’, they still provide a framing for what they describe, with the result that they can turn into silent persuaders that are particularly influential because generally unresisted:

I am not arguing that metaphor predetermines a certain interpretation; however, it may create a predisposition towards one interpretation over another. One way it may do this is by utilizing the underlying evaluations that are conveyed by the choice of certain words and phrases because of the particular connotations they convey. (Charteris-Black 2004, p. 41)

As CMA and Multimodal Metaphor Studies acknowledge the potential of metaphors to persuade and even ideologically orient the audience, they both draw upon Norman Fairclough’s framework for the critical analysis of discourse (1995), which, in turn, is heavily indebted to Halliday’s systemic functional grammar (1985). Both models present a similarly organized structure involving three steps: metaphor identification, interpretation, and explanation. Identification entails deciding what counts as a metaphor and is therefore linked with the investigation of ideational meaning (Charteris-Black 2004, p. 35). The interpretation stage is associated with the study of interpersonal meaning, whereas explanation is connected with textual meaning, i.e. the way in which metaphors establish systems of meaning coherent with the context in which they are used (*ibid.*).

In CMA, metaphor identification involves the isolation of words and phrases that are used metaphorically and their preliminary grouping in categories such as ‘novel’ and ‘conventional’. With regard to this stage, reference will be made in this study to some useful notions belonging to the tradition of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT; Lakoff and Johnson 1980), a model which draws on the assumption that metaphors provide a cognitive organization for areas of knowledge that are unfamiliar or difficult to comprehend. After identifying metaphors, Critical Metaphor Analysis interprets them by “deciding *how metaphors are to be classified, organized and arranged*” (Charteris-Black 2014, p. 175; emphasis in the original) either by source domain or by target domain. Finally, metaphor explanation represents the stage at which metaphors are illustrated in light of the contextual factors of ideology and culture, and not only on the basis of cognitive, semantic, and pragmatic considerations (Charteris-Black 2004, p. 248).

As already noted, Multimodal Metaphor Studies, which mainly focus on the categorization of pictorial metaphors and on the combination of the textual and visual mode, also relies on a three-step approach (Forceville 1996, p. 108; 2002, pp. 2–3). The identification phase coincides with the singling out of the images that perform the role of source and their target. Just like CMA, in the interpretation stage Multimodal Metaphor Studies also consider the purpose of metaphor use within specific discourse contexts to be of the utmost importance. More precisely, in Forceville’s model the notion of context is utilized with reference to the interaction between textual and pictorial resources; such an interaction performs a strategic role in visual metaphor recognition and interpretation, since the visual mode lacks the verbal cues which explicitly express the equivalence ‘A is B’ (Forceville 1996, p. 111). Finally, Multimodal Metaphor Studies return to the wider social and political context as a final step of the analysis (i.e. in the explanation step) to establish the purposes that illustrators had when using these metaphors.

By isolating and examining metaphors in narratives on interracial adoption, the three-tiered analysis applied in this study is expected to make it possible to determine

whether there is a systematic use of this trope in the selected picture books, and, if so, which types of frame it provides for the early experiences of young adoptees.

[3] The Journey Metaphor

An initial glance at the data set reveals a number of emerging patterns. First, the presence of metaphors in the text sample is so significant that they appear both in the choice of characters visually featured on the covers and, albeit less frequently, in the title wording. As a result, the readership’s understanding of the notion of adoption is immediately oriented toward a limited range of concepts or images (which are the object of analysis in this and the following sections).

As far as characters are concerned, in three picture books out of five the protagonists are anthropomorphic metaphors (namely animals and flowers). Lakoff and Johnson (1980) define anthropomorphism as an example of ontological metaphor where human behaviors or traits are applied to animals or non-human entities. Anthropomorphic metaphors are widely used in children’s stories to explain concepts or to make abstract ideas easier to understand. Metaphors are also present in the book titles *The Red Thread* and *Red in the Flower Bed*, although it may be hard to establish whether the elements of the thread and the flower bed are to be intended as metaphors without reading the stories first.

Most books (i.e. three books out of five²) portray the pre-adoptive life of their protagonists relying on the metaphor ADOPTION IS A JOURNEY³. According to Lakoff and Johnson’s model (1980), the ‘target domain’ of this metaphor corresponds to the concept of adoption, while the idea of journey represents the ‘source domain’, i.e. the domain from which metaphorical expressions are taken. Lakoff (1993) maintains that metaphorical mappings involving the JOURNEY source domain are “organized in hierarchical structures, in which ‘lower’ mappings in the hierarchy inherit the structures of the ‘higher’ mappings” (p. 222). The ADOPTION IS A JOURNEY metaphor thus represents the lower level of a three-rank hierarchy in which the highest position is occupied by the ‘event structure metaphor’ and the middle position by the conceptual metaphor A PURPOSEFUL LIFE IS A JOURNEY (Lakoff 1993, p. 223). As a matter of fact, according to the ‘event structure metaphor’,

Changes are movements [...]. Causes are forces. Actions are self-propelled movements. Purposes are destinations. Means are paths to destinations. Difficulties are impediments to motion. [...] Goals in life are destinations on the journey. The actions one takes in life are self-propelled movements, and the totality of one’s actions form a path one moves along. Choosing a means to achieve a goal is choosing a path to a destination. Difficulties in life are impediments to motion. (Lakoff 1993, p. 223)

This superordinate metaphorical configuration deeply structures the lower-ranking conceptual metaphor A PURPOSEFUL LIFE IS A JOURNEY, “since events in a life conceptualized as purposeful are subcases of events in general” (*ibid.*). In the same way, the middle level of the conceptual metaphor markedly shapes the bottom level of the hierarchy, i.e.

the metaphor ADOPTION IS A JOURNEY, as the adoption process can be envisaged as a specific set of events occurring in the course of a purposeful life.

Against this backdrop, the starting point of the metaphorical journey coincides with the moment in which the purpose or desired goal has been formulated but not yet realized, while the end point stands for the achievement of the goal. As a consequence, a narrative revolving around the journey metaphor depicts the movement towards the destination in terms of a resolution for the initial difficulties or undesirable situation of the protagonist; in other words, the presence of the journey metaphor may convey the message that adoption is the solution to the adoptee’s problems. This seems to be the case when the type of movement performed by the main characters is a quest or a journey towards their destiny (and thus inherently positive), as suggested in the following paragraphs.

[4] The Quest

The picture book *A Mother for Choco* can be defined as a “quest” because it deals with the protagonist’s search for his mother. At the beginning of the story, the reader is told that “Choco was a little bird, who lived *all alone*. He wished he had a mother, but who could his mother be? One day *he set off to find her*” (emphasis added; Kasza 1992). In the very first lines of the book, Choco is described as undertaking his journey as a response to his loneliness. Interestingly, he is portrayed as ‘all alone’, as there is no mention – metaphorical or otherwise – of a family of origin. The absence of birth parents (and notably of birth mothers) has been identified as a recurring trait of adoption narratives (cf. Bordo 2002), possibly associated with “the adoptive parents’ [often coinciding with the books’ authors’] judgments and feelings about the child’s birth parents” (Jerome and Sweeney 2014, p. 681). Once he sets off on his quest, Choco encounters a number of obstacles and failures: as a matter of fact, he goes through a sequence of unsuccessful encounters with adult (female) animals who turn him down due to his different physical appearance (“No matter where Choco searched, he couldn’t find a mother who *looked just like him*”; emphasis added; Kasza 1992). As highlighted by Calvo-Maturana (2020, p. 296), this part of the journey is visually represented through the use of simile-type pictorial associations, a kind of visual trope that consists in the juxtaposition of two entities placed next to each other as a sort of invitation to the viewer to establish a comparison between them (Forceville 1996, p. 137).⁴ The simile-type pictorial association can therefore be utilized to depict instances of identity negotiation, such as those narrated in the book. Figure 1. illustrates the unsuccessful simile BIRD [CHOCO] IS (NOT) A PENGUIN.

The awkward expression on Mrs. Penguin’s face indicates that the meeting between the two results in “a rejection based on lack of physical appearance and the genetic bond” (Calvo-Maturana 2020, p. 296).

The end of the quest corresponds with the moment in which Choco finally meets his adoptive mother, Mrs. Bear. From the visual perspective, this coincides with the fulfilled simile-type relation BIRD [CHOCO] IS BEAR.



Fig. 1 Choco and Mrs. Penguin



Fig. 3 The beginning of the poppy seed's journey



Fig. 2 Choco and Mrs. Bear

The identification between the little bird and the bear is made possible by “their mutual affection and despite their physical difference” (*ivi*, pp. 297–298). Figure 2 indicates that Choco’s quest ends with the protagonist’s happiness. This story thus supports the hypothesis that the presence of the journey metaphor in children’s books conveys the message that adoption may be viewed as a process of solving the adoptee’s problems or difficulties.

[5] The Journey towards Destiny

The Red Thread and *Red in the Flower Bed* feature metaphorical journeys towards destiny; the presence of the color red, besides hinting at the element of blood, signals that both stories (especially the first) are indebted to the “ancient Chinese belief that an invisible, unbreakable red thread connects all those who are destined to be together” (Lin 2007). Just like Choco, the protagonists of these books start their journeys to put an end to their suffering or hardships, but, differently from the little bird, they do not know what awaits them and they leave their initial location because they have been encouraged by others to do so. However, in both cases, it is ultimately the forces of destiny that prompt characters to set off on an adventure.

Whereas in *Red in the Flower Bed* the protagonist (as well as the traveler) is a poppy seed, an anthropomorphous metaphor which stands for young adoptees, in *The Red Thread* it is the Queen and the King, i.e. the adoptive parents, who embark on the journey towards destiny. The Queen “[o]ne morning [...] woke up with a pain in her heart. It was a steady ache that filled her with sadness” (Lin 2007); once a peddler reveals that the pain is caused by a red thread pulled from her heart, she decides to follow it and find out who is at the other end. The narrative that illustrates the Queen and the King’s journey to a far-off land where they meet the baby with the red thread tied around her ankles thus rests upon the metaphor FAMILY CONNECTIONS ARE THREADS. Significantly, threads which connect family members are portrayed as invisible and can only be seen with glasses: the only characters able to spot the red thread (i.e. the peddler at the beginning of the story, the Queen and King, and the wrinkled elder who eventually identifies the babies as their daughter) are all depicted wearing glasses. This seems to metaphorically suggest that family ties in interracial adoptive households may not be immediately visible as they are not based on biology, but that they nevertheless represent the outcome of a process of destiny fulfillment.

In *Red in the Flower Bed* it is the poppy, which stands for the birth mother, who urges the little seed to leave, as the circumstances in which she was born are unfavorable: “But [the earth] was too dry, / and the poppy began to cry: / “Good-bye little one. / You will be missed you know / but this is no place for you to grow.” (emphasis added; Nepa 2008). Differently from the other stories analyzed so far, here the beginning of the journey is depicted as the separation from a birth parent who is not only present in the narrative, but even sets it into motion. The departure from the family of origin is rendered through

a very sophisticated visual metaphor which incorporates and blends the idea of movement with that of sadness.

The seed's motion is portrayed in the book as a series of sequential positions that it occupies in space. The initial part of the journey, which corresponds to the seed's painful detaching from the mother/poppy, also construes the visual metaphor of sorrow, because in this picture (unlike in the following ones) the seed is shaped like a tear and the anthropomorphous flower is depicted as crying (cf. Figure 3), an act which is represented both verbally in the text and pictorially.

As already stated, destiny is what drives the characters to reach their destination, and it is therefore attributed agency and responsibility for bringing them together with their adoptive parents/children. The literary trope of destiny thus seems connected to the bureaucratic procedures of adoption matching, which are not in the hands of the prospective parents (or the child) but are managed by professionals, i.e. by people who are outside the family. In other words, adoptive family members have no control over the matching process. This lack of control is observable in the choice of the wind metaphor in Nepa's book. The natural element of the wind is conventionally used with reference to destiny (the expression “winds of destiny” is a case in point); in this particular story it highlights the aspect of unpredictability in the pairing between the poppy seed and her future flowerbed/family. At the same time and rather paradoxically, though, the wind is not described as a blind force, but as an entity actively deciding where to plant the seed:

“Here”, said the wind, / “I have found on this ground a lovely patch / that I think will match.” (Nepa 2008)

A similarly ambiguous metaphor for destiny is the red thread of the homonymous book; the notion of destiny is linked with that of family bonds, which are depicted as both “unbreakable” (“no scissors, knife, or blade could cut the thread, any more than they could cut a beam from the moon”; Lin 2007) and “red”. This color is traditionally associated with blood, an interesting choice which may suggest the strength and naturalness of the new family ties in spite of the fact that adoptive families are *not* linked by blood.

Both the King and the Queen's as well as the seed's journeys come to an end when the protagonists have realized their destiny, that is to say when they have finally met the family (members) they are destined to be with. The King and the Queen discover that the red thread connects them to a baby from a far-off, foreign country. The pictures of the book show a local woman intent at explaining that this is a sign that they belong together:

“Whose baby is this?” the queen asked. “Who does she *belong* to?” [...] The elder's bespectacled eyes followed the short threads connecting the king and the queen to the baby. Her face broke into a broad smile. “This baby,” the old woman said, “*belongs* to you.” (emphasis added; Lin 2007)

The story ends with a sense of completeness as the queen and king's travel has reached its destination: once they find the baby, the pain in their heart (i.e. the initial metaphor related to their decision to leave) subsides.

A similar emphasis on the notion of wholeness appears in the final pages of *Red in the Flower Bed*, where the poppy seed eventually blossoms into a beautiful red flower. Thanks to its color, the poppy complements the flower bed from which it has shot up so that the latter looks like a rainbow:

There is now red in the flower bed. And best of all, look down in the row... we have a *complete rainbow!* (emphasis added; Nepa 2008)

The metaphor A FAMILY IS A RAINBOW is thus used to suggest that, just as a rainbow is not a rainbow unless all colors are there, a family is not complete until all the people who are destined to join it become actual members of it. The presence of this metaphor conveys a sense of belonging and completeness and signals that the poppy seed has finished its journey and reached its designated destination.

Before moving on to the next paragraph, a comment should be made on the picture book *Forever Family*, where not destiny but God's will is depicted as the force that brings families together. In spite of obvious differences, the role played by destiny and by God in these stories is comparable, in that they both create a perfect match between parents and children, which results in a feeling of fulfillment:

God did something only God could do. He brought the perfect child to our family when He gave us you. [...] Then the day finally came when we would officially meet. With tears running down and smiles on our faces, we knew our family was *complete*. (emphasis added; Bullard and Bullard 2017)

The divine plans involving the baby's adoption are described by means of a metaphor: “God placed you in our hearts before we knew you long ago” (*ibid.*; emphasis added). The idea of God placing a baby in his future parents' heart is analogous to that expressed by the image of the heart pain introduced at the beginning of *The Red Thread*: as a matter of fact, they both rely on the conventional metaphor HEART IS (THE PLACE OF) LOVING FEELINGS. In these books, just like in adoption narratives in general, reference to mothers and fathers' hearts is often employed to metonymically indicate their love for their children. In both *Forever Family* and *The Red Thread*, prospective parents unconsciously sense that there are babies waiting to join their family, and hold loving feelings in their hearts even before meeting them. This arguably suggests that children's books attach much prominence to the notion that adoptive families are the result of an ideal match desired by the superior forces of either destiny or God. Such a framing of the adoption process is all the more poignant since both stories are told from the viewpoint of mothers and fathers. *Forever Family* features a first-person plural narrator which coincides with the collective voice of parents, who are thus given the opportunity to provide their religious perspective on the unfolding events. *The Red Thread* contains a frame and a secondary narrative; although very short and consisting of a dialogue between mother, father, and child, the former tells the story of adoptive parents who usually read the book of *The Red Thread* to their adopted little girl. In this case, too, the dominating stance is that of the adults, who can impose their interpretation and reading of the story of adoption.

[6] A Journey through Space and Time

In the journey metaphors that appear in the book sample, particular prominence is sometimes given to the spatial-temporal dimension. As previously noted, *The Red Thread* and *Red in the Flower Bed* are indebted to a Chinese legend and more or less implicitly chronicle interracial adoption stories from China. Both narratives emphasize that the conceptual metaphor PURPOSEFUL ACTIVITY IS MOVEMENT is connected with the passing of time and the crossing of space. In particular, what emerges from both adoption journeys is that it takes time and space for the protagonists to metaphorically reach their target and realize their goals (cf. Forceville 2013). In *Red in the Flower Bed*, the poppy seed is visually and verbally depicted as moving through changing seasons. The textual representation of the changing of seasons rests upon a series of synecdoches involving natural elements.

Slowly *leaves* turned orange, red and yellow. / The *air* began to mellow; Then *snow* started to fall. One day *birds* began to call. Green was starting to show / As *grass* began to grow. (emphasis added; Nepa 2008)

The corresponding pictorial rendering also entails the use of synecdoches, as shown by Figure 4. The notion that motion is slowing down in the winter is metaphorically construed by the presence of more space between the positions of the dot representing the poppy seed (cf. Fig. 3 for comparison).

In *The Red Thread* the spatial-temporal element of the journey is highlighted through the use of images portraying its different stages, e.g. when the King and Queen cross the vast sea or when they walk through a snowy field. Their travel is so long and full of hardship that they end up with ripped clothes and holes in their shoes. The stress on the duration of the journey and the distance covered to reach the final destination suggest that adoption is a long and challenging process and that, in spite of all possible difficulties, people from very far-off countries and belonging to different ethnicities can nonetheless form something as intimate as a family.

Whereas most of the books selected for the research underscore how arduous the pre-adoption stage can be, *Horace* represents an exception in that it focuses on the protagonist's struggles both before and after he has joined his adoptive family. As a matter of fact, at the beginning of the story the little leopard is portrayed as symbolically rejecting his pre-adoptive past; when his tiger mother tells him how he was adopted at bedtime he always falls asleep and never listens to the story. Horace's problematic relationship with his visibly different physical aspect is visually represented through the use of simile-type pictorial associations which highlight that he does not belong to the same species as his parents and relatives. Unlike Choco, whose failed encounters with prospective parents precede his meeting with his adoptive mother Mrs. Bear, Horace feels that he does not match with his new parents, and this prompts him to leave his home after he has been adopted. His escape thus represents a metaphorical movement from his present to his past, from his destination (i.e. his adoptive family) to his origins. Viewed from this per-



Fig. 4 The poppy seed's journey in the summertime

spective, Horace's journey is the opposite of all the other journeys narrated in the sample texts, and unlike them, it problematizes the issue of physical appearances in interracial adoption.

On his day away from home, Horace experiences what it is like to be surrounded by animals that look exactly like him. In the book pictures that represent this part of the story, his outer resemblance with the little leopards is so striking that it is impossible to distinguish him from the others.

In spite of having reached his goal (i.e. finding a family of his own species), Horace eventually refuses to go with the leopards and decides instead to return home to his tiger parents. His metaphorical journey therefore describes his movement towards his destination (his origins) and back (his adoptive family). At bedtime, when his mother once again tells him his adoption story and declares that she and her husband chose him as their child, Horace is finally ready to give his own contribution to the end of the story by affirming that he, too, chooses his adoptive parents as his family.

Although all interracial adoption narratives explored in this study convey the message that physical similarity does not equal parenthood, *Horace* presents this issue as rather problematic. Moreover, the journey metaphor is here utilized to frame adoption as something requiring agency on part of those concerned. Whereas the other stories draw attention to the role played by other agents (namely destiny or God's will) in the forming of an adoptive family, this book rests upon the metaphor ADOPTION IS CHOICE and stresses the importance of adoptees' involvement in the process. As a matter of fact, it is only when Horace explicitly agrees to having tiger parents that his pre-adoption narrative is finally complete.

[7] Concluding Remarks

This paper has shed light onto the presence of patterns in metaphor use across five different pre-adoption picture books about multiethnic families. This indicates that a discourse on interracial adoption runs across these publications and, possibly, even across similar ones (cf. also Calvo-Maturana 2020). Certain source domains appear more frequently than others, and they are reproduced both in the textual element of the books as well as in their illustrations, thus reinforcing their presence. As a consequence, young readers who constitute the target audience of these narratives may be repeatedly exposed to the same recurring metaphors, with the effect that both their understanding and their framing of the (pre-)adoption process are shaped and heavily affected by them.

In particular, the ADOPTION IS A JOURNEY metaphor occupies a paramount position in the sample of books. In cognitive terms, this trope describes a movement from an initial situation to a desirable destination or goal. The storylines investigated in the research provide a number of different frames for the experience of the journey (i.e. of adoption); the quest and the journey towards destiny are comparable because they present similar characteristics. Primarily, these narratives tend to emphasize the initial hardships experienced by the protagonists as well as the long duration of their travel and the difficulties they meet.

This kind of representation of the adoption process may be viewed as problematic, as it is simplistic. In all the stories except *Red in the Flower Bed*, no mention is ever made of birth families, a choice which downplays the importance of adoptees' origins and biological parents. The lack of representation deprives this category of its voice and of the possibility of explaining the reasons at the basis of the choice to give up children for adoption. Although adoptees may come from arduous circumstances, framing adoption as a quest or as a journey towards destiny that starts from total isolation or alienation from the birth family provides an image that may not necessarily correspond to reality.

Some biological parents do love their children but decide not to keep them because their circumstances do not allow them to do so. *Red in the Flower Bed*, for example, features a metaphorical representation of a birth mother who encourages her child to leave in order to grow up in a better place. However, the mother is also depicted as crying when the little one starts her journey (cf. Section 5). The travel of the poppy seed is therefore not solely framed as a movement away from problems and towards their solution, but also as a story beginning with a difficult detachment.

As mentioned above, another common pattern characterizing pre-adoption narratives is the insistence on the journey's length and complications. These elements seem strategic in order to give even more prominence to the happy ending of the books and to convey the message that the adoption process can be challenging for both parents and children, but when it is over everybody feels complete and joyful. Whereas a happy ending is to be expected in stories that illustrate and promote interracial adoption,⁵ a somewhat debatable portrayal of adoption as the “triumph of colorblind love” (Sun 2021, p. 244) appears at the conclusions of some of the stories. The sense of happiness

and completeness construed by the metaphors in the final pages of *The Red Thread*, *Red in the Flower Bed*, and *A Mother of Choco* does not allow room for considerations about the difficulties and possible discrimination often faced by multiracial households. Differently, *Horace* foregrounds the struggles experienced by children belonging to visibly adoptive families; it still includes a happy ending where the protagonist finally integrates with the rest of the family, but it does not neglect to mention the possible challenges and conflicts felt by children while adjusting to their new reality (*ibid.*).

Finally, the study has identified recurring metaphors associated with the idea of fate or God's will. These metaphors suggest that the protagonists do not have many real opportunities to avoid embarking on their journeys because they are destined to do so. Agency for the adoption process is therefore attached to either God or destiny, and not to the parties directly involved. Whereas matches between prospective parents and youngsters are decided by adoption agencies and professionals and not by fathers, mothers and children, it may be argued that forming a family requires more than simple bureaucracy. Young adoptees and their parents also have to actively play their part and “choose each other” in order to create family connections and bonds: this is the main message of the story *Horace*, which ends with the little leopard eventually accepting to live with parents who do not look like him. This kind of framing also stresses the equality of parents and adopted children.

In conclusion, the systematic use of textual and visual metaphors in picture books about interracial adoption may represent a valuable tool to help readers who have been adopted to comprehend their past and the process that brought them into their new families. However, some adoption framings have proven only partially empowering for a readership of small children. Such framings seem to dramatically foreground the positive aspects of interracial adoption while backgrounding some problematic aspects connected to it. Yet, some metaphors, such as the journey metaphor, are so ubiquitous because they are so cognitively familiar and seemingly so appropriate that they can impose a certain reading of reality. As a consequence, challenging their use or coming up with alternative ones is rather difficult, as suggested by the results of this study. While simplified, reassuring narratives are needed when addressing young readers, some authors are more successful than others in selecting metaphors that can favor an easy but still nuanced understanding of interracial adoption reality.

[Notes]

- 1 The *Interethnic Placement Act* (1996) aims at eliminating racial discrimination in foster care or adoption placement as it forbids agencies to delay or deny placement based on the race, color, or national origin of children or parents.
- 2 The only book from which the journey metaphor is completely absent is *Forever Family*. As highlighted in Section 6, *Horace* features the journey metaphor but, instead of relying on it as a frame for the pre-adoption stage of the protagonist (like the other three books), it presents his escape from home as a travel of self-discovery.

- 3 The paper relies on the use of block capitals as the conventional notation for indicating source domains in metaphor theory.
- 4 In the study, similes were included as “metaphor-related words” (Steen *et al.*’s 2010, p. 58) since they can be considered as forms in which “indirectness in conceptualization through a cross-domain mapping is expressed by direct language”.
- 5 As already noted, a good proportion of publications on this topic are produced by adoptive parents.

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