BELONGING AND BELONGINGS:

KINSHIP NARRATIVES AND MATERIAL ANCHORS
AT A SECOND HOME IN KAZAKHSTAN

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Abstract

This article examines the way narratives of kinship come to constitute and sustain kin ties for children growing up apart from their families. At a temporary, state-run group home for children under seven years old in Kazakhstan, teachers and children construct narratives that include parents whom the children may not have seen for months, but who have promised to resume care of them by school age. In contrast to dominant characterizations of orphanages as sites of material and social poverty, I show how materials – from playground equipment to gifts, real and imagined – play an important role in narratives of belonging. Through their own narratives of giving, receiving and losing, moreover, children creatively incorporate into their stories other relationships of belonging between individuals that are never explicitly identified as kin.

I.   Introduction: presupposing the first home

Out in the playground, Aigul Apai, a teacher and carer, is giving an impromptu maths lesson: 'Altogether on the tree, how many apples are growing?' One boy sits beside Aigul on the bench, another stands next to her, and a girl hangs on the bars of the playground equipment, their attention fixed not on a tree, but on two metal bars, horizontal and parallel, each with ten colourful plastic rings. Askhat stands before this playground abacus, using the top bar and sliding the rings back and forth, according to the story his teacher is telling. Askhat counts: there are seven rings altogether, and thus seven apples on the tree his teacher has described.

Aigul Apai tells Askhat to clear the rings by pushing them back to his right. She launches into another problem, this time about the leaves on a tree — five of them. Askhat moves five rings over to the left. Three leaves get blown away, and Askhat moves three of the five rings back to the right. This leaves two rings and thus two leaves on the imaginary tree.

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Aigul begins another '*Aghashta*'[2] – 'on a tree' – but then adds '*oy*,' a hesitation before presenting another tree-based word problem. She changes course: 'My mama gave me four balloons,' she begins instead. 'Two of the balloons got popped. How many balloons did I have left?' Thereafter, Aigul Apai's word problems vary: foxes in the forest run away, flowers in a vase wither and die, a grandmother brings Aigul Apai balloons for her birthday.

This day in the playground and the video footage I captured that day, which I analyse in this article, stood out because a number of issues surrounding the social and material relations of my research site, Hope House, seemed to crystallize around this playground object. It was a day that stood out for Aigul Apai as well: a year later, she asked me to make a DVD copy of the footage for her to keep, as she saw it as exemplary of her creativity as a teacher.

Aigul was one of the two main teachers and carers responsible for the care, upbringing and education of a group of eight children I followed at Hope House, a state-run, temporary home for children from six months to seven years old. The children's parents had placed them there voluntarily, for a minimum of one year. Children could stay until they were old enough to start school, at which time they were expected to go home to their parents. .

Apai could be glossed as 'aunt,' but it is also a more general Kazakh term used by children and adults for respected or older women, including teachers and senior workplace colleagues. Aigul's formal job title is *vospitatel'* in Russian, *tarbieshi* in Kazakh, both of which come from verbs that mean 'to care for' or 'to rear'. Both words are used for teachers and carers at orphanages and other types of group homes for children, and more broadly for most preschool or kindergarten teachers. Their aides, whom the children also called 'Apai,' rotated 24-hour shifts, every three days, arriving in the morning and sleeping overnight with them. Aigul Apai spent twelve hours every other day with them.

Usually, Aigul and her assistant were busy taking care of the play area assigned to their group — sweeping dead leaves, clearing snow from the paths, or pulling weeds from the flower beds, depending on the weather. The children in her charge, between five and six years old, were left to play by themselves or allowed to help out with the work in the yard. On this day in early

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[2] The majority of the children at my field site spoke Kazakh, despite the fact that Russian was the more dominant language in the city of Almaty, where Hope House was located. The directors explained to me that Kazakh was prioritized here over Russian because Kazakh was the state language, and this was a state-sponsored home, whereas Russian was only an official language.

spring, Aigul Apai had time, for a change, to sit with some of the children from her group of eight and lead them in word problems.

Aigul Apai used the equipment to index relationships of quantity and changes in number through addition or subtraction, the rings on the bar moving in diagrammatic relationship to the objects they represent, the rings sliding across the bar to show gains and losses (Peirce 2011). The relationship between the playground's colourful rings and the objects they represent during this activity helped the children to imagine the coming and going of corresponding numbers of objects. At the same time, Aigul Apai and other teachers and carers at Hope House guided the children in imagining interactions with mothers and other family members. When Aigul Apai shifted the topic from leaves on a tree to gifts from her mother, she invoked a social framework that drew the children's attention to familial interactions and gift exchanges. Her narrative treated the playground abacus as a node bringing together a complex set of social and material relations. By describing material transactions between mothers and children, Aigul Apai's seemingly simple story presupposed and entailed certain ties between parent and child (Silverstein 2003).

In this article, I argue that the dual directionality of indexicality — presupposing and entailing — enables talk and other semiotic interactions, including moving rings across a bar on the playground, to create and maintain kin ties (Parmentier 1997, Silverstein 1993). Though the narratives are set in the past and thus referentially index a past event, Aigul Apai and the students in her charge are mostly imagining these past events, and as such, they imagine relationships with their parents, to whom they anticipate returning in the future. As children are socialized through such lessons to talk about particular relationships between people and things in a way that presupposes their importance, they not only replicate the forms their teachers model for them, but also creatively imagine interactions with mothers, along with other children and adults.

I begin by contextualizing Hope House as a particular kind of home for children that serves as a temporary placeholder for them in contemporary Kazakhstan. Drawing on the anthropological literature on kinship and language, I highlight the importance of co-constructed fantasy in creating and preserving kin ties. Hope House takes charge of the children's total care while maintaining the position that their rightful place is back in their first home, the family home. Thus, Hope House socializes children by cultivating their imagining of this first home. This analysis of the complex relationships between narratives, objects and people offers an

overdue counter-narrative on orphanages and similar institutions for children by moving away from narratives of lack. I argue, rather, that as scholars we should attend to the unique social and material relationships that emerge in such exceptional sites. Finally, the material examined in this article illustrates the ways in which children creatively index relationships with other children and the adults around them during these lessons, both in their incorporation of these individuals into their narratives and through the interactional dynamics that unfold during the telling. These acts of telling move children's socialization of kinship beyond defining relationships as kin or not-kin or as temporary or permanent, instead emphasizing the centrality of exchange and movement, and of giving and loss, in their lives.

II. Fieldwork and methods

I conducted 24 months of fieldwork in Kazakhstan, most extensively between fall 2012 and spring 2014, when I visited Hope House several times per week. In addition, I conducted shorter visits to more traditional orphanages and to government and private preschools in order to gain a comparative perspective. My second main site for long-term fieldwork in Almaty was a state puppet theatre, which offered insights into the ideologies surrounding childhood, materiality and fantasy in contemporary Kazakhstan.

At Hope House, after observing the children's daily play activities for the first three months, I began to videotape their daily activities – their play, lessons, rehearsals for performances, and their performances for the frequent visitors they received. Indoors, I often set up the camera in a stationary location beside the children and adults so that it would interfere less with everyday activities. Outside, because the children moved around more, I held the camera and followed particular children (which inevitably meant leaving out other interactions). This video was recorded in March 2013. The children lived in same-age cohorts; my group was the second oldest when I arrived (the children were all between four and five years old). During my second year of fieldwork, some were beginning to 'age out' and go home to live with their families and begin school. Throughout this article, I use the present tense when examining specific scenes from my video footage, but otherwise use the past tense to refer to Hope House's activities and mission more generally.

III. **Narrating the First Home from within the Second: learning to take family for granted**

Hope House offers a unique site for studying the role of talk and other semiotic processes in the creation and maintenance of kin ties with absent others because the institution is charged with teaching children about families and family life when the children have little direct knowledge about such concepts. When sociologist Erving Goffman wrote about 'total institutions', from prisons to mental institutions, in which an enclosed space encompassed the entirety of inmates' lives, he questioned the appropriateness of including orphanages because he held that a key characteristic of total institutions was that their activities stand in tension with the outside world (Goffman 1961: 13). This was not a tension that children could be expected to understand if they had no outside experience from which to draw (ibid.: 12). At Hope House, however, an important part of the children's education was creating this tension – or contrast – between the inside of the institution and the outside world of the family through talk and fantastic play that invoked relationships with mothers, grandparents and others, as this episode demonstrates. Carers worked to maintain relationships between parents and children while offering temporary care to the latter. Because Hope House's mission was to offer a temporary home for children so that they would eventually return to their parents, this institution was charged with socializing children to understand their first and primary home as that of their parent(s).

Aigul Apai uses discussions of mothers to presuppose their existence and their affective relationships with their children as evidenced in material gifts. This gives rise to children's own creative imaginings of stories about their mothers and the gifts they give. Most of the children I observed in the group had been placed in the home when they were one or two years old. By the time I was observing them, three or four years later, their autobiographical memories of home would have faded considerably, based on psychologists' understandings of 'infantile amnesia' (Howe 2008). Parents were allowed to visit during select hours of the day and for special events, but children were not allowed to make short visits to their families' homes while living at Hope House.

While adults at Hope House sometimes spoke explicitly to the children about the temporary nature of their situation at Hope House, teachers also frequently incorporated talk about parents into their daily lessons. When discussing professions, for example, they asked the children what their parents did for work. When teaching a new vocabulary word, teachers invited the children

to repeat example sentences that described mothers or other family members. For holidays and other special events, the children prepared special performances. Hope House often invited the children's families to attend these, along with representatives from overseeing governmental bodies and from local business organizations or other groups that regularly donated clothes or toys to Hope House. At these performances, the children often sang songs about mothers or recited poems about grandmothers. Mothers and children also abounded in games initiated by both teachers and children.

IIIa. Tales of kinship: how narratives make relationships

The kinship terminology used at Hope House is not as interesting as what it does and the ways that relationships of family belonging are created through these linguistic performances. Language plays an important role in how people come to understand their relationships with one another, though the role of language in kinship studies has often been focused on the specific terms that are considered to constitute a 'kinship terminology' and to whom they should be applied. David Zeitlyn has argued that anthropologists need to shift from an approach to kinship terminology that begins with *langue* to one that begins with *parole*; that is, he advocates looking at the pragmatics of kinship terminology by examining how people talk about their relationships with one another (1993: 199; also 2005). Doing this, he argues, compels an examination of non-kin terms and of the social conditions in which social relations and their categorizations unfold.

Robert McKinley has argued for considering kinship as a philosophy of 'what completes a person socially, psychologically, and how that completeness comes about through a responsible sense of attachment and obligation to others' (2001: 143). Such an approach attempts to move away from debates about the biological versus cultural aspects of kinship in order to investigate how this philosophy organizes social relationships and how 'persons of different generations feel mutually implicated in each other's lives' as one another's predecessors and successors (ibid.). Thus, self is deeply shaped by the set of social relations held and actively cultivated. Kinship is not a set of terminologies but a way of moving through the world.

As the children take turns on the abacus, they move around on the bench and on the equipment. They are quick to correct one another while awaiting their turn, and will push others away when it is. When Askhat sits next to his teacher, he leans his head on her arm. A woman

visiting the home interrupts them to ask if they are the group known as the 'Starlings.' 'We are the Chicks,' one of the children informs her.

Children were grouped with other children of their age group, all speaking Kazakh except for a mixed-age group of Russian-speakers. Each group had its own set of rooms — a classroom/playroom, a bathroom, a cubby room, a room where their bunk beds lined the walls and a room with little tables and chairs where they ate. Each section also had its own outdoor play area, with its own little playhouse where the children kept their outdoor toys, and their own designated Apais, though these sometimes substituted for one another.

No one ever elaborated on the pedagogical philosophy that motivated the division of the children into age-segregated groups in this way, and it might seem to differ little from the structuring principles behind preschools in Kazakhstan and other parts of the world. Nonetheless, the intimacy and consistency with which this structure provided the children at Hope House was one of many ways the home fostered a sense of belonging to the group and the home – a sense of 'mutual implication', as McKinley describes it – but without seeking to replace the family home. Hope House was a new and rather experimental kind of state home for children, but it was also part of a wider network of relations between states and families that was in the process of being reworked during the time of my fieldwork. Looking at family situations that are in some ways exceptional can offer insights into ideologies of family that are otherwise taken for granted (Frekko et al. 2015: 712). At Hope House, where children were socialized outside the families the institution was working to protect, children and adults cultivated discursive strategies for talking about the children's families and their future place in them.

IIIb. Ambivalent orphanage: institutions to end institutionalization

Hope House was the first institution of its kind in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. It serves as a unique lens on to shifting relations between the state and families in the decades following the end of the Soviet Union. Scholars have rightly objected to discourses of 'transition' that oversimplify social, political and economic changes in the region as occurring along a straightforward and uniform trajectory from socialism to capitalism (Abramson 2001, Berdahl et al. 2000, Verdery 1996). Kazakhstan, the last to break off from the USSR in 1991, has been described by regional scholars as an 'accidental' state (Dave 2007, Olcott 2010). An American who had been doing development work there for years described it to me as 'the most Soviet' of post-Soviet states.

Representatives of international organizations I met in Kazakhstan beginning in 2010 expressed a commitment to moving Kazakhstan away from reliance on the permanent institutionalization of children who lacked parental care, whether their carers had voluntarily relinquished custody or had had their rights taken away due to neglect or abuse. They also complained that both the government and citizens were reluctant to embrace systems of foster care and adoption that these organizations saw as clearly preferable to state orphanages.

Despite this seeming reluctance to transform institutional systems for providing care to children, the decades following the Soviet Union's collapse did bring about profound changes to the country's social welfare, childcare and educational systems, including the closing of many state-funded preschools and work-site day-care programs. The loss of such support for struggling parents made it increasingly difficult to care for a child (Heyneman and DeYoung 2004). During my fieldwork, the state was also working to develop foster care, both within extended kin networks and outside them, as well as domestic adoption.[3] International adoption to countries such as the US peaked in the early 2000s but has since dropped, with a ban on adoption specifically to the US beginning in 2012 (Lillis 2013).

Hope House was founded in the late 1990s in Almaty, at the same time as the city was losing its status as the nation's capital, although it remains Kazakhstan's largest city and a major centre for business in Central Asia. As the city underwent significant transitions, Hope House introduced a type of care that was innovative in Kazakhstan at that time. It was structured in many ways like more traditional orphanages for children, with the children grouped according to age cohorts, and rarely leaving the grounds of the home, surrounded by fences and a guarded gate at the front. Its goal, however, was to prevent children's long-term institutionalization by giving parents time to find better working or living conditions for a promise to resume the care of their children later. It existed alongside other alternative forms of care for children, including permanent institutionalization in 'baby houses' (*dom rebenok*) for infants and preschool-age children, followed by children's homes (*detskii dom*) for children approximately four to eighteen years old.

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[3] For official numbers of types of institutions and children being served by them, see the Official Site of the Committee for the Protection of Children's Rights (2015), part of the Republic of Kazakhstan's Ministry of Education and Science (in Russian).

IV. The materiality of orphanages: from narratives of lack to objects indexing relationships

McKinley cites Kluckhohn and Leighton's description of Navajo kinship in which the most damning aspersion one could cast would be to describe a person's behaviour as acting *as if* they had no relatives (1946: 100, cited in McKinley 2001: 143). The term 'orphan' often indexes a breakdown or loss of kin ties. However, anthropologists have noted that children thus designated often find themselves not devoid of ties, but rather in complicated relationships with family members, the state and non-governmental organizations (Dahl 2014, Freidus 2010). Scholars of child development and paediatrics have long framed pleas to end the institutionalization of children in a language of lack, deprivation, or poverty of all sorts. In the 1990s, psychologists and paediatricians from the West responded to reports of atrocious conditions in post-socialist east European orphanages with large-scale, long-term studies of the effects of institutionalization. As they catalogued the symptoms and quantified the damage in comparison to never-institutionalized peers, doctors reported their findings, again, as resulting from deprivation — social, emotional, sensory, nutritional deprivation that led to developmental delays or impairment. There is a widespread discourse on orphans and orphanages that frames these children and places in terms of deprivation and loss, of social and material poverty (Bakwin 1949, Goldfarb 1955, Nelson et al. 2014, Rutter et al. 2007).

In contrast, children at Hope House lived in a rich social, material and sensory world: indeed, the traditional orphanages I visited in Kazakhstan, though varying in their access to material and human resources, were nonetheless all better than the appalling conditions described by so many Western journalists visiting east European orphanages in the 1990s. Part of the work of the teachers at Hope House was to cultivate children's anticipations of life outside Hope House; just as crucially, they had to come to understand the differences between the different categories of objects and of people they encountered in their everyday lives inside the institution.

Whenever I would visit Hope House and find a child had a new toy, they would immediately tell me if they had received it from a family member. At Hope House, most toys belonged to a particular group, and children needed to obtain adult permission before playing with them. Receiving a toy from a family meant that the child possessing it could play with it during times when other toys were supposed to be put away. It also meant that these toys were the children's

responsibility and that teachers would not be upset if they got broken. Such toys thus served to index relationships between parents and children at Hope House under the circumstances of the former's absence, but they tended to get broken more quickly than the other toys and often disappeared after only a few weeks, both because they got played with more frequently and because sometimes other children got jealous and played roughly with them.[4]

While Aigul Apai uses the abacus to make numeric abstraction more concrete for her young learners, what emerges from this interaction is a complex semiotic lamination of fantasy and materiality. She invites the children to imagine similar interactions (and transactions) with their own family members, their stories not necessarily referring back to an actual incident in which these interactions took place, but encouraging the children to imagine them.

In addition to gifts from parents, there were gifts from private donors – from volunteer organizations, local business groups and multinational corporate sponsors. While the state covered basic expenses, such as the grounds and building, food and staff salaries, the home received a large number of donations from various private sponsors, including not only clothes and toys but also larger items, such as flat-screen televisions provided by a multinational corporation. Around the home, Kazakhstani flags, seals and photographs of President Nazarbayev could be found alongside these private donations. In addition to photographs of the children with their mothers or other family members, which could be found in the children's classrooms or in the cubby rooms where they kept their outdoor gear, the hallways of the home were lined with photographs of the directors and children greeting prestigious political or business representatives.

A complex field of actors – state and private, families and sponsors – thus provided objects that comprised the semiotic landscape of Hope House. These were often handed out to individual children by visitors representing these groups, but were later collected by the teachers, who would sometimes put certain gifts away, placing them on a shelf for display rather than play if they were large presents such as stuffed animals. For smaller items, such as candies, teachers would redistribute them later as rewards for the children's good behaviour. Thus, the semiotic landscape of the home included not only indices pointing back to absent parents who had given gifts to their individual children, but also offered visible traces of these past visitors. The

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[4] Evans (2006) highlights the ways in which researchers can engage in the exchange of meaningful objects (such as Pokémon cards) with children in order to learn about what matters to them.

televisions bore the logo of the corporation that had donated them. On the other hand, teachers and children usually referred to such visitors simply as 'sponsors' (*sponzory*), without trying to find out which organizations they represented. The objects donated to the home by sponsors lasted longer than those that came from the parents, but the identities of the sponsors went unremarked. There were no stories or games about sponsors' visits or gifts. Nonetheless, the rich material landscape – and directors' and teachers' discourses about the home – positioned Hope House as a counterpoint to narratives of institutional lack and orphans' deprivation.

IVa. Story problems: accounting for presents, mothers, and others

Out in the playground, Aigul Apai has offered the children several problems that all follow a basic formula:

 1. There were X things.

 2. Y things were added to or subtracted from this.

 3. How many things are there altogether, or how many are left?

Without offering such a description of the formula he is to follow, Aigul Apai invites Omar to try telling one such story problem. Askhat, standing again in front of the bars and rings, is to listen and follow along, to move the rings according to the story and to give the final answer at the end.

Omar can do the maths, and he eagerly incorporates his mother into the story, but he has trouble recreating the formula correctly. His first try is, 'My mom gave me three balloons. One of my balloons popped.' Aigul Apai tells Omar to ask Askhat how many balloons were left. Instead of posing the question to Askhat, however, Omar answers the question himself. 'I had two balloons left.' His teacher tells him he needs to give the question. Instead, he starts over. 'My mom brought me five balloons. My mom gave me six balloons.'

There are only ten rings per bar, so the teacher instructs Askhat to ignore Omar's first comment about having five balloons and to keep the part about the six balloons. Then she instructs Omar to tell Askhat that two balloons popped. Again, he skips the part where he poses the question to Askhat and solves the problem, 'I have four balloons left.'

Aigul Apai lets Nurlan try next, but she coaches him to make sure he follows the formula. After he offers a couple of problems, he sits down, and Askhat gets a turn. He presents a problem about bicycles and a popped tyre, following the formula without a problem. When he hesitates

regarding what kind of story to tell next, Omar offers a prompt, '*Mening mamam…*' 'My mother.' Askhat takes the suggestion and tells another one about his mother. The children seem uninterested in the problems about trees.

Askhat tells a story in which he gets ten cakes for his birthday. 'Then,' he continues, smiling, 'Then Aigul Apai and Dina Apai ate two of them. How many cakes were left?' When he tries to tell a third story, Nurlan protests: 'Apai, isn't he saying a lot?' Apai, perhaps not thrilled at Askhat's (imagined) accusation of eating a child's cakes, agrees. Askhat's turn is over.

Though Aigul Apai has offered them a range of different topics they could employ in telling their stories about objects, they almost exclusively imagine stories of gifts given to them by their mothers. By focusing on such problems, the children engage in constructing imagined narratives about their mothers without breaking that frame to engage in discussions about the frequency with which each of their mothers actually visited, or whose mothers had actually brought them such toys or cakes in the past. While the abacus acts as a visual anchor for the abstraction of numeracy brought together with imagined stories of objects coming and going, the objects featured in the stories — gifts brought to the children by their mothers — acted as indices of the children's relationships to their absent parents.

As the children engage with the abacus, moving the rings or recounting story problems, they follow the semiotic logic that the rings stand for objects without much problem. However, the interactional formulas of telling a story and posing a question to which they already know the answer trip them up. They also have trouble at times remembering that only one addition or subtraction should be made. Instead, they sometimes try to add, and then add more, which then requires arithmetic beyond their level. Or the children describe a mother who brings two different kinds of objects, which don't easily translate into the rings on the abacus. Aigul Apai continues to work with them to simplify their stories to fit the model she provided. The narratives are designed to make the abstraction of numbers more concrete by offering 'real world' examples, but both the abacus and their own maths skills limit the possibilities that can be imagined and translated into a maths problem. Their 'real life' experiences with objects and people, of course, are more complex. Objects, real and imagined, from playground equipment to birthday cakes, work in different ways to make and maintain ties between children, teachers and absent family members.

IVb. Kinship and other ways of belonging

At Hope House, teachers spoke frequently with children about their mothers, and these were the family members who most frequently visited the children.[5] This is not to suggest that ideal families were 'nuclear' families: mothers were important in Kazakhstan, ideologically and in actual family life, but so too were extended kin and non-kin networks (Werner 1997, 1998). During my fieldwork, Kazakh families stressed traditional Kazakh reliance on extended kin networks for support during a child's first years. It was quite common for grandchildren to go to live with their grandparents for the first few years of their life, even when their mother and father were married and had work. The new grandparents sometimes requested this arrangement, as they felt they could enjoy taking care of a grandchild in a way that had been unavailable to them when they had been young parents, and it provided the young couple time to experience their first years of marriage without children. This was part of a longer tradition of adoption from within kin networks that signalled the strengthening of kin ties, as when brothers would sometimes adopt one another's children, a tradition reported to me by Kazakhs who also asserted this was declining.

In contrast to this, Kazakhs often lamented that children's residence in state-run orphanages indexed the breakdown of such networks. Some stigma surrounded unmarried women becoming mothers, and they would sometimes move back in with their parents for some time. While some government and NGO workers believed that the key to ending Kazakhstan's reliance on children's homes lay in creating more positive attitudes toward domestic adoption, others held that they should work to offer state assistance to extended family members who were willing to foster their relatives' children. Thus, even projected 'transitions' away from state institutions such as traditional orphanages did not move in a straightforward fashion toward 'the kinning of foreigners,' as adoption has been described by scholars (Howell 2006).

While McKinley's emphasis on these intergenerational relationships as ones of predecessors and successors thus prioritizes systems of lineage, in thinking about how philosophies of kinship unfold at Hope House, we might note the special position of teachers and carers such as Aigul Apai. They are intimately implicated in the children's lives, but without any sense that the

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[5] One boy in my group was regularly visited by a single father. Lacking permission from the home's overseeing government bodies to extend my study to the children's families, and not wishing to impinge on their time with their children when they were visiting, I met the children's mothers or fathers briefly during their visits but didn't ask for interviews.

children will succeed them. Rather, an important aspect of their responsibility to the children in their care is to socialize them to talk about their families in ways that may not reference the real memories the children have of them, but which rather work to naturalize and treat as self-evident relationships that children do not experience on a daily basis. While teachers stressed the importance of families and family homes, other relationships received less attention, including the teachers' own ties to the children. Less than a month before this episode with the abacus, the children's other teacher had gone on maternity leave, with plans to return after two years, by which time these children would all have gone home. No announcements were made beforehand, and I never heard anyone discuss the teacher to the children afterwards.

Children were charged with keeping track of a complicated, always unfolding equation of people and objects coming and going. As they constructed their own word problems in the playground, their mothers were not the only actors included in these equations. Nurlan described his mother giving him three motorcycles, but then Omar drove one away. Tamilya had two dolls but gave one to her twin sister. Hope House differentiated itself from the 'first home' of the family in the name of preserving this first home, but the teachers brought themselves into equations through their work with the children, even if they spent less time constructing narratives about their relationships with the children.

Askhat gets his turn back eventually. Marlin, who joined the lesson late, is moving the rings. Askhat tells one in which his mother brings two different categories of objects — hats and balls — which confuses Marlin and unnerves Aigul Apai. She takes over telling the story. Askhat, his narrative authority usurped, steps in to direct Marlin in how to move the rings. When the turn ends, Askhat tries again, despite Nurlan's repeated protest that Askhat is saying a lot. 'I'm doing the telling,' Askhat asserts. 'My mother gave Aigul Apai three clothes, mmm, four clothes then, and then Aigul Apai ripped one dress'. Nurlan's high-pitched laugh can be heard off-screen, followed by '*Zhaghyn kharyssyn,*' which could be translated as, 'May your jowls fall off.' Aigul Apai looks at me and into the camera, giving a half smile, and then, in her soft voice, asks the question to Marlin directly, rather than prompting Askhat: 'How many dresses were left for Aigul Apai?' Marlin answers Aigul Apai directly, while Askhat balances his torso on the soccer ball, on the bench beside Aigul Apai. He lets Aigul Apai take over.

Throughout this exercise, Aigul Apai is seated on the bench behind the equipment, while the other children are moving around. When Askhat tells his first cheeky story problem about Aigul

Apai and Dina Apai eating two of his cakes, he is seated down on the bench away from her, with Omar between them. He looks over to her and smiles, a look she doesn't seem to return. After this turn finishes and Omar gets up, Askhat slides down to sit closer to his teacher.

V.   Conclusion: anchoring the absent, the imagined and the unspoken

The abacus not only offers a visual, tactile representation of imagined stories, it also serves as an interactional anchor around which teacher and children focus, despite their constant movement. As Askhat moves around the abacus, the bench and his teacher, he incorporates Aigul Apai into the stories about his mother and the objects. But then he teases her by imagining her doing comical things. This potentially distances him from her if it is taken as an insult. He seeks rapprochement by moving physically closer to her, albeit tentatively.

Askhat and the other children understand the coming and going of objects and people, the delicacy of balloons and cakes, as more complex than three-step word problems or descriptions of lack and deprivation. The children's stories and the interactions surrounding their telling also suggest that the first and second homes, the family and the institution, are not so easily separated. In the last instance Askhat takes himself out of the equation entirely, imagining an exchange between his mother and his teacher. As Marlin clears the rings for the next problem, Askhat hugs his teacher from behind. Patting her on the back, he smiles and says, 'That's how you say it, right?' Aigul Apai doesn't look back at him, but she says to Marlin, 'Now I'll say one.' She doesn't return his hug or praise his ability to follow the formula for the story problems she has been modelling for them, nor does she reprimand him for telling stories that depict her as a person prone to eating other people's cakes and ripping dresses. When she takes over, she resumes talking about trees and the leaves on them.

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