Longing and Belonging at a Second Home in Kazakhstan

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In 2014, a Serbian film began to win awards at European festivals: A feral child is found living with wolves in the Bosnian mountains in the late 1980s. When Yugoslavia falls apart and war breaks out in the 1990s, Haris, the film’s protagonist, is forced to fight, throwing into question the nature of the “humanity” versus “animality.” The film’s title, No One’s Child (Nicije Dete, dir. Vuk Rsumovic), suggests an additional ambiguity, in that his status as orphan renders unknown his origins, his national identity, and, to some extent, his humanity. This rootlessness and anonymity gets highlighted in much scholarly literature on children growing up in orphanages. The lack of “belonging” and “belongings” becomes a defining feature of children’s institutional lives, as they both lack personal possession and fail to be recognized as belonging to any kin network (e.g. Rockhill 2010). Meanwhile, literature from developmental psychology consistently studies the effects of institutionalization on children's development and writes of it in terms of “deprivation” of all sorts – material, nutritional, sensory, and emotional (e.g. Nelson et al 2015). The defining feature of orphans becomes a failure to belong.

In this paper, I focus not on how a particular code – Kazakh, Russian, etc. – indexes belonging to a state, region, or ethnicity. Rather, I examine how the language used within a children’s home constructs relationships of belonging – to the state, to particular institutions, or to families. Based on 24 months of fieldwork in Kazakhstan from 2012 to 2014, I analyse how people discuss belonging within the context of a temporary children’s home for children under seven years old. Their parents had promised to resume care by the time the children were old enough to start school. In the meantime, they were cared for within a facility funded by the state but also supported by corporate sponsors and private donations. This site contrasts with dominant accounts of postsocialist orphanages in two ways: 1) Children were surrounded by rich material, sensory, and intellectual stimuli; and 2) rather than belonging to no one, they seemed to belong simultaneously to the state, to the institution where they lived, and to their birth parents. Run by the state but supported with the help of corporate sponsors, teachers described the institution as the children’s “second home,” frequently reminding the children of the first home to which they would eventually return. I examine how themes of the first home pervade play, curriculum, and performance at the children’s home, maintaining a sense of temporary belonging.

I argue that indexical properties of belonging are not given but emerge through everyday semiotic processes, including language lessons, free play, and performances. I look at how objects, such as gifts from parents and outside sponsors, become semiotic resources for indexing relationships of belonging in specific ways. Linguistic performances – in the classroom and for visiting guests – have both presupposing and entailing properties (Silverstein 2003). They both reproduce and index children’s relationships to absent kin, to institutional staff, and to the state.