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Critical Adoption Studies: Conversation in Progress

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Critical Adoption Studies: Conversation in Progress

EDITED BY MARGARET HOMANS

ABSTRACT: These fifteen short essays define critical adoption studies from multiple disciplinary perspectives and in varying relation to scholarly and activist goals. Taken together, they debate the social and cultural construction and consequences of adoption and survey the new knowledges produced by studying domestic and transnational adoption through various critical lenses.

KEYWORDS: adoption, identity, kinship, social justice

Introduction

MARGARET HOMANS

Adoption arouses controversy across the political spectrum, challenging neat divisions between left and right and demanding new ways of thinking from across the human sciences. Difficult to define, adoption is best seen as a set of loosely related and time-bound practices—social and legal, also political and economic—whose meanings shift as they are contested. What adoption practices have in common is that they move infants and children from one social location to another; this movement may be seen and experienced as within or between kin groups, often between cultures (and classes, races, ethnicities, religions), and sometimes between nations. These practices take widely variable forms and acquire widely variable meanings. Adoption can adhere rigidly to nuclear family norms, regulating sexuality and

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contributing to the realization of racist projects, but it can also enable nonnormative family forms and it can queer the family. Adoption can mean the kidnapping of children from the Global South, even a form of slavery meriting only abolition; but it can also reconceive family as part of larger, sometimes transnational, communities. Adoptees and adoptive families can be the same as everyone else; and they can be cyborgs, hybrids, uncanny assemblages.

Critical adoption studies has come into being as the field of cultural critique and scholarly debate that captures and finds meaning in these controversies, and, in so doing, poses fundamental and constructive challenges to existing modes of thought and of scholarly inquiry. The short essays gathered in this introductory section are by a group of seasoned adoption scholars who were invited to define critical adoption studies and thus to provide a multivoiced introduction to the nine full-length essays that make up the rest of this special issue of *Adoption & Culture*. These short essays constitute a compelling snapshot of the field at present even as they map pathways toward new subjects of inquiry and new ways of thinking not only about adoption but also, more broadly, about the human. No single statement can define the field as a whole, but taken together these short pieces provide both an introduction to current and future work in critical adoption studies and a framing context for the longer essays that follow. Their convergences and disagreements along multiple axes exemplify the ongoing conversation out of which the longer essays emerge and to which they contribute.

The full-length essays in this issue represent exemplary new developments in critical adoption studies, detailed investigations that emphasize adoption's intersections with and challenges to adjacent and overlapping areas of study. Even as critical adoption studies draws on established theoretical frameworks such as feminist, queer, postcolonial, psychoanalytic, ethical, biopolitical, and critical race theory, adoption—as these essays show—also proves to be a source of new perspectives that alter the theoretical frames they enter. In these essays, thinking through adoption also sheds new light on specific sites of controversy such as the contradictions between US federal and tribal law, the promise and perils of artificial intelligence, and subaltern struggles for reproductive justice. And thinking through adoption contributes new knowledge, in these essays, to medical humanities and to cultural studies of photography, film, fiction, and life writing.

To some of the authors of the short essays tasked with defining the field, the term *critical adoption studies* describes what they are already doing; to others, it means a new departure. Some describe the reach of their own research projects toward broader concerns; others outline new directions for the entire field. Like the longer essays in this issue, these short pieces come from places of impassioned personal engagement and from primarily scholarly investments in social and cultural research; they give the reader new to adoption studies a feel for the wide variety of discourses and projects that constitute our shared work. They use and

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synthesize disciplines across the humanities and social sciences, from ethnography and economics to literary criticism and history; they address many regions of the globe, from Ethiopia to Japan as well as Korea and the US, and a range of adoption and adoption-related practices—domestic and transnational, open and closed, fostering and surrogacy.

They also come down on many different sides of such questions as these: is the goal of critical adoption studies to critique (either to analyze for better understanding or to reform or to bring to an end) the practice of adoption and related practices such as fostering and surrogacy? Or is its purpose to use adoption (and related practices) as a critical lens through which to see, in new ways, such central features of human existence as race, identity, kinship, heritage, nationality, sexuality, and gender? Is the focus of adoption studies the rights-bearing individual whose subjection within unequal relations of power calls out for justice; can the critical study of adoption expose the structural inequalities—of race, of gender, of economic access, of geopolitics—that not only render contemporary adoption intrinsically unjust but that also characterize global social relations more generally? Alternatively yet simultaneously, does adoption's exposure of bionormativity in kinship and in subject formation mobilize alternative conceptions of the human and therefore alternative pathways to justice? Modern adoption has been described as an "as if" family formation, in which relations between parents and children mimic biological ties, but the nuclear family that adoption mimics is itself an imaginary ideal, as is the individual whose identity would be wholly accounted for by biogenetic origins. Can the critical study of adoption help to crack open regulatory regimes premised on biogenetic essentialism?

My own engagement with adoption studies, as a feminist scholar and as a newly adoptive parent at the turn of this century, began when I encountered one version of this fault line: on the one hand, adoption depends on structural injustice to birth mothers and, increasingly, advantages white women of the West at the expense of women of color of the Global South; on the other, adoption de-biologizes the family, fulfilling an old dream of radical feminism—as articulated, for example, by Donna Haraway, Shulamith Firestone, and novelist Marge Piercy—to undo gender's invidious structural inequity by decoupling kinship from biological reproduction. These conflicting approaches to achieving feminist futures—defending the rights of women, undoing the category "women"—live on in debates within feminist and queer theory, and they inform critical adoption studies as well. If I am tempted to take one side or the other in feminist and queer theoretical debate, I am reminded of their intractable and vital contradiction in the worlds of adoption studies.

Although the essays in this issue engage in scholarly critical thought and research, most are also informed by—and in some cases directly oriented toward—activist projects. As more than one author notes, adoption is a site of the intimiza-

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tion of power, and the urgency of the adoption scholarship represented here arises from its proximity to human pain, endurance, and joy as well as from its imbrication in economic disparities, in social injustice, and in imbalances of political power. The activist implications of these scholarly projects range from abolition at one end of the spectrum to the destigmatization of new family forms at the other. As the private becomes public, the scholarly can become personal.

Almost all the authors whose work appears in this issue are connected to, and thus affiliated with each other through, the Alliance for the Study of Adoption and Culture. This scholarly organization, cofounded in 1998 by Marianne Novy and Carol Singley as the Alliance for the Study of Adoption, Identity, and Kinship, has not only published the journal *Adoption & Culture* since 2005 but has also, starting the same year, organized biennial conferences that bring together scholars in the humanities and social sciences, adoption practitioners (lawyers, social workers, psychologists), creative artists, and activists. The organization's mission statement reads in part,

> ASAC promotes understanding of the experience, institution, and cultural representation of domestic and transnational adoption and related practices such as fostering, assisted reproduction, LGBTQ+ families, and innovative kinship formations. ASAC considers adoptive kinship to include adoptees, first families, and adoptive kin. In its conferences, other gatherings, and publications ASAC provides a forum for discussion and knowledge creation about adoption and related topics through interdisciplinary culture-based scholarly study and creative practice that consider many ways of perceiving, interpreting, and understanding adoption.

Several of the full-length essays in this issue originated as papers given at the 2014 conference in Tallahassee or the 2016 conference in Minneapolis, and the authors of the short essays have all been either keynote speakers or panel presenters at ASAC conferences. The wide variety of positions (subject positions, intellectual positions) represented by participants means that these conferences both invite and manage conflict, even as participants can be surprised into generating new knowledges when points of view different from their own challenge their assumptions and require fresh thought about deeply held convictions.

The writing in this special issue reflects the variety and the dynamism of these encounters, constituting a lively and contentious conversation, a moment in an ongoing debate that neither starts nor ends here. In the spirit of conversation, this introductory set of short essays begins with an epistolary exchange.

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Letter to the Special Issue Editor

PEGGY PHELAN

Dear Margaret,

I want to answer all your questions about critical adoption studies. There are rather a lot of questions though, an ocean really, and you have also specified 1,000 words. Maybe that small number is a big tease. A way to get me to agree to try—"1,000 words? Sure, I can knock that out. No problem." But then, once begun, the current comes and I am upended in wet sand.

"Margaret," I ask, "how strict is the word count? Can I let the 1,000-word statement grow?"

"Yes, go ahead. I am not sure what will come in," you reply.

Wondering what the sea will bring in, I begin again. Let me repeat your words back to you so their echo will encircle us both. You wrote,

> I would like the group of short statements to serve as a kind of collective field statement or even manifesto of what critical adoption studies is, why it should matter to people outside the immediate field, how it enters into field-transcending debates of the day, and how insights derived from studying adoption and other non-normative kinship forms are transferable across fields of inquiry.

Echo is as echo does: four references to "fields" in one sentence that contains four clauses. In our shared habits of mind that come from decades as English professors, we know that dense repetition means *something.* What, then, are these four references to fields for? Is the repetition a nervous assertion, a kind of verbal tic performed in response to an unacknowledged fear that perhaps in posing the question "What is critical adoption studies?" the returning tide may wash away the field before it can be known? Here at the edge of the echoing current, my ear resounds with Foucault's sentence at the end of *The Order of Things:* "One can certainly wager that man might be erased like a face drawn at the edge of the sea . . ." (422). Do you notice how quickly the mind moves, or at least my mind moves, from a question about the field of critical adoption studies to a citation about the erasure of the human tout court? Maybe your four references to fields is a kind of defense against this sort of sliding; piling up references to fields might serve as a bulwark against sliding into the unbounded sea.

On the other hand, my speedy turn from the topic at hand—*what is critical adoption studies and why does it matter?*—to Foucault's apocalyptic forbearing might itself be a symptom of "the adoption complex," those multifaceted operations and actors that produce radical new lives and new thinking about the human as such. Heady, I know, and much too fast. (*You said 1,000 words!*) Suffice it to say that

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the adoption complex both destroys and creates simultaneously, and as with any kind of collision of opposites, the fallout is often, although not always, spectacularly messy. While the usual clichés suggest that adoption is "the end of one story and the beginning of another," for many the first story rarely ends. Rather, when viewed together, the adoption complex comes closest to what John Cage suggests musical form is: "the morphology of the continuity" (38). In this (optimistic) view, the adoption complex offers opportunities to expand human possibilities, especially in terms of narratological (*about which you know more than I*) and affective forms.

Perhaps, then, the four "fields" in your sentence are meant to conjure optimistic abundance. Fields are often attractive because they are usually "discipline-like" or, as some of my conservative friends assert, "discipline-lite," even as they sidestep some of the hazards of disciplinary narrowness. Fields work to produce connections and conversations *across* methodologies and objects of study, while disciplines work to solidify the methods and objects of study that constitute their subject. But if the repetitions of "field" are meant to encourage possibilities, then why not just call the field "adoption studies" and let it be a loose baggy monster? Why burden an expansive and growing field with the word *critical?* After all, scholarly fields are presumably critical, so is it redundant to name the field critical adoption studies? Is there something specific to the adoption complex that makes the word *critical* necessary? The answer is yes, at least for now.

The word *critical* suggests that the field is not necessarily advocating adoption as a practice. For good or for ill, fields such as feminist studies or Chicana studies have been viewed as surrogates for political advocacy; while both fields have produced exceptional scholarship, the academy as a whole has tended to view fields of this sort as somewhat marginal to their larger enterprise, a kind of "special interest" rather than a central source of respected expertise. Compare this attitude with, for example, the way subatomic physics, also arguably a special interest, is revered rather than tolerated on most university campuses. The abstract logic of that field is highly valued, while the concrete and material efforts to improve the lives of disenfranchised groups of people are seen as somehow lesser pursuits. Thus, keeping the term *critical* within the name of the field underlines a larger resistance to the effects of marginalization that often haunt adoption itself.

The adjective *critical* also helps distance adoption studies from some of the more commercial and psychologically superficial views of adoption as a kind of paradise in which all involved live happily ever after, especially the adoptee who is positioned as blissfully ensconced in a "forever family." To name the field critical adoption studies, in other words, invites much-needed scrutiny of the main tropes that currently define and often distort the adoption complex.

Moreover, the adjective *critical* also creates a small but important interruption of shorthand references to "adoption studies." This latter term refers to the large sociobiological literature undertaken by scholars concerned with genuinely fascinating issues of nature versus nurture. This scholarship prizes data about twins or siblings who have the same biological parents but, because of adoption, have been

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raised in different environments. The name "critical adoption studies" should help differentiate it from this data-driven research and encourage interest in the messier affective, economic, narratological, and geopolitical consequences of the adoption complex that will likely be among critical adoption studies' main concerns.

Additionally, naming the field "critical adoption studies" aligns it with broader currents in the new humanities such as critical legal studies and critical race theory. And in light of the political urgency central to both of those fields, I will also take up your invitation to offer a manifesto for the field-to-come:

1. Critical adoption studies must consider the adoption complex from a global perspective; to do so, critical adoption studies will need to displace the centrality of the US model. In the US context, the adoptive family has received the most attentive and birth fathers the least. One consequence of this is that we know—or think we know—more about Angelina Jolie's three adoptions of children from Cambodia, Ethiopia, and Viet Nam than we know about the 650,000 or so children who spend time in the US foster care system each year. And we know even less about the biological fathers of these children. International adoptions are often perceived to be more appealing than domestic adoptions in the US; the complex reasons for this preference, and their consequences, need more analysis.
2. As with any academic enterprise committed to the global, critical adoption studies must be vigilant about interrogating the terms of its object: to whom and for whom is adoption critical? Is the term *adoption* capacious enough to accommodate all the ways in which nonbiological children come into new family units? For example, refugees and children from homes wracked by war or natural disasters may have fundamentally different experiences and affective responses to adoption than children who move from foster care to adoptive homes in the United States. Is *adoption* the correct word for both experiences? And children who are removed from their biological families because of the perception of abuse or neglect in Aboriginal Australia may have a different understanding and experience of adoption than a child from the South Bronx who may have been removed for the same reason. That is, the multiple causes of adoption may mean that critical adoption studies will need to develop a much richer vocabulary for the myriad experiences that are currently known as *adoption.* Terms such as *resettled, stolen, rehomed, relinquished,* and *rescued* will likely be part of this vocabulary.
3. Reproductive technologies are also pushing the time horizon of adoption backward in significant ways. To date, adoption has been understood as a postbirth event. But as reproductive technologies now allow three or more adults to contribute genetic material to a fetus, and as other kinds of cloning and gene editing make it possible to create a fetus with genetic material (primarily from skin cells) not connected to the reproductive or-

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gans at all, the definition of biological parent is shifting.[1] Critical adoption studies can play an important role in helping parse the terms and concepts of entangled biological origin stories, collective and collaborative parents, and the like. Critical adoption studies can help guide some of the ethical parameters for the brave new world of reproduction that the first world has recently produced and will continue to develop. Conversations about how, when, where, and why to market those technologies for emerging and developing economies will be crucial.

4. Critical adoption studies should be transdisciplinary: the global economy and political ideology cannot be separated from the adoption complex. Poverty, coercion, racism, religious precepts, and human trafficking all play significant roles in the adoption complex.
5. Critical adoption studies needs to welcome scholars working in trauma studies and clinicians with experience treating children who have been diagnosed with reactive attachment disorder (RAD). Additionally, since the RAD diagnosis itself has been viewed with both skepticism and praise, both skeptics and proponents should be invited to join critical adoption studies' scholarly community.
6. While affect studies generally can be an important ally for critical adoption studies, the field must be especially scrupulous about not letting narrative or video memoir be the primary source for measuring the affective consequences of adoptions. To date, published memoirs and produced films and videos have had an outsized influence on our understanding of the emotional density of adoption. Other art forms—song, dance, painting, video, spoken word, performance—should be more fully embraced by critical adoption studies because these forms allow more access points for more people involved in the adoption complex.
7. The allied professionals who sometimes broker adoptions, as well as the professionals who work with postadoption communities at camps, in therapy, in schools, and in religious settings, should be added to the study of the adoption complex that will be the central focus of critical adoption studies.
8. Critical adoption studies must remain attentive to both the role of global racism and the privileging of capitalism as an absolute good in the adoption complex. Legal concepts such as "the best interest of the child" often function as an ideological bias rather than good jurisprudence. Critical adoption studies should welcome legal analysts dedicated to a wider understanding of "best interests" than those associated with wealthy white parents.
9. The challenge for critical adoption studies in the next decade will be to balance the unruliness of any new relationship with the need to discover what its unique epistemological contribution to thinking actually is. One of my biggest fears about critical adoption studies is that the (arguably necessary) preoccupation with *studies* will overwhelm the lives most affected

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by the adoption complex. The consolidation of any academic field risks defanging and, indeed, disciplining the more radical aspects of thinking as such. By thinking I mean feeling and dreaming and wishing away one's current habits of mind. This is the work of everyday imagination; it cannot be corralled by the ceremony of conferences, the proliferation of publications, and the anxiety of tenure decisions.

10. What critical adoption studies needs to build, in other words, may not be a field but rather *a way of fielding*, a mode of transit between meaning and bodies. Located, perforce, in the academy, critical adoption studies risks falling for meaning while ignoring fundamental obligations to those who suffer most in the current configuration of the adoption complex. Thus, I hope critical adoption studies will strive to occupy a liminal space between the academy's meaning machine and worlds that produce new configurations of survivability and possibility. And from within that space, perhaps critical adoption studies can transform the adoption complex (as a set of performances and as a conceptual field) from the clichéd Eden of forever families to a radical rethinking of what love and family might be.

Best wishes, dear Margaret,
Peggy

Note

1. For overviews of some of these developments, see Tingley and Lewin.

Birthmothers: Their Rightful Place in Critical Adoption Studies

JANET MASON ELLERBY

As a birthmother and literary scholar, I have often written about my own experience as an unwed mother as well as analyzed representations of unwed mothers in mythology, literature, and film. But whenever adoption enters the story, as it did in my own, I find myself in problematic terrain. Although I can write with a certain theoretical detachment about the historical and contemporary penalties for unwed mothers, when adoption is involved I must first confront resentment and regret, sentiments that have not substantially subsided in over fifty years. When I was recently asked to make a brief statement on theorizing critical adoption studies, I again had to face my enduring emotional turmoil and the methodological dilemma

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it creates: how can I objectively "theorize" about a social practice that was for me coercive and exploitive? How can I navigate the turbulent waters where emotion and critical thinking collide?

I was only sixteen when my parents shipped me from Southern California to an aunt in Cleveland and then, when my pregnancy could no longer be concealed, to Akron's Florence Crittenton Home for Unwed Mothers. Like so many middle-class girls in the "baby scoop" era, I felt powerless to determine my fate and so "agreed" to all the arcane machinations that kept my pregnancy a secret. I was not pilloried like Hester Prynne, but I was coerced into believing I was unfit for motherhood, that I had no choice but to surrender the infant whom I loved instantly with a ferocity that still surprises.

If I'm to write truthfully, I must acknowledge: real harm was done. The existing social system not only felt no compunction about taking babies from unwed mothers, it was also adamant about closed adoptions. At some psychological level, those credentialed to remove babies and those receiving babies must have sensed that there was something humanely wrong about relentlessly feeding the adoption system. Why else coerce girls into signing away their parental rights? Why insist that they disappear from their children's lives, even to the point of erasing their names from birth certificates? Beyond all the glib rationalizations, they must have known, even then, that what they were condoning was deeply unjust.

Over the past twenty-five years, I anticipated with each finished manuscript some measure of ameliorative scriptotherapy, that I would finally be able to leave behind the shame, regret, and anger I had carried for so long. And, in fact, there has been therapeutic value in telling my story: thirty-five years after we were pitilessly separated, my writing led me to a joyful reunion with my daughter. Given this fortunate outcome, I was then certain that my deeply embedded resentment of adoption would evaporate. Our reunion would heal all wrongs. I would be transformed. But I have been disappointed both emotionally and analytically. I have not found representations of literary birthmothers who seize their rightful place as empowered heroes, nor can I claim to be one myself. My conflicted emotions endure. My enmity toward adoption still simmers, especially when I consider disadvantaged mothers who are still being exploited, not just as victims of coercive surrender but as paid surrogates.

Which leads me to the birthmothers I know, women like me who were exiled to the homes of distant relatives or maternity homes and were told that adoption was our only option. We surrendered our babies forever. We lived for years with regret, uncertainty, shame, and sorrow. We dreamed of our children: their first teeth, their first steps, their first day of kindergarten, their first illness, their first love. We cringed when we let ourselves imagine cruel, unloving adoptive parents and stinging slaps we could not prevent. We secretly acknowledged each birthday. We gazed surreptitiously at babies, children, teenagers, adults their age. We imagined their graduations and their weddings. We dreamed of the day they would somehow return to us. There would be a tentative knock on the door. We'd run

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to open it, and there they would stand with their shy, hopeful faces turned up to us. We waited. We believed there would be a happy ending.

For some of us, that day came. We gazed lovingly into our children's beautiful faces. We were restored to one another. We were jubilant. We were forgiven. We thought we forgave ourselves. We thought we were healed. We thought the past was vanquished. We couldn't give enough, yet we asked for too much. We were unprepared when our longing resumed. We were frustrated when our regret persisted. We were shocked when our sorrow returned. Our happy ending dissolved. We still longed for the past. The deed could not be reversed. The baby could not be restored. The longing could not be assuaged. The adult child may have lovingly returned, but the first loss and the deep-seated sorrow would not be mollified. Thus, my conclusion: there can be no unequivocal happy ending for mothers who surrender.

Nonetheless, birthmothers are heroic. We bravely, resolutely lead productive lives. We struggle to define ourselves against demeaning stereotypes. We know all too well the coercive forces at play when it comes to "choosing" adoption. We have experienced firsthand the dramatic economic and racial inequalities that continue to compromise adoption practices. We work for a day when young, "unprepared" girls will never have to surrender their babies. We argue for family preservation and support rather than adoption. We envision kinship formations, families or villages or communal arrangements that nurture young unwed mothers, girls who can keep their babies because they have a safety net. Such villages include parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, social services, churches, educational institutions, and friends who come together to help them raise their children. Such villages will recognize maternal rights and encourage motherly responsibility. They will provide a nurturing home from which heroes can emerge.

A critical agenda is not possible without a self-reflective scrutiny of responsibility. I urge those who are thinking critically about adoption to include birthmothers in their projects: unpack the psychological and emotional wrongs that were done and that continue; confront the exploitation of birthmothers; acknowledge the pain of those who paid too dearly for the happiness of others. Attention must be paid.

Mourning, Adoption, and Literary Form

ERIC WALKER

In the American poet Robert Pinsky's 2016 verse collection *At the Foundling Hospital*, the central poem, "The Foundling Tokens," midway turns the poem over to the voice of an eighteenth-century London birth mother, mourning her relinquished

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child: "Regardless he, Unable I / To keep this image of my Heart / 'Tis vile to Murder! hard to Starve / And Death almost to me to part!" (20). Because voices and tales of separation, loss, and grief abundantly characterize adoption writing, the relationship between mourning and literary form offers important matter for critical adoption studies because it addresses events of loss and separation experienced by all members of the adoption triad.[1] The literary form long associated with loss and grief is elegy, the lament for the death of a loved one. In its adjective form, "elegiac" has been stretched from the event of death to define writing about abundant kinds of loss, even to the existential extreme of lost time. In this more generalized sense, it can be argued that much if not all adoption writing is by definition elegiac.[2] Especially because poetry is the genre of longest association with the history of elegy, my examples here are all drawn from contemporary adoption poetry, but I hope these inquiries are resonant for the study of adoption writing in multiple genres, including prose fiction, memoir, film, and drama.

Critics of elegy have long pinpointed an ethical challenge posed by the form: does elegy honestly wrestle with hard truths or does it falsely settle for comforting fictions? The textbook tag for this debate is the eighteenth-century critic Samuel Johnson's objection to John Milton's elegy *Lycidas,* a dauntingly elaborate poetic performance about the death of a college acquaintance: "Where there is leisure for fiction, there is little grief" (99). Modern theorists of elegy keep this debate alive in this manner: on the one hand, elegy is a closed form of mourning that offers the substantial promise of consolation and compensatory resolution, as Peter Sacks argues in *The English Elegy;* on the other, elegy is an open form of mourning that remains unsettled by loss, as mapped by Jahan Ramazani in *Poetry of Mourning.* The primary risk of the closed form, sentimentalism, is that consolation and resolution are unearned; the primary risk of the open form, despair, is that loss triumphs.

For an example of the risks of a closed-form adoption elegy, I nominate a recent short lyric by the popular American poet Billy Collins. In his poem "Foundling," Collins offers as the poem's speaker an adult writer who was abandoned as an infant. This foundling thinks his writerly way back into his infancy ("groping blindly down the page") to his infant self's defining event of "my recent abandonment." Collins builds the poem to the adult writer's invented memory of his first act of infant "self-expression" in the immediate wake of that abandonment. In the concluding lines, the adult imagines his foundling self "sticking out my infant tongue / and receiving in return (I can see it now) / A large, pristine snowflake, much like any other." The phrase "receiving in return" renders altogether too clear that the transaction in this moment and in these lines is compensation for the loss of abandonment. Performing the pathos of benign contingency, the compensatory commerce between snowflake ("large, pristine") and abandoned infant tongue is too sweetly engineered to bear the hard work of mourning the infant's lost mother.[3]

To sample the opportunities and risks of an open-form adoption elegy, I turn to the American poet Edward Hirsch's book-length poem *Gabriel,* about the 2011

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death of his twenty-two-year-old adopted son, the most ambitious English-language poem about adoption since the Scottish poet Jackie Kay's *The Adoption Papers.* The death of an adopted child poses an extreme case of the abundant losses and separations of adoption; the extremity of the grief of an adoptive parent in *Gabriel* helps clarify the stakes of mourning and literary form in adoption writing. During the sometimes unbearably "wretched sound" of the poem, the poet-father is anxious not to inflict a second literary death upon his adopted child, even as the poem offers abundant snapshots from the history of the adoption: "I'm scared of rounding him up / And turning him into a story" (33). I read these lines as the poet's wariness toward elegy precisely because it is susceptible to fictional sums ("rounding up"). Refusing to turn the adopted child into a false story about adoption, the long poem's nearly unbroken anguish peaks to what it knows is an impossible demand born of despair: "I will not forgive you / Indifferent God / Until you give me back my son" (77).

In her recent critique of elegy, *Dying Modern: A Meditation on Elegy,* Diana Fuss views the demand for the dead to return—for loss to be undone—as the unexpressed desire lurking within and undercutting elegy; such a demand is "elegy's most selfish impulse: to reverse the hands of time and to restore the dead to life" (82). Fuss views elegy as too often a failed form of mourning, open or closed, in its liability to risks of unearned consolation or the desperation born of despair. In a counterintuitive move, Fuss nominates a different verse form, the aubade—the dawn song of parting lovers—as a form better fit for separation, loss, and grief:[4] "the aubade's greatest attraction may be its radical potential to ethically outdo the elegy" (82). At root "a poetry of uncoupling," Fuss understands the aubade as "deeply anti-compensatory . . . an anti-elegy at heart, a pointless exercise in waiting" (85). In a longer version of these remarks, I argue that *Gabriel* works best as an open-form adoption elegy to the degree that it performs what Fuss would instead call an aubade. *Gabriel* is an adoptive father's bitter lament for loss (even unto death) that nevertheless holds darkness and despair at a suspended length called survival, the chief evidence of which is simply, at great cost, the long poem itself.[5] Locating at morning instead of evening the time of its anguished labor of uncoupling, Hirsch employs a homonym that is also key to Fuss: for the aubade, morning is, paradoxically, the appointed time of mourning.

The story about this adoption that Hirsch fears to falsify makes no mention of the griefs of an adoptive mother or a birth mother.[6] The missing voices of these grieving mothers are instead displaced into one of the most striking features of the poem, a chorus of grieving poets who have lost children. The most memorable of these are grieving mothers, the final example of which is the seventeenth-century German poet Margaretha Susanna von Kuntsch, who "Lost eight sons and five daughters," and whose voice enters the poem with these words: "The page is shaking / And cannot bear the words of grief" (70). After giving voice to the grief of a birth mother in "The Foundling Tokens," Pinsky includes in his *Foundling*

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Hospital volume a lyric titled simply "Grief," in which he registers resistance to unearned compensation for separation and loss: "The presence / In the absence: it isn't comfort—it's grief" (32). Throughout adoption writing, what is always at stake is the presence of absence. Where elegy risks the closure of comfort or the perils of despair, in Fuss's alternative model the aubade waits out in suspension what she terms the foundational challenge of mourning, "the painful presence of absence" (2). In her critique of elegy as form, Fuss casts a wide net with her book's title phrase, "dying modern," including kinds of loss and separation that are resonant for adoption studies: "To search and not find, to call and not be heard, these are recurrent themes in the era of dying modern, an age haunted by orphaned, abandoned, or lost voices" (110). In the world of adoption, to write about these very themes and voices is the hard work of elegy, or even at times what we might think of as aubade.

Notes

1. This brief overview does not attempt to track the foundational work on mourning in Freudian and post-Freudian psychoanalytic theory and in poststructural theory.
2. Even in their most constructive, redemptive, and recuperative instances, adoptions do not occur without forms of separation from what is prior. The elegiac is a name for writing that negotiates necessary distances from antecedents, distances that necessarily never disappear: the presence of absence.
3. For an example of a closed-form adoption elegy that earns the astringent consolation of its final images, I would point to Jennifer Clement's brief lyric "Einstein Thinks about the Daughter He Put Up for Adoption and Then Could Never Find."
4. A touchstone for the form in drama is the morning departure episode in *Romeo and Juliet*, act three, scene five.
5. Related to Fuss's idea of "pointless waiting," the concept of "suspension" is a rich resource for adoption writing, embedded across many of Jacques Derrida's texts and helpfully summarized by Anne McCarthy: "Suspension, then, names a practice of awareness . . . that Derrida develops throughout his writings in a variety of registers. To adopt these practices means that we must assent to a certain experience of 'never-having-done,' and also means that we must continue to take contingency and instability seriously, not allowing these concepts to become domesticated through frequent use" (29).
6. In the acknowledgments, Hirsch thanks Gabriel's adoptive mother, "who has her own story to tell" (79). Because they are divorced, the primary partner of his grief in the poem is Gabriel's adoptive stepmother, who also never speaks. The only brush with biogenetic inquiry in the poem's adoption history is this stanza: "Maybe we should have tried Edinburgh / Or Dublin to see if we felt at home / He decided he was Scots-Irish" (34).

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Thinking with Adoption in Historical Research

KAREN BALCOM

When I first began to write about adoption, I wasn't writing adoption history. I was a graduate student interested in social policy and border crossing. I wanted to explore what happens when social policies and laws develop within bounded geographic areas (specific states, provinces, or nations) but the people governed by these policies and laws move across borders and between jurisdictions. Almost by happenstance, I ended up exploring my questions through case studies of adoption across the Canada–US border.

As I was exploring social policy with adoption examples, the field of critical adoption studies was growing. At early workshops, in conversations with generous colleagues, and then at the first Adoption and Culture conference in 2005, I reframed my work and saw the possibilities of writing critical adoption history with social policy examples.[1] The change crystallized for me with Ellen Herman's keynote at the 2005 conference, where she argued that "adoption is good to think with." That prompt helped me to understand that while families are always social institutions shaped by culture and public policy, the intentionality and public surveillance surrounding adoption lays bare the possibilities and limits in our ideas about family, motherhood, identity, race, nation, and many other crucial social categories. But the power of this analysis must always be balanced with attention to the people and intimacies of adoption. If scholars are *thinking with adoption* to explore wide questions of public policy and crucial social constructions, they must also be *thinking with the people of adoption* as they live in, through, and around the transfer of children.

Of course, as a historian, I believe historians are particularly well suited to hold this tension—to work between the details of individual lives lived and the wider social implications of adoption as an institution. The craft of the historian is to dig deeply into specifics, then use that detail to support a wider analysis. But this is neither a simple nor a straightforward move. Historians have often been (mis-)understood as empiricist scribes who just "tell us what happened." In the practise of history, every act of gathering (or not gathering) evidence, of reading the evidence, and of creating a narrative is an act of interpretation and analysis framed by the historians' priorities and theoretical investments. The work is further complicated when historians are separated in time and space (and, perhaps, life experience, racial identity, nationality, and other markers) from the subjects about whom they write. Historians are challenged, as well, by the limited evidence

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available to capture the experiences of those most marginalized in the past and present of adoption. Some past lives and experiences leave many traces, others far fewer and fainter.

In the documentary sources traditionally used by historians, the adoption lives hardest to trace are those of first mothers. Historians have learned to read across and between the records of caseworkers, social welfare organizations and policy organs to hear the echoes when mothers are spoken about but rarely permitted to speak themselves (Dubinsky). And we have learned to read those echoed voices alongside the films, memoirs, fiction, works of art, and interviews where mothers, adoptees, and their wider families tell their stories in their own words (*A Girl Like Her;* Petrie). But still, there are gaps and silences, and it can feel almost like a quest for historians to uncover, to narrate, to bring forward the story of those most silenced and pushed to the side in adoption's past.

My current research in the post–World War II period includes letters and documents that purport to tell the stories of first mothers in Japan, Greece, and Italy whose children were adopted by American families. Such documents, which bring some part of the first mother into the receiving family and country, are extremely rare in transnational adoption. Some of these documents quite explicitly narrate the women's lives from the perspective of the adoptive parents. Others were "officially" authored by the women themselves, although usually in the context of an official adoption proceeding. And these documents were packaged and saved in dossiers designed to prove the necessity of the adoption and the worthiness of the adoptive parents.[2] The effect is to evoke the first mother, to mobilize pity for her (but mostly for her child), and then to show that she must be left behind. The documents may, in the end, say much more about the adoptive parents who secured and saved this record than they say about the women themselves.

And yet—in fragments and around the edges—the mothers' stories are told, and not told, and perhaps told against their will. To come in as the historian (okay, *this* historian), reading these documents against the grain, reassembling fragments, and then narrating (partial) life stories seems like a positive example of recovering marginalized voices and restoring hidden histories. The women's stories, reassembled in historical narrative, support big-picture analyses that talk about the cruelly limited options for mothers and about the erasure of first families (never complete) in order to make space (never quite enough) for a new family, a new identity, a new basis of belonging. This looks like *thinking with adoption* and *thinking with the people of adoption.* Doesn't it? But it is not that simple, and it never can be unless we pretend that historians *are* empiricist scribes, meaning that we disregard the occluded view in the sources and we ignore the active interpretive voice of the scholar. Is the story the historian (that's me, again) *re*-presents a story that these mothers would recognize? Would want told about themselves? Or is the attempt to "rescue" the women's voices an act of appropriation and another violation (Briggs 202–9)?

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I don't have full answers to these questions yet, but I know two things. I know that I am asking these questions in this way because of the work of fellow historians and other scholars working across disciplines in critical adoption studies and also because of the work of committed activists in the adoption community who demand careful thought and accountability in our scholarship. I also know that this scholarship was much easier when I was a social policy historian who just happened to write about adoption. But the work is so much more meaningful and important now.

Notes

1. It is impossible to list all of the colleagues who influenced my perspective as we thought our way into adoption history, but I must start with Ellen Herman, Laura Briggs, Karen Dubinsky, Veronica Strong-Boag, Tobias Hübinette, Denise Cuthbert, and Shurlee Swain.
2. The dossiers contain evidence assembled by adoptive parents in support of exceptions to US immigration law that would allow them to bring adopted children into the US.

Marking the Turn and New Stakes in (Critical) Adoption Studies

KIT MYERS

What does it mean to add the term *critical* to the field of adoption studies? This is not merely a rebranding effort. To think about critical adoption studies (CAS) as an intellectual project means placing it within a long line of disciplinary theoretical and methodological "turns" in academic fields such as anthropology, literature, legal studies, and even ethnic studies. These fields question entrenched epistemological and theoretical assumptions about positivism, objectivity, structuralism, the law, liberalism, modernity, and Western thought.

While CAS is polyvalent, I offer four components: interdisciplinarity, intersectionality, comparative-relational, and multifaceted stakes. Critical scholarship in adoption studies need not have all four pieces but would try to genuinely engage in at least one or more of these areas.

Beginning with interdisciplinarity, adoption studies has mostly centered the understanding of the *practice* of adoption through social work and psychological lenses. These forms of knowledge have helped us not only understand the

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wide-ranging personal—especially emotional and psychological—and public impact of adoption but also to devise practices that could help those involved. Nevertheless, in efforts to standardize, normalize, and reform adoption, adoption studies has in some ways contributed to reinscribing historical inequalities in adoption practice and research.[1]

Thus, CAS attempts to build on the generative aspects (both early and recent) of social work and psychology by considering further intellectual and pedagogical approaches to the study and practice of adoption as an institutional and discursive formation within the larger contexts of knowledge, representation, and systems of power. In this sense, CAS is not merely multidisciplinary—the addition of other fields into the study of adoption—since this approach has existed for a while now, but it is also interdisciplinary by bridging various disciplinary approaches. From an interdisciplinary view, CAS poses different questions. Instead of asking whether adoption is beneficial or harmful, or what is wrong and how can it be improved, CAS asks, how do we know what we know, and are there alternative forms of knowledge and practice? While interdisciplinarity is not a panacea (possibly producing more questions than answers), it can lead to deeper connections and understanding and the production of new possibilities, allowing us to take multiple angles and examine in-between spaces of existing disciplines and practices.

The second aspect is intersectionality, which posits that, and seeks to examine how, various socially constructed categories (e.g., race, gender, sexuality, class) do not exist and operate independently but interact to shape multiple and simultaneous dimensions of experience, identity, and systematic inequality. Integrating intersectional analysis into CAS disrupts these social categories as assumed givens. Race, for example, is no longer an unexamined independent variable or given identity. Instead, CAS interrogates how race, gender, sexuality, and other concepts such as "orphan" are intersecting sociohistorical constructions. The anthology *Outsiders Within* broke new ground in demonstrating how different social categories affect the lives of adoptees (Trenka et al. 2006). Without an intersectional analysis, the chances of us misunderstanding adoption's impact on social formations and institutional structures increases.

Third, CAS continues the fertile aspects of comparative work within adoption studies but in a much different vein. Traditional comparative research examines how adoptees, adoptive parents, or birth parents fare in relation to their presupposed and privileged "normative" nonadopted, same-race, biological, or nonrelinquishing counterparts. Critical comparative research, though, seeks to understand the formation of the normative and disrupt aspirations to emulate it. The most interesting comparative work, for me, examines seemingly disparate cultural and historical contexts but brings them together to see how they inform the past, present, and future. One could look at David Smolin's legal scholarship and Kathryn Joyce's work as examples, in which they examine and link the corruption in transnational adoption among multiple countries. Laura Briggs's *Somebody's Chil-*

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dren also offers a strong example of how to incorporate the construction of race, gender, and class as well as indigeneity into our analyses of adoption, family, and nation. Such work looks at components not as separate but relational (i.e., how the existence of one informs the other), especially in relation to normative, unmarked entities such as whiteness.

Being adopted from Hong Kong into a white American family and trained in ethnic studies have informed my views of the emergent field. Like many scholars in CAS, my positionality exists within the mutually constitutive realms of the personal and political. We are in a moment where many people who live, study, and practice adoption and nonheterobiological kinship formations are less concerned with espousing the power of love and normalizing adoptive family-making. The stakes have shifted, marking a fourth component of CAS.

Adoption emerges in a broader context than liberal individual love and creates more than a new family. Those at the forefront of activism, practice, and research understand that love and adoptive family-making are always already wedded to varying forms of structural, symbolic, and traumatic forms of violence. Nevertheless, that violence is a condition of possibility for adoption and a problem that cannot be "solved" has not produced (and should not produce) arrestive effects. Indeed, people within CAS are imagining different ways toward justice and dignity for everyone in nonnormative families—where social life does not require social death. For example, in my own work, I am trying to think about how adoptive kinship (rather than family) as a descriptor and analytic might be more capacious for adoption praxis. While family describes relations between people through blood, marriage, or adoption, kinship encompasses the ways culture defines family, interactions, and relationships. If kinship, as Marshall Sahlins suggests, is "mutuality of being," then in the context of adoption, it could seemingly hold biological, adoptive, affinal (e.g., adoptee relationships with other adoptees), and geographical (e.g., connections to homeland) ties, where connections are not imaginative or impossible but significantly attached to people, common experience, and place.

In reformulating the stakes, the people and goals have also shifted. Orphans, children, and adoptive parents are no longer the only subjects of focus, and the title of "expert" is no longer reserved for adoptive parents and adoption professionals. Instead, CAS considers alternative perspectives, truths, and the expertise of adult adoptees and birth or first parents. Academics are not alone in this endeavor. They are surrounded by powerful and inspiring stakeholders. Writers, artists, and poets have produced trenchant narratives and imagery, helping us understand the pain, happiness, and complexity of adoption in new ways. Collectives such as the Lost Daughters, who started the #FliptheScript narrative, and organizations like the Adoption Museum Project and the Korean Unwed Mothers' Families Association are also making crucial interventions. As a multiply informed field, CAS signals an important shift in adoption inquiry, experience, knowledge, and practice.

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Note

1. For instance, social workers promoted controversial forms of transracial adoption because these adoptions, and adoption in general, were perceived as a type of "reform," inclusion, and solution to various social problems, while psychology did not always consider adult adoptee perspectives or larger structural issues.

Critical Adoption Studies as Inclusive Knowledge Production and Corrective Action

KIM PARK NELSON

Critical adoption studies seeks to complicate current views of adoption, family, and kinship. Instead of understanding adoption as a solution to a social problem or as a procedure that requires "best practices," it understands adoption as a complex set of cultures, processes, exchanges, relationships, losses, and gains. Critical adoption studies recognizes identities as layered, intersectional, and complicated. It recognizes race, gender, sexuality, class, and ability as identity markers, individually and in various combinations, as factors that complicate adoption cultures and exchanges.

Critical adoption studies seeks to understand adoption from many perspectives, but it is mindful about the dangers of only imagining the experiences of others. Instead, critical adoption studies works to hear and make heard multiple perspectives from multiple positions within adoption experience. Critical adoption studies understands that discourse about adoption and depictions of members of adoption triads within our cultures are powerful and symbolic. Critical adoption studies deconstructs adoption tropes that develop in our policies, practices, and cultures. It invests in analyzing these discourses and depictions in ways that connect them to issues and problems in adoption history and practice.

Because of its interdisciplinarity, there is no single or unified critical adoption studies methodology; instead, critical adoption studies embraces methodologies and research designs that best illuminate complicated issues and problems within adoption policy, practice, or culture. Critical adoption studies makes ethical considerations for those in adoption triads at every level of research, writing, and other forms of knowledge production. It foregrounds researcher position in the context of adoption and other communities, and it acknowledges that the perspectives of some positions in the adoption triad, as well as some racial and cultural perspectives, have been undermined while others have been elevated. In response,

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critical adoption studies privileges voices from marginalized groups that have restricted access to public or academic discourses and makes space for scholars whose access to the academy has been limited due to discrimination. It is inclusive of marginalized experiences within adoption identities, including differing triad positions, races, national origins, and class.

No matter the methodology used, critical adoption studies is thoughtful about the myriad ethical questions in adoption. It understands that the rights of parents, the right to have access to original identity information, and the right to live free of oppression, discrimination, and coercion have been and continue to be violated in adoption practice. It considers whether there is indeed a right to parent and the implications of that right for marginalized groups of people.

Critical adoption studies is grounded in social justice ideologies. It acknowledges that the loss of a child, the loss of identity because of an adoptive placement or displacement, and the loss of control over reproductive processes are common within adoption experience. It is willing to ask critical questions about possible negative outcomes of adoption, coercion in adoption processes, and flaws in adoption industries.

Critical adoption studies is mindful of the history of state child welfare, including adoption, as a social control of oppressed groups of people. It recognizes that adoption processes are about power and have often relied on social, political, and economic disenfranchisement to operate, including the oppression of women, children, people of color, and poor people. Critical adoption studies recognizes that governments have been complicit in enforcing and capitalizing on these social inequities in order to operate adoption programs. Critical adoption studies recognizes abuses of power within reproduction markets—including adoption, commercial surrogacy, and the gamete trade—and connects these abuses to the misuse of economic and political power by corporations and governments in order to profit financially or to exert power by taking from some groups while rewarding others. It critiques adoption industries and offers alternatives to current adoption practices that rely on race, class, and political inequities in order to operate. Critical adoption studies is wary of an adoption industry that mediates payments between those who receive children and those who procure them, and it understands financial gain as a key factor that makes the adoption industry susceptible to corruption.

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Adoption, from Private to Public: Intimate Economies

LAURA BRIGGS

My own intellectual affection for critical adoption studies is the way it forces us tell stories from the inside out. It begins with families, the stuff of intimacy: who do you know? Who do you love? Are you different from them? How is the romance of parents and children, infants in particular, a new beginning, and how does it ground us in histories that began long ago? What are the conflicting attachments of parents and children? What are the things you long for, and why? How were you formed, socially and physically? All the stuff that goes in the style section of the newspaper. But then you take a second look at it and boom, it's all about the things that go on the front page: political stories about state practices, war, refugees, visas and immigration, the economics of whose children are adopted or fostered and whose are not, work and wages, judges and social workers, racism, Indigeneity, misogyny, rape and abortion, feminism and those who loathe it, policing and prisons. The vicious things we say about and do to single mothers, including sometimes taking their children away. I'd make the argument that family always has this double character, is always both "the private" and the outcome of a lot of very public processes, but in critical adoption studies, this doubling is unavoidable. And if "public" and "private" are always fictions of liberal political theory, in critical adoption studies, their contradictions are hypervisible.

In recent years, scholars have done extraordinary work in tracing the circulation of children, the paths they take, the forces that put them in motion, and the cultural preoccupations that place adoptees within a grid of intelligibility, from the long history of the literature of "orphans" to the religious and NGO (non-governmental organization) connotations of that word. It's hard to specify particular books because so much wonderful scholarship inevitably has to be left out—but I want to name a few works that were, for me, places where I came to understand key things that the field has to say, that ought to make them of singular importance to many people and numbers of fields. Eleana J. Kim's *Adopted Territory,* together with Tobias Hübinette in *Comforting an Orphaned Nation*, helped me think about how transnational adoption became institutionalized as part of South Korea's "economic miracle" as an alternative to a child welfare system or social supports for single mothers. It helped me understand transnational adoption as more than just an index of the vulnerability of families and children who are poor or marginalized, but to think of it particularly as something that happens to

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single mothers. That is not universally the case, but it is strikingly common that these are the women across many societies who are not allowed, authorized, empowered, or economically capable of keeping their children, and obviously this is a feminist question.

Barbara Yngvesson's *Belonging in an Adopted World* gives us nodes of circulation—Sweden, Ethiopia, India, and to a lesser extent, Colombia and Chile—that refreshingly blow apart the US-centricity of so much of the adoption scholarship, recentering it in European circuits where adoption is, per capita, even more common. Without minimizing the centrality of loss to adoption, Yngvesson also asks us to think about whether nonnormative, nonheterosexually reproductive kinship forms really are so exceptional. Kim Park Nelson's *Invisible Asians* points us to the centrality of racial formation in adoption, specifically how adoptees make sense of deeply contested questions of race, in relation to the very political demand that they be the perfect symbols of a "color-blind" society. Kay Ann Johnson's *China's Hidden Children* blew apart the story of "unwanted daughters" in China, which normalized the incredible violence of that country's one-child policy as just "culture," bringing to the fore the exceptional heavy lifting that the oxymoronic notion of "birth culture" does in conversations about adoption.

I am also quite intrigued about the ways questions of transnational surrogacy—thinking here about the work of Amrita Pande and Sharmilla Rudrappa in particular—relate to critical adoption studies, because surrogacy puts the question of reproductive labor—gestational and otherwise—firmly back in the frame of a field that has too often thought about adoption divorced from questions of work and economy.

On that note, I'd like to see critical adoption studies take up the relationship between adoption and trade liberalization more vigorously and at greater length. We have quite a thoughtful literature about law and the work it does in estranging children and infants from natal parents (particularly the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Hague Adoption Convention on Intercountry Adoption). But what if we pushed that a little further and asked how children travel with commodities and financialization. My point here is not that children *are* being turned into commodities, but just an observation about how closely transnational adoption tracks free trade. One of things that fascinated me when I was researching Guatemala was how late it was that transnational adoption really took off. All through the 1980s, it became clear, there was an immense military and paramilitary apparatus separating children from their parents and communities and placing them in other families. Some, but not a lot, were placed in international adoptions via the Red Cross and private adoption. But the numbers really took off after the war ended, and free trade steadily expanded. Something similar happened with both China and Russia, where transnational adoptions closely tracked other kinds of trade liberalization (until the numbers dropped with the Hague Convention and

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after the Magnitsky Act). Or, alternately, when adoption did and did not parallel other kinds of transnational migrations.

On the whole, I find the field vibrant and thriving as it takes up more and more extensively the ways reproduction *is* politics and economics, migration is deeply imbricated with precarity and violence, and what all these things have to tell us about what it is to be human, with all that means about care, harm, and this broad and amorphous thing we call culture.

A Black Studies Approach to Adoption

CYNTHIA CALLAHAN

Scholars often approach the topic of race in adoption through the racialized dynamics of people of color raised in white families, or framed by the uneven systems of exchange that frequently make children of color the most readily available for adoption. Indeed, contemporary transracial and transnational adoption grew out of the normative adoption system, which matched white heterosexual married couples with infants in a closed records arrangement, as an alternative when white infants fell into short supply. Thus, despite the racial differences that transracial adoption introduces into this system, its origins and the prevalence of white adoptive parents mean that whiteness still remains at the center of these adoptive inquiries.

My interest in developing a black studies approach to adoption studies, one broadly defined to encompass diasporic and African American studies paradigms, arises out of rather fundamental questions: what happens when scholars decenter the white adoptive family from our inquiry? How might this shift in thinking change how we understand adoption as an act of family making?

These questions may seem ironic coming from a white woman adopted in exactly the kind of system that I am critiquing. In fact, the limits I encountered when I attempted to apply the normative model of adoption to my research in African American literature are exactly what led me to them. The closed-records model fails to encompass the breadth of adoptive kinship scenarios represented in African American literature, such as foster care, extended kinship care, and "other mothering." Nor does it account for slavery's systematic destruction of family bonds. And, conversely, when I looked for mid-twentieth-century examples of African American adopters who resembled the postwar norm, I initially failed to find them. The recent work of scholars such as Kori Graves, Rosemarie Peña, and Sarah Trembanis, however, reveals African Americans to be agents in the creation of their adoptive families and emphasizes their place in the history and culture of

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American adoption. Their work and my own research into narratives about African American adoption in and after World War II prompt me to sketch out some preliminary implications of what a practice in black studies in adoption might reveal.

It is important to recognize from the outset the extent to which many African Americans were excluded from access to adoption by law or bias. Doing so foregrounds the vastly different experiences that families and even individual members of the triad have as they navigate institutional landscapes. Furthermore, this black-family-centered strategy can remind us that not all families were interested in adoption. Responding to the legacy of slavery, some families prefer to raise children within their kinship networks rather than relinquish them into the hands of strangers. Conversely, as Laura Briggs's research emphasizes, many African American children available for adoption are not necessarily voluntarily relinquished. This complex context reasserts the need for an intersectional approach to adoption studies that attends to the structural and cultural forces that articulate adoptive subjects.

While on one hand a black studies approach recognizes the limits on black families' autonomy, on the other it counteracts the assumption that restrictions on African American family life meant that no black families ever adopted. Instead, treating black families as agents of adoption highlights the black families that did participate in the adoption system. An excellent case in point comes from the small but significant group of African Americans who adopted internationally from Germany after World War II. Like their white counterparts in the first wave of postwar international adoption, they were pioneers, motivated by stories of children suffering in war zones; even more, these adopters also wanted to confront German racism while demonstrating civic responsibility for the children fathered by black GIs in the occupation army. Looking at African Americans as early transnational adopters (and their children as transnational adoptees, for that matter) adds important nuance to American adoption history, a differentiation that might go unnoticed if international adoption were presumed to be the purview of white Americans in the midcentury.

When we place African American families at the center of midcentury adoption, we can see how the postwar pronatalist imperative included black families on the domestic front, too. The black press featured African American adopters of black German children in middle-class homes appointed with all the latest consumer goods, in line with midcentury domestic values. And similar to white adopters, some African Americans also sought agency adoptions to build their families. Yet they sometimes cited culturally specific priorities as their motivation, like the desire to maintain kinship ties in response to family separations resulting from the Great Migration (Potter 42).

African American adoption fiction from this period embodies a similar mix of normative midcentury values and culturally specific concerns. Nowhere is this more evident than in the appearance of the pervasive concept of the "bad seed"

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that haunts adoption to this day. It arose in the 1950s, in the book, play, and film of the same name and suggested that inherited traits could unknowingly appear in an adopted child. In his novella *Rite of Passage*, Richard Wright invokes this fear in his black adopted character only to dismiss it definitively, advancing an unambiguous argument that the real threat to black families is the interference of white institutions that arbitrarily break up black homes and displace black children. In the novel, the child, thriving in his home, is so traumatized by learning that he is a long-term foster child that he runs away and joins a gang of other foster-care dropouts. With this novel, Wright challenges the pervasive stereotype of inherited black family pathology.

A black studies approach to adoption studies provides an opportunity to make visible what was hiding in plain sight: the presence of an African American adoption tradition. It requires difficult questions about the boundaries of what counts as "adoption," especially when we look at kinship ties forged in response to slavery's destruction of genealogical families. And it invites new ways of understanding African American transnationalism and diasporic consciousness forged with Europe. For literary study, my central interest, a black studies approach to adoption can expand the canon of adoption literature and of African American literature more generally. It revisits African American literary texts that may have fallen into obscurity but, when read through the frame of adoption and kinship, provide valuable insight into both black family life and adoption studies.

Black Germans: Transnational Adoption and the Search for Belonging

ROSEMARIE PEÑA

Black Germans born during the Allied occupation in Germany after World War II to German women and African American soldiers were among the first organized transnational adoptions to the US under the Displaced Persons Act as amended June 16, 1951. The children represent the only adoptive cohort systematically expelled from their birth country simply on the basis of race. As a member of this cohort, and as the founder and president of the Black German Heritage and Research Association (BGHRA), I have had the privilege of meeting many adoptees and learning about their adoption journeys and reunification experiences. Since the 1990s, many adoptees have exchanged life stories with each other and with nonadopted Black Germans, interested scholars, and concerned others situated globally in private internet-based forums and virtual communities. Transnational

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relationships developed over time within these online spaces precipitate and connect flourishing Black German counterpublics. These counterpublics in turn foster and support social, cultural, academic, and activist organizations and networks.

A number of recurring themes emerge in adoptee testimonies, shared with me privately and in the online spaces I have created, moderated, and been an active participant-observer in for nearly two decades. With varying degrees of salience, and despite most relaying happy childhood experiences and having led productive adult lives, adoptees often express a sense of alienation and loss. The loss extends beyond relationships with biological family members to a cultural heritage and peer community. Each opportunity to learn about the history and contemporary culture of Black people living in Germany is important because adoptees often wonder about what it might have been like had they grown up with their original families there.

In her keynote address at the inaugural BGHRA convention, held in 2011 at the German Historical Institute DC, Noah Sow, respected Black German author, activist, and artist from Hamburg, Germany, spoke about a *Geteilte Geschichte;* a Black German history that is both shared and divided. Sow asserted that "the mass deportation of Black German children through the instrument of adoption has had transnational implications." Speaking directly to the adoptees attending what is since considered a historic and watershed event, Sow noted that subsequent generations of Black children growing up culturally displaced in a white German society lacked role models "because they had taken [the children] away."

The body of literature comprising the burgeoning field of Black German studies, inspired by the pathbreaking 1986 anthology edited by Audre Lorde and others, evidences the effective erasure of the historical presence and racialization of Black people in Germany extending beyond the Middle Ages. Sara Lennox's long-awaited *Remapping Black Germany* provides an invaluable account of the development of Black German studies since the 1980s and the critical theories that provide useful frameworks for participating in its vibrant, interdisciplinary discourse. Tina Campt's widely read *Other Germans* describes the experiences of several of hundreds of children born to German women and Africans serving in French colonial troups following World War I. Most of these children, referred to disparagingly as "Rhineland Bastards," were involuntarily sterilized in accordance with the racial purity laws under National Socialism, and some just disappeared. Black survivors of the Nazi period like Hans Massaquoi, Marie Nejar, and Theodor Michael have published their memoirs. Ika Hügel-Marshall's autobiography is the first to describe the childhood experience of a dual-heritage German African American born during the Allied occupation following World War II. Hügel-Marshall, born in 1947, was removed from her mother by social services at the age of five and grew up in institutional care in Germany.

The voices of the post–World War II generation of Black Germans, inclusive of the now middle-aged adoptees, are just beginning to emerge in contemporary

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public discourse concerned with the history of race and racism and as a topic of interest in the growing interdisciplinary fields of adoption, migration, Black German, and childhood studies. The third BGHRA conference inspired the creation of Marian Kraft's anthology of autobiographical writings by transatlantic Black Germans, and only a relative few Black German adoptee memoirs now exist. My own essays are, so far, the only publications to discuss Black German adoptee experiences in hiystorical context. To date there has been no ethnography written documenting Black German adopted life experiences.

Between 1945 and 1956, an estimated 150,000 children were born to occupying troops and German women. More than nine thousand were the children of African American and Moroccan soldiers (Lemke Muniz de Faria, "Germany's" 344). Statistics are unreliable, but by 1968, historians estimate that in the two decades following the war as many as seven thousand Black German children were adopted to the US. Unknown numbers of their generational peers were adopted domestically and, transnationally, to Denmark. Other dual-heritage Black German Americans grew up in children's homes or foster families in Germany. All formal adoptions were closed. Upon relinquishment of their rights and responsibilities to their children, German mothers also waived the right ever to pursue contact with their children.

Mabel Grammer, a correspondent for the Baltimore-based newspaper *The Afro-American,* facilitated somewhere between fifty to five hundred "by proxy" adoptions. Grammer and her husband, a US naval officer stationed in Mannheim, Germany at the time, adopted eight of the Afro-German children. Subsequently, Grammer launched a press campaign encouraging other African American couples to adopt. Her initiative became known as the "Brown Baby Plan," and the children she placed were referred to as the "Grammer Babies." The children's controversial plight was publicized extensively in Germany and in African American newspapers and magazines, which urged African American married couples who were able to provide evidence of their education and economic stability to adopt. Scandinavian Airlines voluntarily transported the children from Germany to the waiting adopters in the US (Lemke Muniz de Faria, "Germany's" 354).

The Black German American adoptees born around World War II are now roughly between sixty and seventy years old. Many are parents and grandparents themselves and reside in all regions of the United States. Most grew up in military or middle- to upper-middle-class civilian households and have enjoyed successful careers and otherwise satisfying lives. While there is no monolithic Black German adoptee experience, Black Germans are challenged with the same losses and grief that other transnational adoptees describe and report a wide range of childhood experiences. Some adoptees are still without original birth records and naturalization certificates. Unable to document their identity and legal status, some fear their US citizenship is precarious. A few have been deported for minor crimes. Still others aspire to and a few have achieved the binational recognition that dual

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citizenship provides. Not all Black German adoptees are inclined to search for their origins. For those who desire to know their first families and the specific circumstances that precipitated their births and eventual relinquishment, obstacles such as language differences, expense, lack of information, and US military and German bureaucracy are all too often insurmountable. Some, after delaying their searches until their adoptive parents have passed away, discover their birth parents have also already died. Cultural differences and racism sometimes complicate adoptees' ability to develop meaningful social relationships with their first family members postreunion.

Black Germans, like other dual-heritage children born to African American soldiers and native women after war, must come to terms with the reality that they may never see themselves visually reflected anywhere within their adoption kinship networks. Growing up in the midst of the civil rights and Cold War eras, many Black Germans, both in Germany and the US, describe enduring culturally and contextually specific insults associated with their dual German–African American heritage and the stigma of illegitimacy. Adoptees report diverse reunion experiences, and some encounter outright rejection, exacerbating the sense of unbelonging that many felt within their extended adoptive families. As foreign-born, biracial persons whose very existence was evidence of a crime when they first arrived in the United States, many adoptees assert that they experience race, racialization, and racism differently than their African American family members and peers. Until the landmark US Supreme Court civil rights decision in 1967, *Loving vs. Virginia,* interracial marriages were outlawed in many states. Without having the experience of a white mother, however, Black German American adopted childhoods also contrast with those of other Black German Americans who grew up in their interracial families of origin—many of whom speak German and have or had an ongoing transnational Germany-US cultural experience—or those who grew up in white families, adopted or otherwise, in Europe.

That the multigenerational peers of the Black German American adoptees who remained in Germany are also considered culturally dislocated—perceived and treated as foreigners in their own homeland—sets the group apart from most transnationally adoptive cohorts. The contemporary *Afrodeutsch* or Black German diaspora community as defined by Black Germans themselves, many of whom are also scholars, is an inclusive term that references persons living in or connected to Germany with ethnic roots stemming not only from the United States but also from a number of African and Caribbean countries. Exploring adoption in the Black German context, therefore, compels a nuanced approach to examining the historical and contemporary intersections of race, culture, and national identity in Germany and the US that may prove useful in considering more recent transnational adoptive cohorts of children considered to be Black or dual-heritage and that are yet underrepresented in adoption literature.

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Creating Historical Genealogies for Intercountry Adoption

ELISABETH WESSELING

In 2016, only 214 children entered into the Netherlands through intercountry adoption (ICA), a far cry from the 1,604 adoptees who became members of Dutch families in 2006 (Stichting). An even stronger indicator of the current decline of ICA in the Netherlands is the advice that the Raad voor Strafrechtstoepassing en Jeugdbescherming (National Council for the Application of Penal Law and Child Protection) administered to the Dutch government on November 2, 2016, namely to work toward abrogating ICA altogether in the coming few years, beginning with an immediate stop to adoption from the US and Europe. The Dutch societal debate is no longer about how we may safeguard ICA from malfeasance such as kidnapping or child laundering but about whether we should have ICA at all. A similar situation applies in comparable European countries such as Denmark.

With adoption figures dwindling in all receiving countries, should we conclude that the death knell sounds for ICA and thereby for adoption studies as we know it? A definite no. First of all, ICA has never compelled our attention through numbers (1,604 adoptees in a population of seventeen million still counts for nothing). But instead it has interested us through its immense cultural and symbolic import. Furthermore, adoption numbers have been rising and falling throughout the past decades, all depending on the opening up and closing down of adoption "channels," meaning that ICA may reassert itself if new channels open up. And even if ICA would make way for other modes of global family-making such as surrogacy, then the concepts and perspectives elaborated by adoption studies would still matter.

Historical genealogy may illuminate the ongoing relevance of the field beyond statistical contingencies. ICA is generally regarded as a relatively new phenomenon that gathered momentum in the wake of the Korean War as a successor project to domestic adoption, which is assumed to be the prevalent practice before prospective adopters turned their eyes to the other ends of the world. However, the genealogy of ICA is in fact more complex than that. The removal of children from their birth families in Asian or African countries to rear them according to Western standards was standard practice in Europe's settler and extraction colonies. Indigenous (especially mixed) children persistently figured as targets and tools of Western civilizing and missionizing efforts. Children were thought to be more malleable than their adult counterparts. If properly reeducated, they could

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be employed as local intermediaries between Indigenous nations and the colonial administration in the next round of civilizing and missionizing projects.

Organized cross-border child mobility has always been strongly inspired by humanitarian motives as they were understood at the time, within their own socio-historical context. The Dutch, for instance, began to reallocate Indigenous children to children's homes or to Dutch families only in the 1890s, when the so-called Ethical Policy (*ethische politiek*) for the Dutch East Indies (the present-day Indonesia) was introduced. The Ethical Policy, which was the Dutch version of the British "white man's burden" or the French *mission civilisatrice,* implied a shift in colonial governance from single-minded economic exploitation to the vocation of educating and uplifting colonized nations, with a view to their eventual independence. In actual practice, the implementation of the Ethical Policy went hand in hand with an intensification of interventions into the daily lives of Indigenous peoples and with territorial expansion, which reveals a tragic distance between intention and effect. This gap is underscored even more poignantly by the fact that the Ethical Policy petered out in the course of the 1920s, when the Dutch repressed Indonesian independence movements ever more vigorously, believing that the Indies were not "ready" yet for independence. The repression of Indonesian nationalism eventually culminated in the two bloody colonial wars that preceded Indonesian independence in 1949. This does not mean, however, that the humanitarian motives of the advocates of the Ethical Policy were insincere, as may also be inferred from the fact that quite a few first-wave feminists were enthusiastic practitioners of (often forcible) child removal in the colonies, as Margaret Jacobs has demonstrated. Maternalism was a driving force behind both women's emancipation at the center and child removal at the peripheries of empire, linking women's emancipation to that of Indigenous nations. And maternalism still prevailed when the US began to reinvent itself as a new type of imperial power in the wake of decolonization. ICA fulfilled a crucial symbolic role in this project of national self-fashioning, since the US styled itself as a caring (rather than coercive), maternal (rather than paternal), nonracist (rather than fascist) global power, so very different from Europe's imperial powers of old. ICA provided the new US world leadership with a highly appealing icon: the transnational and transracial adoptive family, celebrated by middlebrow cultural genres like memoirs, (auto)biographies, and Broadway musicals (Klein) such as the "Asian trilogy" produced by the famous duo Rodgers & Hammerstein, comprising the musicals *South Pacific, The King and I,* and *Flower Drum Song,* all of them featuring Asian–American relations.[1] Clearly, this icon can only exemplify a new "family of man" if we forget about Europe's previous projects of reallocating and reeducating non-Western children within Western contexts.

The fact that ICA tends to be imagined to have begun in the fifties of the previous century is indicative of widespread cultural amnesia, especially on the European continent.[2] While the "stolen generations" in Australia, the "lost birds" in the US, and the "home children" in Canada are the topic of a growing body of

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documentaries, fiction, and scholarship (including adoption studies!), silence still reigns supreme on the continent. Publications on child removal in the Dutch colonies, for instance, can literally be counted on the fingers of one hand,[3] even though the Netherlands have nearly four centuries of imperial rule over a global empire behind them, and the same applies to France.[4] Critical adoption studies could rise to the occasion here and puncture the silence about this largely forgotten aspect of the colonial past in order to offer informed historical perspectives on contemporary modes of child reallocation across national borders. This observation also underscores the heuristic value of international comparison in adoption studies. Such a comparative critical genealogy should relate the present not only to the past but also to the impending future. Just like ICA did not emerge like a bolt out of the blue in the fifties, global surrogacy is not fully "new" either. Once again, the emancipation struggles of a group in the West (this time lesbian and gay) and interventions into the reproductive lives of non-Western persons become entangled, producing the ethical and political quagmire that the global West has faced quite a few times before. Adoption studies are uniquely positioned to articulate these complex dilemmas, provided they are informed by the comparative and historical perspectives I have argued in favor of.

Notes

1. The contributions of American middlebrow culture to national self-fashioning are discussed at length by Klein.
2. See my speech (*Verwantschap*) for a more extensive discussion of this striking form of cultural forgetting.
3. See Dirks; and Derksen (both "Local" "On Their Javanese") for the first publications on the topic.
4. See Firpo for sustained inquiry into child removal in French Indochina, including illuminating comparisons with Dutch colonial rule over the East Indies.

Adoption or the Metaphor of Power

BRUNO PERREAU

In 2012, the Magnitsky Act introduced financial sanctions and visa bans against Russian officials involved in the death of attorney Sergei Magnitsky. It didn't take long for Moscow to react: it banned the adoption of Russian children by American

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citizens. In June 2017, Putin resumed talks with the United States to ease the Magnitsky Act, in an environment where his own financial investments might one day be affected directly. During the initial exchanges with the Trump administration, adoption was put into play (Kopen).

This recent example illustrates the role of adoption in shaping policy issues. But adoption is not only the subject of tight international negotiations; it is also, in many countries, a place of very intense social intervention (social inquiry prior to adoption, parental leave, link to parenting, financial aid, and more). The study of adoption policies is therefore a very active branch of adoption studies (Kim, *Adopted*; Varzalli).

Nonetheless, while the political dimension of adoption is so important, it is not so only because of the international negotiations and public policies that govern this familial relationship. The very small number of children adopted at the country level has very little impact on the general rules governing the family, nationality, and education. To name but one example, in 2007 a parliamentary amendment proposed requiring genetic tests to authorize family reunification in France without ever taking into account the fact that going about things this way would not work for adoptive families (Perreau 112–14).

Thus, if adoption plays a central role in the way membership to a political community is defined, it is less because of its real influence and more because of its metaphoric weight. What does being "adopted" by a country mean? To what extent does international adoption symbolize a certain imbalance of power between the children's countries of birth and the adopting countries? What is the implication of shaping a "social body" in terms that are not modeled on reproducing the body itself? What concepts of citizenship does adoption convey? How do political "families" continue to shape themselves using a logic of birth-related kinship?

In the North American context, where adoption is looked upon above all as a private practice, there is far too little research on this political dimension of adoption. Respect for the privacy of adoptive families is, of course, essential to their legal protection. The privatization of family life, however, does not detract from the fact that adoption also conveys certain conceptions of collective reality (Briggs 261–68). It is yoking private and public that is essential to the development of "critical adoption studies": to think through adoption with and against itself, which is to say with and against the definitions devised by the law and ordinary speech.

Critical adoption studies therefore needs to invest the symbolic dimension of adoption and the study of family norms and practices, simultaneously. In doing so, it will reconcile, in a double effort of deconstruction, the two main meanings of the word "adoption." The Latin *adoptare* initially means "to choose" in the context of the transmission of political power. The "fathers" chose who would become their "sons," able to exercise power in their stead. The purpose of adoption was to prevent dynastic extinction. The development of Christianity curtailed this practice: the Catholic Church feared that adoption would impede the preemption of

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orphans' goods and compete with baptism, which is a rite of adoption by God. In this context, the idea of adoption gradually acquired a different meaning. From the middle of the fourteenth century, adopting refers to admitting an opinion or representation, to making a foreign notion one's own. Adoption is therefore both literal and analogical.

This brief reminder invites us not to reify the meaning that adoption has acquired nowadays. Throughout history, "adoption" has responded to very different needs, political and economic ones in particular. It is only during the twentieth century that it truly acquires its contemporary meaning: creating a family (Carp). It is therefore essential today to grasp these changes, which already take place within it and lead it to other horizons.

Lesbian, gay, and trans adoptions are an example of this transformation. Today's knowledge-power regime—to use a Foucauldian formulation—is largely anchored on the idea of the body's truth: a body that is able to create a child is a body that *knows* how to create a child. This know-how is valuable only if it is also a *letting-know*-how (Leighton, "Being Adopted"). This is the case with the game of recognizing similarities within adoptive families, which aims to reinforce the idea of family resemblances. Now what must be destabilized is the very idea of the body's truth (Haslanger). Family links, whether based on childbirth or not, are a legal fiction, that is, a social convention certified by institutions. That is the idea that lesbian, gay, and trans adoption highlights, willingly or not. It shows that it is possible to have children without having to act "as if" the adopted children were born of their adoptive parents. As a result, without being assigned to mimic biology, adoption can explore new territory: multiparent families; legal ties among friends; inheritance between relatives, neighbors, colleagues; and so on. These possibilities upset the entire current family order founded on the symbolic force of the body. My critique does not bear upon the legitimate need to access medical data as Martha Satz argues. The question here is not biological data per se but its totemic power. This question is central to critical adoption studies: to better understand adoptive practices that already exist, but also, in the context of an analysis of the epistemological-political regime of which they are a part, to suggest what a "rich[er] relational world" might look like (Foucault, "Social Trimph" 158).

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Visualizing Queer Kinship

LUCY CURZON

My stake in this discussion is—at once—decidedly professional and deeply personal. As a historian of modern and contemporary art, much of my academic practice revolves around critically examining visual representations of LGBTQ+ lives and experiences, from the sexual avant-gardism of early twentieth-century Bloomsbury to Catherine Opie's contemporary photographic portraits. Yet I am also an immigrant, a lesbian moreover, living in the Deep South with an American partner and two US-born children, one of whom (for each parent) is adopted. Our family is thus bound not by so-called "conventional" affinities (whatever those might be) but rather by a sometimes-tangled web of (dis)affirmations from state and federal bodies, including those that oversee immigration, marriage, and adoption. And while I was less conscious of it before, my scholarly examinations of how LGBTQ+ people and their experiences are represented, quite literally brought into recognition through visualization, are now unquestionably linked to my everyday existence. Despite "coming out" many times before, my partner and children are undeniably *visible* evidence of our status as a family. Indeed, we daily negotiate our appearance—from rainbow-strewn pride to closeted assimilation—using skills that are now so rote they appear natural. As such, it is perhaps not surprising that my insights regarding the direction of critical adoption studies are firmly wedded to questions of how we might productively theorize the visibility of queer kinship.

The concept of bionormativity, which legitimates (via the cultural work of normalization) those families who share or have the potential to share genetic material, weighs heavily in this discussion. Having experienced state-level reactions to marriage equality in Alabama, it has become clear to me that "family" is a category that remains, in the end, uniquely defined by biology. To be sure, the legal barriers preventing same-sex couples from accessing the rights—including adoption—that marriage confers were largely eradicated in 2015. Yet despite the outcome of *Obergefell vs. Hodges,* the rhetorical and sometimes literal violence generated by ongoing debate about who has the "privilege" to form a family (and who does not) has inspired widespread fear in LGBTQ+ communities across the US. Now more than ever, the concept of family appears singularly genetic in scope, even though, as Katharine Baker argues, "neither history, nor evolutionary biology, nor moral philosophy dictate[s] a legal regime in which parenthood [or other family relations] must be based on biological connection" (1).

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What I would like to consider, from this point forward, is how we might use critical adoption studies to strategize a visual politics of queer kinship. How do queer families look? What is at stake in our visualization? Are there assets to invisibility? A necessary first step in this endeavour, I argue, is theorizing alternatives to what I would call the "bionormative gaze"—a gaze that restricts, co-opts, or even makes invisible the rich diversity of kinships (queer included) that we find in everyday life. Recent and historical scholarship on visuality in tandem with gender and queer theory is an excellent starting place for thinking about how critical adoption studies might take up this charge. Douglas Crimp, J. Jack Halberstam, Laura Mulvey, and Griselda Pollock, among many others, have already mobilized "ways of looking" that expose patriarchal, heteronormative, and cisnormative privilege. Bionormativity, as we might expect, requires each of these ideologies for its successful functioning. As such, critical adoption studies could begin to explore, for example, how Halberstam's notion of a "transgender look"—which deploys an "alternative vision of time, space, and embodiment" to define transgender subjectivity beyond the gender binary—might be the starting point for thinking about queer kinship's visualization outside the similarly gendered constraints of bionormative looking (87). This might include thinking about how queer families destabilize the bionormative imperative of "familial resemblance," and in so doing, create spaces to visualize multiparent families, contractual families, intentional families, and so forth.

The study of family photographs and cultural memory further offers a theoretical richness upon which critical adoption studies can draw. In this area, Roland Barthes, Emily Hipchen, Marianne Hirsch, Annette Kuhn, Kirsten Emiko McAllister, Jo Spence and Patricia Holland, and Deborah Willis have made pivotal contributions. Hirsch's theorization of the "familial gaze" is particularly useful. This look embodies "the conventions and ideologies of family through which [families] see themselves" and through which they are seen (xi). As such, Hirsch argues, family photographs are useful sites for cultural analysis because they reveal the "dominant mythologies of family life"—the ways in which families position themselves in relation "to conceptions we have inherited, to images we see on television, in advertising, in film" (xvi). Thus not only do such photographs embody "familial representation in a specific cultural and historical *context,*" but in so doing they also show the "possibility of resisting dominant [familial] ideologies" (xvii). It is the latter opportunity that proves, perhaps, the most worthwhile for critical adoption studies to take up with regard to queer kin and their visualization.

In the end, the bionormative regulation of family as a concept offers the state comforting recourse to the convenient but arbitrary armature of biology, which is positioned as the (equally arbitrary) foundation of civic life. In so doing, of course, it imposes strict limits on the class of people allowed to form a family. Moreover, it regulates how families perceive themselves and how they, in turn, are perceived. Alternatives to the bionormative gaze, however, provide an opportunity to make

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visible the fact that these same concepts of family are, in reality, constructions. Such activity likewise demonstrates how bionormativity privileges the visibility of particular communities and marginalizes others by making them invisible. Critical adoption studies, I feel, is the right place to take up this work.

Adoption and Critical Models of Identity: "Searching" for Adoptees' Rights to Know beyond an Ideology of Authenticity

KIMBERLY LEIGHTON

In the past several decades, adoption as an institutional and cultural practice in the US and elsewhere has moved from being defined by secrecy toward being predicated upon some expectation of openness. The moral value of openness can be seen in the acceptance, if not celebration, of the adoptee's "search." One way the metaphysical requirements for what would be deemed a so-called successful search have been made operative is via the authenticity paradigm, specifically through the discourse of the secret. Hidden from the self, the true nature of the adoptee must be discovered in order for, as Betty Jean Lifton puts it, the adoptee to be empowered and healed (128).

A demand for transparency, however, similar to the acceptance of the adoptee's curiosity as "natural," does not necessarily challenge the authenticity paradigm it risks reproducing. Rather, it can reify the idea that there is some natural or pregiven object that is the source of identity, and, as such, that demand for openness can overdetermine the meanings of identity and delimit our understandings of possibility and freedom.

I argue here for the importance of reframing the terms by which so-called searches undertaken in relation to adoption are understood, considered, motivated, and made personally meaningful by those individuals who engage in them as well as by the culture at large. Such a shift is relevant not only for those immediately affected by adoption. The search reflects and reenacts a model of subjection defined in terms of autonomy and authenticity. As pursued within a modern liberal paradigm, the aim of the search has been the self's reunion with its truth, a truth the denial of which has limited the freedom thought to be possible through authentic self-knowledge.[1]

The success of such a quest in this model requires two things: the discovery of some epistemic object that can satisfy the demands of the search, and the discovery of the means by which to understand, read, and interpret that object, such that it

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can validate the subject not as determined but as free. The object and episteme, in Michel Foucault's terms, together engender the possibility of the search as a technology of domination. But can the search be a technique of self, or, as some have argued about desire in general, is the "desire to know" oneself in relation to such things as relatedness thoroughly normalizing?[2] I offer here that one way the search can resist normalization is to refuse conducting it teleologically, in other words, with Truth as its goal, a refusal all the more strengthened when the "desire to know" is not explained away by the value some assign to *genetic* origins. To search not for the Truth of the self but for new modes of being, and with an attitude of curiosity, is what, following Foucault, I understand as an ethical practice.

The [Ethical] Search

As a common topic in contemporary media, adoption is often, if not always, framed in terms of the issue of *origins,* with a particular focus on the idea of a reunion with such origins.[3] While it seems that what is being reunited is the mother and child, the search is often scripted as for one's *true self.* Such reunions of self and self, like some metaphorical key in a science fiction film, once completed, are expected to reveal the Truth of identity.[4] The body of kinship, while it represents our connections to and with others through a consanguineal line, has force in such a paradigm because it is considered the origin of our individual identity. The self's union with others, imagined via the discourse of genealogy, functions to secure for the self a belief in its own originary and unified meaning. To be more precise, the positing of an essential nature of the self—even when its limits are defined in relation to others—not only constructs the ontology of the self as given or natural. It also figures the achievement of autonomy in relation to acts of knowing this nature; it is through such (self-)knowledge claims that we achieve the union that is our (individual) originary state.

This fantasy or vision of the search as providing the truth of self through biogenetic information can be seen in the popular work of Lifton, in which who we *are* is a kind of given truth and the desire to know ourselves is itself natural. Sandra Patton summarizes Lifton's position as drawing from "a view of kinship and identity . . . steeped in the 'ideology of authenticity'" (111–12). The ideology of authenticity that Patton refers to involves not only a belief in an authentic self but also a figuration of that authentic self as both a *goal* and a *right* such that it defines a space through which the self can enact its freedom. What concerns me here is not only how the body gets read as providing the source or truth of identity but how the project of knowing that body, of discovering that identity (that exists present inside oneself) is figured in such literature as a means of claiming political *agency.* For Lifton, "The very idea of search and reunion is empowering. . . . Healing

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begins when adoptees take control of their lives by making the decision to search, . . . [to set out on] this forbidden journey toward the self" (128).

The construction of adoptee rights using terms from the psychological language of trauma, as in Lifton's work, contracts together a rights approach and a normative-health discourse, framing the argument for equal access to birth records in terms of a natural, normative need. What is most relevant to this project is how both discourses rely upon a notion of a natural and given self. The slide from adoptees' *rights* into adoptees' *healing* is an easy one because of the notion of self these discourses share. To advocate ethically for adoptees' rights to know, however, we must use arguments that refuse to rely on the view, propped up by a bionormative understanding of identity as pregiven, natural, biological, or genetic, that what must be known is our "true selves."[5]

Denaturalizing Curiosity and the Desire to Know

As we must resist naturalizing identity, so too we must resist naturalizing curiosity if the desire to know is to encourage ethical practices of self-knowing. Lifton naturalizes curiosity, viewing the shame and secrecy of adoption as repressing it, reiterating the limits of the "authentic identity" model. For Foucault, however, rather than a practice through which we know the nature of the self, curiosity is an action through which one can nurture a *relation* with the self ("Masked" 325). As an ethical practice, a care of and for the self, curiosity encourages an aesthetics of existence: desiring to know who we are becomes a lifelong project. Denaturalizing curiosity allows engagement in searches that make more possible new ways of problematizing identity practices. *Genealogies* of the ways in which we become related to others are thus ethical, moreover, as they further enable us as subjects capable of pursuing our desires to know—as *agents of our desires*—without relying on a notion of an authentic, natural self. As a technique of self, then, the search can offer a means both of claiming our desires to know our identities and of relating to those identities differently, encouraging new possibilities for being ourselves through our relations with ourselves and with others.

I want then to suggest that the popularized notion of the adoptee's searching for birth family can be a very useful contact point through which to analyze the production of the subject. For Foucault, analyzing the genealogy of the subject requires that we examine techniques of the *self* and technologies of the *subject* together, "to take into account the points where the technologies of domination of individuals over one another *have recourse to* processes by which the individual acts upon himself. And conversely," he continues, we have "to take into account the points where the techniques of the self are integrated into structures of coercion or domination. The contact point, where the individuals are driven [and known]

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by others is tied to the way they conduct themselves, is what we can call, I think, government" ("About" 203, emphasis added).[6]

I do not want to deny the body's importance to constructions of the self. But as "the soul is the prison of the body," there are readings of the body that continue to be presented in soul-like terms, that conceive of the body as containing the truth of the self (Foucault, *Discipline* 30). Such a *truth*-oriented notion of bodily life lends footing to technologies of domination, rendering the body docile and the self subjected.[7] In contrast, as a desire to know the self through *genealogical*—rather than *genetic*—narratives of identity, the adoptee's "search" is a continuous and open-ended *process of identity-making.* The desire motivating this process is a desire that can be "integrated into structures of coercion" as well as a desire that can resist such coercion. To move away from knowing the body as containing the truth of identity and toward a problematization of such knowing by examining its constitutive effects on the subject prompts us to ask, *why* do we want to know? And what makes that knowledge *meaningful?*

For the adopted self's desire to know the self through the searching process to be considered ethical, then, it must be clear how a self might practice the search in a way that resists coercive or dominating technologies. The search, as an aesthetic project, must open up the self to new practices of identity, new ways to engage with itself as not-yet-fully-known, to be in relation with itself. While genetic origins may matter to one's sense of identity, possibilities for how each person makes origins matter is what the search should open up. For Foucault, at least, "The game is worthwhile insofar as we don't know what will be the end" ("Truth" 9).

Notes

1. I am not claiming here that the form of "the search" is idiosyncratic to adoption. To the contrary, I want to suggest that how the body and its relatedness are mapped through heredity searches in general—mistakenly called *genealogies* even though their focus is on genetics—should be interpreted as in direct dialogue with the meaning of "the search" in adoption discourse.
2. See McWhorter. I am suggesting how relatedness prompts us to reconsider *desire* and its effects and arguing for the necessity of reevaluating desire and its role in Foucauldian genealogy elsewhere.
3. It is interesting that adoption, as a space regarding the lack of knowledge about origins, has become such a sign or symbol (perhaps a kind of inverted metonym) for such knowledge. As globalism and late capitalism fragment culture, there is simultaneously a fetishization of genealogy in the US. Rather than adoption and reunion performing the drama of self-discovery in high relief, I wonder whether it does not instead reflect the failure of genealogy or hereditary knowledge to erase the (constitutive) lack present in the subject. Thus adoption could be thought to function as the needed supplement to identity, as identity (necessarily?) fails to satisfy the subject's (unsatisfiable) desire for self-certainty.

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4. I previously explored the impossibility of such so-called completion and suggest some of the implications of the fantasy of epistemological completeness at stake in the identification of one's true self via a narrative of origin ("Being").
5. For a definition of *bionormative,* see Haslanger, "Family". For the implications that this bionormative understanding of identity has for the family, see Leighton, "Analogies."
6. The added "[and known]" comes from a different version of the same lecture. I have included it as it is key to my argument.
7. Foucault dismisses the idea that we have truly left behind the premodern view that individuals must be punished through their bodies. Rather than self-knowledge being a means to freedom, Foucault claims that, to the extent that self-knowledge is tied to knowing our true selves (and that such knowing is a requirement of being recognized as a subject), such a model of liberation is, itself, imprisoning (*Discipline* 30).

"As-If" Belongings: Legal Fictions and Adoptive Identities

BARBARA YNGVESSON

My interest in the "as-ifs" of adoptive kinship and the legal fictions in which they are expressed began with the adoption of my son in the early 1980s, and more specifically with the arrival of his new birth certificate a few weeks after the adoption was finalized. The birth certificate affirmed his status as my legal child but did so through the legal fiction that I had given birth to him in the Marin County General Hospital in San Rafael, California, a bureaucratic sleight-of-hand that placed me in a city and hospital where I had never been, in a state where I had only resided many years previously.

This legal fiction, as Judith Modell notes in her classic analysis of American adoptive kinship, is a way of managing the tension set up by "the legal axiom of 'substitutability' upon which adoption rests" and "the presumed 'reality' of a genealogical connection" (2). By constituting adopted children "as-if-begotten" and their parents "as-if-genealogical," the amended birth certificate and the sealed record system that supports it in effect "paper over" a tension "at the presumed core of [American] kinship" (2): that "the relationship of blood cannot be ended or altered," regardless of its legal standing (Schneider 25). "An ex-husband or ex-wife is possible. . . . But an ex-mother is not" (24).[1] The altered birth certificate produces adoptive kinship as a kind of counterfeit form of what is considered to be real or natural relatedness, in a system of kinship that "*is defined* by its blindness" to the place of law and "the social *effectivity* of the market" (Žižek 18–20) in producing biogenetic relatedness as the natural order of things. "It cannot take it

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into consideration without dissolving itself, without losing its consistency" (Žižek 20; Yngvesson, "Going" 12).[2]

I suggest that it is the lived experience (and emotional effect) of occupying a position on the unstable (but normally invisible) threshold at which a system (of kinship) may either dissolve itself or achieve its consistency that "*compels an alertness to the terms of a relationship that is unusual in an American context,*" as Modell so aptly put it (4, emphasis added). Marilyn Strathern describes a similar kind of alertness that is triggered by the "ethnographic moment" and the ethnographer's positioning on the "threshold of understanding" (11) in an ethnographic field of relations.[3] While Modell's research, and my own experience as an adoptive parent, placed us (and our adoptive children) on such a threshold in the American context, research on transnational adoption underscores the parallels in a more global arena.

This is particularly true of transnational adoptees who return to their countries of origin on a so-called "roots trip," a journey of self-discovery that has become virtually obligatory (uncomfortably so for many transnational adoptees) and has been the focus of my research for the past two decades. Both the longing of some transnationally adopted children and adults to "go back" and the refusal of others to succumb to the experienced pressure to do so is related, as I have argued in earlier work, to the contradictions of adoptive kinship, contradictions that are more visible because they are often written on the body of the (transracial) adoptee. In transnational adoption, the adoptability of a child is made possible by the child's status as a legal orphan (Hague Convention, Articles 26, 27)—a legal fiction that determines the child's availability, or "freedom" to circulate in adoption (Hague Convention, Article 4)—as well as by official policies governing the immigration of children who enter a country with a pending adoption decree.

As is the case with the fiction that an adoptable child is an "as-if-begotten" child in domestic adoptions, legal orphan status secures the possibility of incorporating a child into a new family and nation by officially canceling his or her connection to other parents (and in some cases, to other nations). As anthropologist Annelise Riles has noted in a discussion of the work of philosopher Hans Vaihinger on "as-if" knowledge, such knowledge and the legal fictions in which it is expressed constitute "a kind of knowledge that is consciously false and for this very reason irrefutable" (802). As Riles observes, "The As If is a kind of subjunctive position, therefore: *it is neither true nor not true, Vaihinger insists, but rather is itself the tension between what is true and what is not true*" (802, emphasis added). As-if concepts involve a kind of "counterfeiting" or "logical falsification" of the external world so that "a productive handling of it can be achieved" (Vaihinger, *Die Philosophie,* qtd. in Iser 142).[4]

What does this mean, in the case of adoptive kinship, with its "subjunctive" positioning of the adopted and the "as-if" forms of relatedness it offers to birth and adoptive kin? I suggest that the legal fictions of adoption are most productive in

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creating a potential space and time—what the child psychologist D. W. Winnicott describes as "the continuity-contiguity moment" (101)—that can make "appearance appear, from a position just on [the] edges" of so-called biogenetic or natural kinship (Buci-Glucksman 60). In this way, the as-ifs of adoptive kinship can reveal the contingency (the as-if-ness, if you will) of conventional kin relations, their dependence on law for their realization—that is, for their authorization as real (kinship).

This entanglement of the fictive with the real in adoptive kinship, and its productivity in making appearances appear, is vividly demonstrated in Elise Prébin's account of "being 'adopted back' into my birth family" (180), a process that she likens to a more general "'reintegration' of transnational adoptees to the birth country or birth family" that "is not organized against adoptive citizenship and adoptive families" but rather *modeled on it.* As Prébin argues, "Problematic because they are past and yet present. Lingering and yet severed, inalienable and yet unacceptable, blood ties are turned into a middle-ground alternative, a relatedness that combines and accepts a plurality of belongings and fluidity of identities—no matter the outcome of the meeting" (179–80).

Likewise, adoptive fictions and the "as if" relations they presume are productive of new forms of relatedness that have taken shape in the "Gatherings" of Korean-born adults who were adopted as infants or children in a number of Euro-American nations, including Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Australia, and the United States (Kim, *Adopted* 211–48). Like other adopted children and adults who return each year to visit the nations where they were born, "as if" they were Ethiopian (Yngvesson and Coutin 177–78), Chilean (Yngvesson, "Going" 18–24), or Chinese (Volkman 81–108), Korean-born adoptees manage their relationships to one another and to their birth nation "as if" they were Korean. This is a form of relating in which their orphan status and the abandonments in which it is entangled is a central theme (Kim, "Our" 520–22), even as their adoptive status ("as if" Swedish, Norwegian, or American) has transformed them into objects of desire in the nation that gave them away (Yngvesson, *Belonging* 39–58). The "Gatherings" suggest not only how the "as if" relationship of adoptive kinship constitutes the subjectivity of adoptees but how this relationship also "grounds" a continually shifting virtual community of persons who regard themselves as neither Korean nor as "not Korean" but rather as occupying a "third space" (Hübinette 16) or a "fourth culture" that is based on "a common experience of being adopted and Korean" (Stock, qtd. in Kim, "Wedding" 59).

In conclusion, I suggest that the fictions of adoptive kinship—the "as if" orphaned child, the "as if" begotten child, and the "as if" Korean, Ethiopian, Chilean, and other adults who return each year to establish relations of virtual kinship with (former) mothers or brothers, and of virtual community with other adoptees—can illuminate the tensions and ambiguities (the tension between what is true and not true) that underpin "real" identities that are always just out of reach but seem to

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take shape in the context of adoptive ones. Just as the "as ifs" of adoption demand a return, unsettling the closures that adoption seeks in securing a genealogical order of things, so too do returns bring the adopted up against these closures and the histories that shape them: child welfare policy in Korea, where foreign adoption became a way of "letting die" (Foucault, *Society Must* 247) children whose illegitimacy or biracial heritage allowed them no place in Korea's strongly patrilineal society, producing an adopted diaspora of some 200,000 Koreans (Kim, *Adopted*); the one-child policy in China, which has led thousands of women to abandon their female children and thousands of Euro-American parents to adopt them since the "opening" of China to adoption in 1992 (Johnson 1–26); and more generally, the poverty of women whose children become vulnerable to adoption because they are not "one of us" but who through processes of rescue and custody can be transformed into "one of ours" by their placement with families in other nations (Yngvesson, *Belonging* 57–58).

Encountering the closures (the clean breaks and irrevocable relinquishments) that established some children as adoptable produces new "as ifs"—the mother who relates to her baby "as if" she is adoptive (Yngvesson, "Refiguring" 562–64), the woman who relates to her (birth) mother "as if" she is not her mother in order to establish a connection with her (Borshay Liem 2000). These and other forms of connection take shape in the potential spaces opened up by the closures of adoptive kinship, unsettling the very ground that fixes "real" belongings in place.

Notes

1. I reiterate here the oft-noted point, in the context of extensive debates about the nature of Schneider's data, that he is referring to American kinship as a (dominant) *cultural* system: that is, a set of assumptions about what constitutes various kinds of relatives. He is not referring to the way kinship actually works in everyday practice.
2. Žižek, discussing Alfred Sohn-Rethel, is referring here to commodity exchange and the "as ifs" required for it to operate. The "as if" involves the assumption of an "other body," an immaterial "body within the body" or "sublime object" that survives the act of exchange "with its beauty immaculate" (Žižek 18). I have suggested that the circulation of children in adoption involves a similar assumption about "the child" as an object of exchange ("Going" 12).
3. I am indebted to extensive conversations with Susan Coutin about the ethnographic dimensions of this experience, in conjunction with a joint research project we are currently engaged in.
4. Wolfgang Iser moves back and forth between Vaihinger's original (untranslated) text and Charles K. Ogden's translation in his discussion of "as if" phenomena, and references the untranslated version in this passage.

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