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Sallie Han, Cecília Tomori

Adoption and fostering

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Jessaca Leinaweaver, Diana Marre
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Adoption and fostering are two terms whose definitions overlap around the concept of an adult caring for a child not born to them. Adoption can be very amply described as “the purposeful taking on of a kinship role, responsibility, or duty vis-à-vis another person,” a definition that is as broad as “kinship” itself because it can be about caregiving, inheritance, identity, compliance with religious commitments, and more, as well as simultaneously reinscribing existing inequalities (Leinaweaver 2018).

Adoption, in this sense of the rearranging or claiming of kin ties, is widespread across time and place. For example, at the turn of the previous millennium, Roman emperors famously deployed adoption to arrange the heirs they wanted (Corbier 1991). One thousand years later, Elise Berman documented that for the 250-person village in the Republic of the Marshall Islands where she works, a quarter of children are adopted and a full “90 percent of households include someone adopted in or out” (2014: 579). In early 2020, as we write this essay, an elected official in Arizona has recently been arrested on suspicion of human trafficking, namely recruiting pregnant Marshallese women to give birth in the US and place their infants for adoption.

These three brief examples illustrate three different ways in which the concept of adoption has worked. They are not entirely commensurate, because in each case adoption is meant to accomplish something different and context-specific (inheritance, kinship, the “priceless child” in the sense of Zelizer 1985), but they share an underlying sense of arranging kinship ties with intention and action.

In what follows, we outline a range of anthropological ways of thinking adoption—only one of which is primarily reproductive. The first conceptualization of adoption we offer is “adoption as (assisted) reproduction.” In this discussion, we review anthropological (primarily cultural anthropology) research on adoption and fostering as processes and intentions, and show how these practices inform the anthropology of reproduction. This framework, however, requires aligning mainly with the perspective of adopting parent(s). What stories are silenced from this framework? Approaches that center the perspective of birth parent(s) include adoption as reproductive injustice, outsourcing of reproduction, or stratified reproduction (Colen 1995). Perspectives that center on adopted persons include the “afterlives” of adoption: What it means to have been adopted, searches, the creation of “families we choose” (Weston 1991). We illustrate each of these analytics with material from our own research projects on fostering and domestic
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Adoption and fostering and international (also known as transnational or intercountry; see Leinaweaver 2019) adoption in Peru and Spain, and from colleagues working globally.

These three italicized “characters” in the preceding paragraph represent what is typically referred to as the “adoption triad” in social work analysis and practice; as other scholars have commented (Ginsburg and Rapp 1995), there are many more people involved in adoption besides these three figures, and we close by suggesting future directions for scholars of reproduction to consider that address the work of mediators/brokers (e.g., Leinaweaver 2009; Thompson 2011; Mariner 2019; San Román and Rotabi 2017), policymakers (San Román et al. 2015; Cheney and Rotabi 2017; Salvo Agoglia and Marre 2020), and others.

Adoption as reproduction

As Terrell and Modell write, “At core, adoption is about who belongs and how—a subject of immense political as well as disciplinary significance” (1994: 160). Adoption and fostering have been analyzed across the traditional four fields of anthropology—with cultural anthropology predominating, but with some work appearing in linguistic (e.g., Frekko et al. 2015; Goldfarb 2016; Keen 2014: 20–21), biological (e.g., Silk 1980, 1987), and archaeological research (e.g., Allen and Richardson 1971: 49; Ensor 2011: 207).

“Fostering” is a term sociocultural anthropologists often use to refer to the circulation of children without the express intervention of a state. The Old English word ‘fōstor’ connoted nourishment, sustenance, and nursing. This positive valence of lavishing care upon and tending to helps fostering resemble what we see in Crittenden’s chapter on alloparenting and Block’s on grandmothers in the present volume. Fostering, in this sense, is widespread (see, for example, Berman 2014; Bledsoe 1990; Bodenhorn 2000; Carroll 1970; Carsten 1991; Fonseca 1986; Goody 1982, 1984; Gottlieb 2004; Guemple 1979; Leinaweaver 2008; Stack 1974; Strong 2001), and can be an effective response to structural challenges as well as a sound strategy.

Figure 39.1  Courtesy of Miguel Gaggiotti.
for creating and reinforcing inter-household ties that many people worldwide rely on for sustenance.

By contrast, state-involved adoption in the legal, “modern” sense of the term eliminates many of the elements that make fostering effective (and see the Browner and Sargent chapter in this book on the significance of the state for reproduction). In plenary adoption, one of its present-day forms, the connections between “sending” and “receiving” families are minimized or made obsolete, and the structural inequalities that make it possible are not solved. Plenary adoption—a requirement of the 1993 Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption—means that the child’s legal ties to his or her original family are completely severed (see, for example, Duncan 2000; Howell 2006, 2009, 2010, 2016; Briggs and Marre 2009; Fonseca et al. 2015; Modell 1994; Yngvesson 2003, 2010). In instances of international adoption, which we view as a form of reproductive travel or cross-border reproductive care (Inhorn and Patrizio 2009, 2012), the parties are further disconnected by geographic distance. That severance is made more complete in the case of “stranger adoption,” as opposed to kin or step-parent adoption, where the birth parent and adoptive parent cannot know one another’s identities.

We view adoption as a form of “third-party reproduction” or assisted reproduction, comparable to the processes described in Marcia Inhorn’s chapter and others in this book. In third-party reproduction or assisted reproductive technologies, the gametes, embryo, or gestation is provided by a third party other than the person(s) who will raise the resulting child. Many people think of adoption as fundamentally different from contemporary technologies of reproduction, but we see it as part of the same set of practices—framed by an ideology of choice, but constrained by realities of law, geography, availability, affordability, or cost-effectiveness. Indeed, medically assisted reproduction and contemporary forms of adoption coexist and mutually influence one another. Adoption, like other forms of third-party reproduction, normalizes the idea that reproduction can involve more than two people, incorporates so-called foreign elements into a family, and raises new and pressing questions about rights to knowledge about origins.

As an illustration of adoption-as-reproduction from the perspective of the prospective adoptive parent, we turn now to what international adoption looked like in Spain at the turn of this most recent century. In 1975, at the end of the 40-year Franco dictatorship, Spain had one of the highest birth rates in the European Union. The rate plummeted throughout the 1980s to “lowest low” in the mid-1990s. In Spain, delaying and transferring childbearing became the only “choice” for many women who wished to have children (Alvarez 2018; Marre 2009a; Marre et al. 2018; Mills et al. 2011). As a woman experiencing infertility problems told Marre, “I always wanted to have children, but we wanted to wait until we had stable jobs. Nobody told me it would be too late.” A single mother offered Leinaweaver a slightly flippant observation, commenting that “Spanish young adults are selfish and don’t want to give up the life of going out with friends and staying up late” (2013: 106). During the 1990s, transnational adoption started to gain a public profile. In 2004, Spain led Europe in the number of adopted children and was second in the world after only the United States.

For Spanish upper, middle-class, and even working-class women who couldn’t bear a child in the traditional way, adoption was until the middle of the 2000s often the first choice, for reasons related to affordability and access. In a survey of Spanish parents adopting transnationally since the 1990s, 40.4% cited the “inability to have a biological child” as their reason for adopting, while 49.6% reported that “adoption was their choice” (Rodríguez Jaume and Jareño Ruiz 2015). Marre’s ethnographic data shows that for some families, adoption was their first choice because they could not afford the time required for a pregnancy and the first years of a baby’s life. This may partly explain the high percentage of couples citing adoption as “a choice”
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rather than as a biological imperative. An adopting woman who held a management position told Marre, “I want to be a mother, but I can’t manage a pregnancy and I don’t have time to give bottles and change diapers. That’s why I want a child that’s […] about two years old or so.”

A couple that worked in advertising also told her that they needed a child that was “already somewhat raised.” To them, this meant a toddler or preschooler who knew how to walk, eat, sleep, and use the toilet.

Another factor that led would-be parents to frame adoption as a choice was the widespread belief that there were millions of children languishing in apparent orphanages who required “rescue” (Briggs 2003; Bergquist 2009; Cheney 2014, 2016; Cheney and Rotabi 2017; Cruz et al. 2011). Contrary to this belief, most of the children placed in international adoption had living mothers or birth family members, some of whom brought their children to orphanages because of the difficult circumstances they found themselves in, and others who were deceived or coerced by intermediaries (Bharghava 2005; Briggs 2012; Fonseca 2010; Graff 2008; Howell 2006; Marre 2010a, 2010b; Mezmur 2009; Rotabi 2012; Rotabi and Gibson 2012; San Román 2013; San Román and Rotabi 2017; Smolin 2004, 2006, 2007; Terre des Hommes and UNICEF 2010).

Strikingly, some prospective adoptive parents and adoption professionals describe the adoption process as pregnancy-like (see Part VI of this volume). Some scholars, too, have traced adoption’s analogues to biologized reproduction (e.g. Howell and Marre 2006: 301–302). In a “pre-pregnancy” stage, similar to the “zero trimester” concept coined to expand the period of reproductive surveillance (Waggoner 2017), people make the decisions to adopt, what kind of adoption and, if international, from where,3 and experience being evaluated by professionals for suitability (Howell and Marre 2006: 302–303). These actions are undertaken amidst emotional and subjective work, connecting to an unknown future child (see Mariner 2019: 29).

Subsequently, the equivalence to pregnancy is when prospective parents are approved, and added to a waiting list. Some adoptive parents in Spain called it a “bureaucratic pregnancy” (Marre 2004; Jociles Rubio and Charro Lobato 2008: 113). A social worker interviewed by Kathryn Mariner calls the process, pointedly, high-risk pregnancy (2019: 36, 97; see also Howell 2001, 2003), as a fall-through is always a possibility, particularly in the contemporary US domestic adoption sphere that Mariner studies—analogous, in many ways, to the descriptions in Erica Van der Sijpt’s chapter on reproductive loss. These qualified pregnancies are unpredictable in terms of time: One mother quoted in a Spanish newspaper described the process of adopting her child as “like a pregnancy, though eight years long instead of nine months.”4

Finally, the birthing stage is comparable to the prospective parents being notified that they have been assigned a particular child and is completed when the child is formally placed with them (Howell and Marre 2006: 303–306). That formal placement is the end goal of the process. In the early years of medically assisted reproduction in Spain, as is indeed the case globally (Inhorn and Birenbaum-Carmeli 2008; Hampshire and Simpson 2015), the greater success rates and cost-efficiency of transnational adoption made the latter more economically and emotionally affordable. A Spanish mother who adopted from China in the mid-2000s explained to Marre her decision to adopt: “Adoption is cheaper [than ART] and the results are more certain because at the end of the process there is always a child. We couldn’t afford the unknown numbers of assisted reproductive treatments we would have needed to become parents.” But by the time we are writing this, although the population of “waiting” adults approved to adopt remains extensive (Selman 2009: 591), the numbers of transnational adoptions have dramatically fallen while medically assisted reproduction became more common.5 Indeed, we believe that medically assisted reproduction has been normalized in Spain in part due to the discursive work of transnational adopters and adoption professionals whose efforts to destigmatize adoption bore broader fruit.
Note the closure of the discussion of adoption as pregnancy after birthing in which the child has been assigned and goes to live with new parents. This is an illustration of how the adoption-as-reproduction framing—indeed, like the bulk of the present handbook on the anthropology of reproduction—maintains the focus on the “perinatal” period (to extend the analogy further). In this sense, it is perhaps ironic that our chapter is set within the care as reproducing kinship section because this most common focus on the procedural aspects of adoption itself can take scholarly precedence over discussions of the nuances of post-adoptive parenting. Adoptive parenting has, however, been explored by some scholars, who have highlighted parenting practices meant to effectively “kin” adopted children, a “process by which a foetus or newborn child is brought into a significant and permanent relationship with a group of people, and the connection is expressed in a conventional kin idiom” (Howell 2006: 8). Far less well studied, though, are the particular affordances of life as an adopted person (though see Yngvesson 2003; Yngvesson and Coutin 2006). This may indicate a sense that the process of adoption is the novel one, worthy of study, while the everyday activities of life as an adopted person (or a member of an adoptive family) are unremarkable in their similarity to other families.

To conclude this section, we note that for the anthropology of reproduction, this form of adoption has been rich food for thought. It has opened up important lines of inquiry on topics such as stratified reproduction, reproductive mobilities, and outsourcing/offshoring reproduction. It is strong evidence “that kinship is produced through social, linguistic, and legal practices rather than asserted through genetic codes” (Leinaweaver 2018). Such involvement of third parties can make it possible for people to satisfy their “desire” to reproduce (Strathern 1995), regardless of medical conditions, maternal age, marital status, or sexual preference, and so we can, as well, acknowledge how adoption can expand the possibilities of parenting, both to those who are medically infertile as well as to the “socially infertile,” such as queer parents (see chapters by Twine and Smietana and by Falu in this volume and Lewin 2005) or single parents by choice (Hertz et al 2016; Jociles Rubio and Medina Plana 2013).

As cultural anthropologists researching adoption, we—like many of our peers (e.g., Cardarello 2012; De Graeve 2013; Kim 2010; Lewin 2005; Modell 1994; Seligmann 2013)—are wary of analyzing or describing adoption primarily as a process whose end is reproduction, in the narrow sense of expanding a family. This perspective requires aligning with the adopting parent’s perspective, something difficult to avoid given that the adopting parent’s perspective is often more accessible than that of the birth parent, particularly as many adoption researchers are based in wealthy, industrialized nations where international adoption’s endpoints lie. Yet, recent anthropological research on adoption works to trouble this perspective and expand our understanding of adoption’s entailments (see, e.g., van Wichelen 2019a; Marre et al 2018; see also Perreau 2014). What stories are silenced from this framework? Who else might adoption implicate, and accordingly, who else might the anthropology of reproduction learn from in the silences and absences of reproduction?

Perspectives that center the birth parent

In anthropologist Pauline Turner Strong’s words: “Adoption across political and cultural borders may simultaneously be an act of violence and an act of love, an excruciating rupture and a generous incorporation, and an appropriation of valued resources and a constitution of personal ties” (2001: 471). We see her gesturing here toward perspectives that recognize birth parent or birth family experiences, such as adoption as reproductive injustice—the global, unequal relocation of children (Franklin 2011; Luna and Luker 2013; Ross and Solinger 2017; Smietana et al. 2018)—or adoption as the absence or erasure of reproduction (extracting children, “as if”
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reproduction didn’t happen). With these perspectives, anthropologists of adoption can identify it as more comparable to the processes discussed elsewhere (see also chapters by Browner and Sargent and by Mullings in this volume Mariner 2019; Roberts 1997; 2002).

Adoption is an often unrecognized form of outsourcing of reproductive labor, even as the transactions involved can generate profits for others. Access to diverse women’s reproductive contributions is possible due to “the critical significance of global and regional class hierarchies and the intersections of gender, migration, race, and nationality within the context of late global capitalism” (Constable 2016: 46). Some authors consider these practices to be a form of “euphemized violence” (Anagnost 1995: 34) against working-class, impoverished, and marginalized women. Birth mothers who place their children for adoption, for diverse reasons, may be simultaneously unknown, invisibilized, and stigmatized or misunderstood (Mariner 2019). These women may be denied access to reproductive rights, healthcare, and justice in their own countries even as they may provide children for adoption (or eggs, or uteruses) to upper- and middle-class families (Briggs and Marre 2009; Fonseca et al. 2015; Marre et al. 2018). Through open adoption practices, many children are “placed” in adoption even before they are born, making it in fact strikingly similar to surrogacy, except for the lack of compensation for birth mothers (Briggs and Marre 2014). This is the same system that provides the labor of housekeepers and nannies at low cost, a system within which “women’s cheap labor is not only used to produce for the world market, but also to ‘reproduce’ for the world market” (Gupta 2006: 32).

In this sense, these reproductive practices are an extreme case of stratified reproduction. This term was coined by Colen (1995) to describe the inequalities that traverse the process of transferring childrearing labor from middle-class New York women to Black and brown West Indian immigrant women, who had left their children behind to be looked after by friends and family, usually also women. Colen argued that these activities are insufficiently recognized as labor, instead regarded as an extension of “women’s supposedly ‘natural’ nurturing and caregiving” (1986: 54).

An example comes from Leinaweaver’s research in adoption files in the Peruvian province of Ayacucho. One such file recounts the story of infant Luisa, whose mother died in childbirth. Her father was older, a farmer, and impoverished; he asked Luisa’s mother’s sibling to care for the baby, with the help of other relatives. When Luisa became ill, the relative brought her to the local orphanage to receive medical care as a temporary resident. As Leinaweaver wrote in her analysis of this case, public employees, looking at the same events that motivated Luisa’s entry into the state system, saw an elderly widower unable to care for his daughter who simply gave the baby away to his wife’s brother, also an elderly widower. “The baby was not only ill but also malnourished, and these factors taken together were enough for the orphanage staff to paint Luisa as ‘morally and materially abandoned.’ In Luisa’s own best interests, the adoption lawyer concurred, she should be put up for adoption” (Leinaweaver 2007: 174). The file shows that Luisa’s father and uncle were both interviewed and stated that they were opposed to her adoption, but this was insufficient to prevent it from happening (Leinaweaver 2015: 95). Leinaweaver interpreted this story as a form of stratified reproduction in which the kinship practices and preferences of a rural, impoverished, elderly, Indigenous family were expressly ignored and silenced.

As Ginsburg and Rapp wrote, “Who is normatively entitled to refuse childbearing, to be a parent, to be a caretaker, to have other caretakers for their children, to give nurture or to give culture (or both)?” (1995: 3). Their questions are directly pertinent to the reproductive injustices that a supply-side view of adoption reveals. We might add, in turning to our final discussion: Who is normatively entitled to know their kin, to understand their personal history, or to receive nurture or culture (or both) in the context in which they were born? This set of questions brings us to adopted persons themselves.
Perspectives that center the adopted person

As an adopted young woman told Marre some years ago, “You are an adopted person for your whole life.” This statement asks us to seek not only reproductive justice for women who give birth and who parent children, but also reproductive justice for those who were born and raised in a context of reproductive injustice. Having been adopted, in some cases, has the effect of perpetual infantilization—“children forever,” in the words of Salvo and Marre (2020). Certain forms of closed or stranger adoption, in legislative contexts where openness has not been prioritized, mean that adopted persons have fewer rights to information about their origins than non-adopted persons. Barbara Yngvesson’s research on “roots trips” and the notion of “return” for internationally adopted persons set the bar on this topic (Yngvesson 2003; Yngvesson and Coutin 2006; see also Howell 2009; Kim 2010; Salles 2012; Van Wichelen 2019b).

Persons born through the reproductive mobilities and outsourcings of the previous generation may be structurally vulnerable when they lack the right to access information about their origins. In Spain, current legislation recognizes the right of adopted people to search for their birth families or for information about their origins. But it does not treat assisted reproduction in the same way, instead maintaining the anonymity of gamete and embryo donors (Ballesteros et al. 2016; Igareda 2016; Rivas et al. 2019). For those born via assisted reproduction in Spain, current legislation thereby forecloses their future rights to information about their origins. And, because genetic material from Spain circulates throughout Europe, this law affects people born to families beyond Spain. Marre’s research has found that reproductive mobilities in and to Spain offer some people the ability to form the families they want. But in doing so, they also help to create a class of children who have fewer rights than their peers.

One approach taken by Leinaweaver is to analyze adoption as migration, emphasizing the movement, and analogy to other migrants, rather than the rearrangement of kinship ties. She suggests that doing this opens a door into everything that happens subsequently to the adoption itself, displacing the centrality of the original moment in favor of the lives that follow—as migration scholars, too, focus not so much on the act of migration but on the subsequent everyday lives of migrants (e.g., Coe 2011; Dreby 2010; Marre 2009b; Orellana 2009). Leinaweaver argues that the migration lens thus uncovers some of the persistent discomforts that preclude open conversations about racial difference and minority status in an adoptive context, that is, one where children have been caused to migrate as part of their recruitment into families. Race and racial difference play a crucial role in the identity development of these adoptees, and their significance is all the greater because of the countering effects of kinship discourse—that is, because adoptees are family (Leinaweaver 2014: 63).

Conclusion

The range of perspectives we share here is not an exhaustive list. Many adoptions are partly produced through and supported by the involvement of mediators, from the official—social workers and attorneys (Mariner 2019; Leinaweaver et al. 2017)—to the everyday, the family members, teachers, neighbors, and community members who evaluate or ratify adoptive reproduction (Goldfarb 2016: 48). These third-party supports are analogous, in some ways, to the midwives and doulas considered in the chapters by El Kotni and Searcy and Casteñeda in this book, and we look forward to new work by emerging scholars on this compelling topic of multi-party reproduction, alloparenting, and generalized reproductive support. In this chapter, by reviewing the role that standpoint takes in anthropological research on adoption, we have shown that
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Adoption studies have played an important role in expanding anthropology of reproduction more generally, into realms such as “who’s not reproducing” and “what happens afterward.”

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Notes

1 Leinaweaver writes, it is worth remembering that the term [adoption] is also fairly widely used to describe those who have begun using a new technology, those who take home new pets, those who have agreed to sponsor a stretch of highway or a valued object (Leinaweaver 2008: 171n5), those immigrants who have become naturalized (Coutin 2003: 517), and others (Katz Rothman 2006: 22). In all those cases there is an element of taking in or taking on, of claiming responsibility or authority over something which was not originally one’s own.


3 There are different processes for different countries, and prospective adopters must be found suitable according to the standards of both their own place of residence, and those of the sending country they select: “For example, while Spain permits adoptions by same-sex couples, many countries, including Peru, do not” (Leinaweaver 2013: 32).


5 Although surrogacy is not allowed in Spain, many Spanish families travel to the United States, Mexico, Canada, Ukraine, or Georgia to work with a surrogate. Assisted reproductive treatments’ success rate for older mothers has improved in recent years, due in part to the increase in egg donation across Europe, led by Spain.

6 Egg donation is an instructive analogue to adoption here, as two forms of assisted reproductive technology. Spain has become a major “exporter” of eggs; more than 60% of eggs used in fertility treatments in Europe come from Spain (Álvarez Plaza 2015; Degli Esposti and Pavone 2019; Kroloppke 2014a, 2014b; Lafuente-Funes 2017, 2019; Marre et al. 2018; Molas and Béstard 2017; Pavone 2017; Tober and Pavone 2018). Ethnographic data suggest that the economic crisis and the anonymity of provision have influenced the young women who provide and many European citizens to receive.

7 Birth mothers are acknowledged in their absence, but as de Graeve and Longman argue, “biological fathers in the metaphorical South who live in poverty are not attributed a similar connection and seem to figure less prominently in the adoptive families’ adoption narratives than birth mothers do” (2013: 142; see also Leinaweaver 2015: 94). As with blood donation (Titmuss 1971), the source of biological substance is distant, unknown and impersonal to recipients.

8 The organization Bastard Nation keeps track of the states, provinces, and nations that have unsealed original birth certificates (http://bastards.org/), and at the time of this writing, New York State had just opened its records.

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