

**Toby Alice  
Volkman**

Sierra Song E, Marty, and I sat with our noses pressed against the glass straining to see the land as it intermittently appeared and vanished through the clouds. Almost in a whisper she confided “I think that place right down there may be where my birth parents live, Mommy. I think maybe they might be looking up and wishing that their little girl could fly down to them for a visit. Someday, maybe I will look for them. I’m sending them a wish now. It is that I hope they have enough to eat and they are happy. I hope they are not missing me too much. I wish I could tell them that I will come back to China again and again. I hope they catch my wish, Mommy and Daddy—don’t you?”

—Jane Brown

In the early 1990s, the adoption of children across national borders began to accelerate at an astonishing rate. Although transnational adoption originated more than fifty years ago in the aftermath of World War II and the Korean War, the current wave of adoption is unprecedented in magnitude and visibility. Immigrant orphan visas issued by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Services nearly tripled between 1991 and 2001: from 7,093 to 19,237. In the United States alone, more than 139,000 children have been adopted internationally in the last ten years. Over 50,000 of these children were born in China or Russia.

What are the implications of this massive movement of children, almost entirely from poor nations, to the more affluent West? The essays in this issue explore transnational adoption from multiple perspectives, encompassing both “sending” and “receiving” countries: birth parents who relinquish children, adoptive parents and adopted children, and adult adoptees. All of the essays view adoption as situated in the midst of larger social and cultural transformations and, inevitably, in the space of familial intimacy *and* the public sphere. In its transnational mode, adoption enters into and informs the complex politics of forging new, even fluid, kinds of kinship and affiliation on a global stage. These politics start from, rather than end on, the critical insight that identity is a social construction (see Taussig 1993).

Questions of belonging, race, culture, and subjectivity loom large in the discourses of transnational adoption. In an earlier era, adoption across borders was assumed to be straightforward: A child traveled to a new

country and stayed there. A child born in Korea and adopted in Minnesota was expected to grow up, and remain, simply a (white) American. Parents and adoption organizations did not question that their acts were good deeds. The past was erased or contained in an abandoned “there”; the racialized trace of origins tended to be treated as manageable. Today, adopted people—children or adults—are expected, or at least invited, to explore their multiple identities: to retain a name, to imagine their birth families, to learn about “birth cultures,” perhaps to visit the birth country.

As an anthropologist and interpreter accompanying a group of Chilean adoptees and their Swedish parents who traveled “home” to Chile, Barbara Yngvesson tracks one such exploration, suggesting that these journeys unsettle the narrative of exclusive belongings, the notion of a singular identity, a self that can be made whole. Contemporary adoption discourse echoes the ambivalences discussed in Yngvesson’s essay: the contradictory narratives of the child “rooted” in his or her original culture and the child as freely transferable, to new kin and culture, in the global marketplace.

At least some of the popular culture of adoption has begun to acknowledge the impossibility of “exclusive belongings.” An American mother wrote on the Internet of her hopes to give her daughter “what she would need to have a fulfilling, but divided life.” The daughter, six-year-old Sierra Song E, echoed her mother’s thoughts: “Part of me lives here now and part of my heart is in China now, you know?” Her mother replied: “That is the way it should be—you are a daughter of each of the two lands you rightfully claim as yours” (Brown 2002). Like the passage quoted in the epigraph above—Sierra Song E’s whispered thoughts upon leaving China at the end of her first “homeland visit”—this dialogue would have been unimaginable even a decade ago.

The state may stake its own claim to the adoptee, as Eleana Kim describes in a quite different version of the “roots” journey. Reversing the direction of fifty years of Korean adoption, thousands of young adult Korean adoptees have traveled to South Korea in recent years, where some attend “cultural training” camps sponsored by a government now eager to recast Korean adoptees—once seen as outcasts—as “overseas Koreans.” In this process, Kim shows, adoptees have resisted appropriation by the state and are struggling to create alternative identifications. Those struggles are part of a larger, self-consciously global movement in which Korean adoptees are encountering “Korea” in complex ways, wrestling with their own fantasies of origins, articulating new forms of “cultural citizenship” and understandings of what it might mean to be both Korean and not.

The voices of these Korean adoptees, adopted at a time when for the most part their Koreanness was suppressed, have been extraordinarily

influential in shaping the consciousness of adoptive families in the 1990s. Long silenced, Korean adoptees are now seen as articulate pioneers: producers of “autoethnographic” film and video, creators of such collective practices as worldwide gatherings of Korean adoptees. On the Internet, a mother whose son was adopted from India thirty years ago wrote simply: “Everything I’ve learned has been from the Korean adoptees.”

Changes in the culture of adoption have been especially dramatic in the last decade of the twentieth century. Aware of the experiences of earlier generations of adoptees and caught up in the rhetoric of multiculturalism, North American adoptive parents of younger children self-consciously strive to embrace difference rather than assimilation and attempt to help their children fashion multiple or fluid identifications. Such efforts are most visible in the case of adoptive families with Chinese children, whose intense involvement with “Chinese culture” brings to the fore tension between the affirmation of difference (cast sometimes as culture, sometimes as race) and its reinscription. Fascination with the performance or embodiment of “Chinese culture,” I suggest, may also represent displaced longing for the unknowable narrative of the child’s past and the imagined figure of the birth mother.

In each of these instances, adoptive families are not isolated actors but are engaged in some form of larger community—the Swedish agency-mediated travel group, the emerging global Korean adoptee movement and state-orchestrated stagings of identity, organizations such as Families with Children from China. Perhaps most distinctive as a 1990s medium of community making is the Internet, where adoption discussion groups proliferate. Media and new technologies may shape communities of discourse and expand the sense of solidarity, but they have other complicated effects as well. Lisa Cartwright reminds us how the media catapulted viewers into action in the rush to adopt in Romania, and she explores how digital technology has made possible the creation of a staggeringly vast archive of available children. Images of “waiting children” are used to incite desire, to classify and grade and diagnose, and to serve as “identity’s most . . . legible representation.”

Until the mid-1970s, when the “open adoption” movement was born in the United States, adoptive parents were pressured to create “as if” biological families. These practices were premised on the forgetting of a child’s past, and especially on the erasure of birth parents. In dramatic contrast, contemporary adoption discourse encourages, even exhorts, adoptive families to imagine, to grieve for, and at times to search for those parents. These changes are sometimes read as a progressive opening up, an unsettling of the constraints of conventional kinship and the idealized white nuclear family. Alternatively, might the desire for the birth connection—in

the form of what some now call “birth culture,” birth kin, or country—represent a reemergence of the dominant American ideology of “blood,” now recast in a more contemporary idiom of DNA? Cartwright argues that the late-twentieth-century turn toward the social construction of family was quickly followed by a return to genetics in adoption discourse, wherein the adoptive family is seen as a “set of genetic legacies” linked through choice, “a network of blood lines that closely cross but do not mix” (Cartwright n.d.). Tensions between these visions complicate adoptive parents’ discourse about their pleasure in creating new forms of kinship even as they pursue the remote possibility of finding “true” DNA sisters (see Volkman’s article).

Preoccupations in the West that impel parents and adoptees to seek connections with the country or the culture of origin have stimulated all sorts of border-crossing movements that would have been unimaginable in an earlier era: an array of culture camps, charitable initiatives, orphanage visits, birth family searches, and other forms of travel. These movements are promoted by social workers and agencies, the adoption community, listservs, and even in some instances by policies of “sending” states, most conspicuously by South Korea but increasingly by other countries that are observing their counterparts elsewhere.

The sometimes vexed relationship between transnational and domestic adoption in the legal and policy realm is also treated in Claudia Fonseca’s essay, which highlights discrepancies between global legal frameworks and local understandings and practices. As Brazilian legislation was revised to conform to “modern” global frameworks for adoption, it insisted on plenary adoption. The possibility of a permanent and complete rupture with the past, Fonseca argues, is profoundly discrepant with local Brazilian understandings and practices involving the circulation of children.

Although there is a voluminous adoption literature in psychology and social work, in other disciplines adoption has just begun to emerge as a serious topic. Even in anthropology, with its traditional core focus on kinship and the making of culture, adoption (except in faraway places like Oceania) has been oddly absent. Transnational adoption, in particular, provokes myriad questions about race, culture, and nation; about genes, kinship, and belonging; and about the politics of sending and receiving nations, poor and rich, powerless and powerful. As Strong (2002) writes eloquently: “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, an appropriation of valued resources and a constitution of personal ties” (471).

Adoption also raises methodological questions for those among us who are adoptive parents (as several in this collection are). We live daily

with these ambivalences and ambiguities and have struggled with how to position our research and writing: how to cast an eye that is both critical and sympathetic, attuned to our own profoundly personal connections to these questions and to an analysis of the cultural and political contexts within which adoption must be situated. We see these essays as the opening of a terrain of inquiry and the beginning of a dialogue: among scholars, but also with a growing and highly engaged community of those touched by adoption.

## Note

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