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Adoption & Culture, Volume 6, Issue 1, 2018, pp. 74-93 (Article)

Published by The Ohio State University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ado.2018.0001>



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Adoption as a Reproductive Justice Issue

KIMBERLY McKEE

ABSTRACT: Centering adoption within a reproductive justice lens, this essay elucidates the complexities of adoption as a market and method of family disintegration and creation. This approach centers the labor of women of color in contemporary adoption and highlights adoption's privileging of white, American adoptive parents' reproductive destinies.

KEYWORDS: reproductive justice, birth mothers, reproductive labor

ARISING FROM women-of-color activism in the 1990s, reproductive justice addresses the ways women of color and Indigenous women routinely are denied the rights of bodily autonomy given to white women.¹ Examining women's holistic lives and the multidimensional forces affecting women's bodily autonomy (Ross and Solinger; SisterSong), reproductive justice underscores how "reproductive oppression is a result of the intersections of multiple oppressions and is inherently connected to the struggle for social justice and human rights" (Asian). The deployment of an intersectional lens accounts for the interconnected nature of seemingly disparate issues—"forced sterilization, environmental toxins in breast milk, mandatory drug testing of women on public assistance, and the lack of social support for poor women to have and raise the number of children they want" (Thomsen 149). Women's reproduction, particularly the reproductive labor of women of color, thus becomes linked to larger issues of systemic racism and settler colonialism.

Intervening in existing elisions concerning the rights to keep one's children by birth, this essay calls our attention to the reproductive hierarchies of adoption.

In this respect, I refer to closed-record, stranger adoption of infants and young children that frequently involves state intervention and a financial transaction. The deployment of a reproductive justice lens elucidates the complexities of adoption as a market, a reproductive technology, and a method of family disintegration and creation. In doing so, reproductive justice offers new opportunities to understand adoption outside of reductive celebrations of adoption as a gift of love. Beneficiaries of adoption as well as other reproductive technologies predominately operate as a racialized and privileged class of the world's population.

Interrogating mainstream notions of adoption through a reproductive justice lens exposes how the reproductive destinies of white, American adoptive parents are privileged at the expense of birth parents in cases of both domestic and international adoptions. White adoptive parents compose a greater number of those adopting both domestically and internationally.² Analyzing data from the 2007 National Survey of Adoptive Parents, Sharon Vandivere et al. note, "Whereas a majority of adopted children are nonwhite, the majority of these children's parents are white (73 percent). Sixty-three percent of children adopted from foster care have white parents, as do 71 percent of children adopted within the United States, and 92 percent of children adopted internationally" (13). Of those adopted internationally, Vandivere et al. note that 84 percent are transracial placements (13; see also McGinnis et al.; Smith and Juarez). This is not surprising given the fact that the majority of children adopted internationally come worldwide from countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Selman). The percentage of transracial placements decreases slightly when accounting for children adopted from foster care and private domestic adoption—63 percent and 71 percent, respectively (Vandivere et al. 13). Women of color are thus disproportionately birth mothers, while white women are overwhelmingly adoptive mothers.³

Given nonwhite women's overrepresentation as birth mothers and women negatively impacted by government interventions in women's health, their reproductive destiny—the ability to assert agency and control over their reproductive autonomy—often finds itself curtailed or limited (Ross, "What?"). A reproductive justice lens makes explicit the ways adoption is a reproductive technology rooted in the disruption of women of color's ability to parent. My interest rests in how discussions of reproductive choice fail to explore the complicated histories of domestic and international adoption. Pauline Turner Strong notes, "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). The market of adoption relies on curtailing the reproductive choices of some women over others (Ribben; McKee, "Monetary"). Adoption's violence stems from power differentials that exist between adoptive parent and birth parent, receiving country and sending country (in cases of international adoption), as well as the conditions that reduce adoption to reductive narratives of gratitude and humanitarian child-saving. This movement

of children also reflects how notions of parental fitness—who are deemed qualified and deserving versus those who are not—intersect with the national and racial hierarchies that fuel transnational, domestic, and transracial adoptions (Roberts; Dorow; Solinger, *Pregnancy*; Raleigh, “Assortative”). More importantly, given the fact that many adoptions are transracial in nature—meaning the child is not the same race as the adoptive parent—and involve shifting a child from a lower socioeconomic bracket to a wealthier family (Gailey), one must account for the role of privilege and power in adoption. Laura Briggs notes, “Stranger adoption is a national and international system whereby the children of impoverished or otherwise disenfranchised mothers are transferred to middle-class, wealthy mothers (and fathers)” (*Somebody’s* 4). Adoption comes at an incalculable cost.

A deeper examination to understand why we uphold the rights of one set of parents over another is necessary when adoption is facilitated for adoptive parents at the expense of the reproductive rights of birth parents. First, I will situate this discussion within feminists’ calls for reproductive justice in the name of women’s bodily autonomy. A reproductive justice approach underscores the limits and deficiencies of reproductive-choice rhetoric to discuss transracial domestic and international adoptions. I will then locate adoption within feminist analyses of reproductive technologies. Finally, I will shift our attention to investigate whose reproductive destinies—the ability to parent without interference and with encouragement—matter in an exploration of the metric gauging parental fitness. In other words, how is the adoptive parent who rehomes their child more fit than the birth parents of lesser socioeconomic means (Joyce, *Child*)? Adoption arises from power imbalances between prospective adoptive parents and birth parents. While this is not a call to debate the fitness of prospective and current adoptive parents, it is an appeal for scholars, practitioners, and members of the adoption triad and the adoption community to rethink adoption’s intrinsically unjust structure.

Reproductive Justice as Method

The emergence of reproductive justice as a framework to locate women of color’s bodily autonomy can be traced to the way in which reproductive-choice rhetoric routinely is generalized to focus only on a single issue—abortion. An interrogation of what reproductive choice looks like in nonwhite women’s everyday lives is necessary. In the context of reproductive justice, choice includes multiple options concerning parenthood and reproductive autonomy. Susan M. Shaw and Janet Lee write, “Reproductive choice involves being able to have safe and affordable birth and parenting options; reliable, safe, and affordable birth control technologies; freedom from forced sterilization; and the availability of abortion” (290). Yet the term *reproductive choice* remains fraught with tension as choice is bestowed unevenly to women (Gaard; Silliman et al.; Briggs et al.). Choices are not created

equally. The rhetoric of choice presumes socioeconomic security where choices are not constrained by other factors, including “access to education, health care, civil rights, and social services . . . in addition to the spectrum of reproductive health services” (Briggs et al. 119). More importantly, reproductive justice theory not only accounts for white supremacy’s existence, it also pays careful attention to “the relationships between people who are reproductively privileged and those who are disadvantaged” (Ross, “Conceptualizing” 184). Reproductive justice theory, therefore, addresses the intersectional identities inhabited by women of color and looks beyond women’s access to particular services.

Incorporating adoption into discussions of reproductive justice recognizes how some women’s motherhood is encouraged while other women face barriers “that impede [their] ability not only to survive, but to thrive” (Jolly 167). Zakiya Luna and Kristin Luker assert that reproductive justice “simultaneously demands a negative right of freedom from undue government interference and a positive right to government action in creating conditions of social justice and human flourishing for all” (328). Luna and Luker’s understanding of reproductive justice offers an opportunity to consider the government’s role in restricting women’s access to reproductive health options and limiting support for low-income mothers and families. To this end, Loretta Ross asserts reproductive justice accounts for the social supports required to actualize women’s ability to exercise “safe, affordable, and accessible” choices regarding individual life decisions (“What”). Like Luna and Luker, Ross underscores the contradictions surrounding women as parents: only women who are able to afford reproductive health supports or the costs of motherhood may exercise their right to parent. While one’s status as a mother is only one aspect of the heteronormative reproduction of the family, I focus on mothers and motherhood because adoption so often focuses on adoptive mothers that the injustice experienced by birth mothers is seldom visible as an injustice.

This analysis does not seek to erase the experiences of white women in same-race domestic adoptions in the United States even as this essay focuses on women of color and Indigenous women as birth mothers. After all, as scholarship examining mid-twentieth-century same-race domestic adoption practices in the US demonstrates, some white middle-class women lacked control over their reproductive destinies. The lack of control before and after the legalization of abortion profoundly impacted these women’s lives (Solinger, *Wake*; Wiley and Baden; Fessler; Henney et al.; Krahn and Sullivan). Relinquishing a child was often a grievous loss that affected their future relationships. And while unwed white women are no longer ensconced in maternity homes, this does not mean community stigmas have dissipated or cultural understanding has radically improved. Unfortunately, as white women experienced bodily autonomy through greater access to birth control and abortion by the mid to late-twentieth century, American society continued to curtail the reproductive destinies of women of color (Chen; Redden). More importantly, to benefit white women’s access to safe birth control, dangerous contracep-

tives have been promoted in communities of color and Indigenous communities (Briggs, *Reproducing*; Cox; Briggs et al.). Population control methods (e.g., eugenics, sterilization), contraceptive trials, and long-acting contraceptives (e.g., IUD, Norplant, Depro-Provera) disproportionately impact poor, working-class women, women of color, and Indigenous women (Briggs et al.; Ross and Solinger; Ross, "Trust"). To this end, Elena R. Gutiérrez notes, "racist and classist rhetoric about overpopulation, care of the irresponsible 'poor,' economic development, and environmental sustainability are used to justify both official and unofficial policies that limit women's autonomy in their reproductive experience" (Briggs et al. 113). The lack of reproductive choice inhibits the ability of Black, Indigenous, Latina, and Asian women to contemplate the remote possibility that their parental rights will never be challenged, curtailed, or eliminated. These communities traditionally face population control methods in the US and abroad that undermine autonomy of their reproductive capabilities (Briggs, "Reproducing"; Tillet).

Adoption as a Reproductive Technology

Acknowledging that adoption is a form of reproductive technology elucidates the power differentials involved between adoptive parent and birth parent and, in instances of international adoption, between receiving country and sending country. Feminist theorizing on new reproductive technologies (Spallone and Steinberg; Steinberg; Tong) demonstrates how these medical practices "facilitate, manage, or prevent reproduction" (Throsby 9). Interested in the construction of families, "high end" technologies—for example, in vitro fertilization or gestational surrogacy—become available to those able to pay, reinforcing notions of who are *fit* mothers. Motherhood becomes synonymous with wealthy, white women, while poor and nonwhite women remain undeserving of treatments aimed to facilitate fertility (Rowland; Inhorn). Moreover, reproductive technologies involve the purchasing of woman's maternal labor and the manipulation of their bodies into disembodied separate parts—uterus, fallopian tubes, embryos. As a form of reproductive technology, adoption participates in all of these kinds of exploitation and inequality.

Although it is beyond the scope of this essay to investigate the reproductive labor of gamete donors and gestational surrogates (Almeling; Rudrappa; Jacobson), feminist analyses of reproductive technologies demonstrate the importance of exploring the purchasing of reproductive labor from a reproductive justice approach (Gaard; Fixmer-Oraiz). This framework accounts for the power differentials that exist between those selling and those purchasing reproductive labor, not only in the case of medicalized technologies but in regard to adoption as a reproductive technology as well. To argue that donors or surrogates are altruistic in their reproductive labor participation assumes free choice and ignores the ways economic

constraints under global capitalism frequently lead women, in particular, to elect to commodify their labor. This notion romanticizes surrogacy and egg donation as a gift in the same way that birth mothers are depicted as selfless, benevolent figures in adoption when the constraints that impact their reproductive choices are rendered invisible.

To understand the links between adoption and reproductive justice, it's critical to locate the role of exploitation in adoption and other reproductive technologies that rely on the reproductive labor of nonwhite women. For example, while the commodification of women's bodies occurs with gamete donation and hormone injections, surrogacy expands the notion of a woman's body as a reproduction commodity. Robyn Rowland notes, "Briefly, surrogacy promotes the economic, physical, and emotional exploitation of women. A woman who contracts her body as a 'surrogate' mother agrees to give up control over her pregnant body in return for money" (77). Janice G. Raymond underscores this notion, commenting that surrogates are "instruments in a system of breeding" (xxii). In this context, labeling women "breeders" reinforces racialized beliefs that only certain women are able-bodied and "fit" mothers, as women from the Global South are increasingly used as surrogates in the globalization of new reproductive technologies (Bailey; Fixmer-Oraiz). This depersonalization constructs surrogates as "incubators," even though in reality, these women are genetic or gestational mothers (Corea). Surrogacy, alongside adoption, epitomizes the commodification of reproduction. In fact, as Guatemala ended its participation in international adoption, it became a rising partner in global surrogacy (Rotabi and Bromfield).

Using a reproductive justice lens to understand adoption puts birth mothers' lack of rights in conversation with theory and praxis that moves to the center women's rights to parent with dignity, if they elect parenthood, and their right to the ability to achieve this goal (Luna and Luker 343). Historically, adoption was viewed as a clean break between children and biological parents. In this respect, the birth mother is rendered voiceless and not included in the portrait of the adopted family.⁴ The broader concerns of reproductive justice are essential to explore the ethical issues that arise in adoption. That poor women, women of color, and Indigenous women are subjected to harmful forms of contraception and exploited as resources in adoption and medicalized reproductive technologies are among the material ways women find themselves lacking the right to become a parent, let alone parent. Adoption is an extension of these realities that impact women's rights to motherhood. Adoption processes are not immune to the systemic and institutional abuses that privilege the rights of some—white, upper-middle class—over others—people of color, low-income families. Accounting for the intersections of race and class in a comparison of the reproductive destinies of birth parents and adoptive parents locates how women of color and Indigenous women find their abilities to parent erased.

Whose Reproductive Destinies Matter?

Far too frequently birth parents, in particular birth mothers, are removed from narratives in adoption. This effectively erases their reproductive labor. Such an elision results in the myth that adoptees are a blank slate upon their adoption, ready to assume a new name and identity in the welcoming arms of their adoptive parents. Capturing this identity shift in transnational adoption, Korean adoptee Crystal Lee Hyun Joo Chappell writes, “At the age of 4, Lee Hyun Joo was sent to America to be adopted. Her name became Crystal Chappell. Like thousands of other Korean adoptees, her birth family and culture were left behind” (124). Assumptions concerning adoptees as blank slates reflect the social death they experience upon the severing of ties to their birth families (J. Kim; McKee, “Monetary”).

When birth mothers are included in popular culture’s discussions of adoption, they find themselves pathologized—reduced to well-worn tropes of promiscuous sexuality (Solinger, *Wake*; Ellerby). In cases of adoptions from Asia, birth mothers are often either valorized as selfless (e.g., Kim’s “altruistic” suicide in *Miss Saigon*) or rendered as prostitutes (Park Nelson). Adoptee memoirs discuss how the trope of birth mother as prostitute is invoked to demonstrate why adoption provided a better life (Trenka 226). This trope is also deployed to undermine the adoptee’s character. For example, Mia Farrow and her supporters deployed this simplistic caricature during the Soon-Yi Previn and Woody Allen scandal to weaken her daughter’s credibility (Farrow; McKee, “Let’s”).

The complex realities of birth mothers and biological parents, more generally, are still depicted in pathologizing terms in mainstream society, even though, as Katarina Wegar notes, “adoption professionals no longer characterize unwed birth mothers as fallen women or neurotic girls to be cured” (Wegar 77–78). Wegar further writes, “empirical research on relinquishment still tends to emphasize the dangers of unwed motherhood and the benefits of adoption,” while also noting that women of color’s unwed pregnancies are explained “in terms of cultural rather than individual pathology” (78). Although not all birth mothers are unwed mothers, the ways single women’s pregnancies are linked to adoption means such stereotypes concerning unwed mothers are forever tied to common perceptions of adoption.

Such depictions of birth mothers as deficient or defective prevent these women—these allegedly “bad” mothers—from entering our imagination as potential equals to the “good” adoptive mother. Claudia Corrigan D’Arcy asks, “Why is it so hard to see a birth mother as a real, live person? Both of the views—the sinner or saint, the Madonna or whore, the selfless or the abandoner—are just so limiting and not real. Instead, they are parts cast in this play we call adoption.” This binary construction results in roles that need to be filled so that the storyline works out whereby a child is rescued and the main characters—the adoptee and their adoptive parents—have their happy ending. It is nothing more than a par-

rotating of the carefully honed adoption-marketing message (Raleigh, *Selling*). This opening prologue sets the tone that gratefulness is expected throughout the adoptee's life (McKee, *Disrupting*). The conditions that generate the need for "rescue" by adoptive parents remain unexamined in this storyline. Only when a reproductive justice lens is deployed to understand adoption are the systemic causes leading to the relinquishment of a child made evident.

As the narrative of birth mothers becomes complicated and society recognizes the complex motivations fueling decisions to place children for adoption, it must be recognized that any decisions concerning adoption are constrained choices. These women have limited options. While the shame of unwed motherhood may lessen for some, others still encounter societal stigma and lack economic support, as in the experiences of some Korean birth mothers (H. Kim). More troubling are the experiences of those who may unknowingly relinquish their parental rights or find their rights terminated because of unethical adoption practices abroad (Rotabi) in countries including Guatemala and Ethiopia (Siegal; Joyce, *Child*). Birth mothers' reproductive autonomy continues to be curtailed or constrained.

A reproductive justice framework thus offers a lens to understand how adoption practices challenge a woman's ability to control her reproductive destiny. The unwed mother's homes of the mid-twentieth century ("History") have become rebranded into maternity homes, designed as spaces to ostensibly support women during pregnancy. However, maternity homes affiliated with an adoption agency in sending countries involved in international adoption raise questions concerning reproductive coercion (Kwon Dobbs). Discussing South Korea, Hosu Kim notes, "As of the mid-2000s, ten, or more than half of all maternity homes, were run by only three adoption agencies, Holt International Children's Service, Social Welfare Society, and Eastern Children's Welfare Society, all of which were founded by devout Christians who regard adoption as an 'act of God's love' and a Christian's duty for salvation" (84). During the peak of Korean adoption in the 1980s, Kim reveals that *Ae Ran Won*—the second-longest-running maternity home—"provided services to single, pregnant women who agreed in advance to [relinquish] their unborn children to an adoption agency" (84). Even now, maternity homes and adoption agencies in South Korea often share employees and frequently are located in close proximity to one another.

In the United States, crisis pregnancy centers (CPCs) have become an updated version of unwed mothers' homes. More than 4,000 CPCs operate across the nation. These facilities seek to provide women abortion alternatives and frequently provide misinformation concerning maternal health to expectant mothers (Dias; Ahmed). Additionally, these centers are not regulated in the same way as other health providers because they do not provide medical care (Bryant et al.). Kathryn Joyce writes, CPCs "seek not only to induce women to 'choose life' but to choose adoption, either by offering adoption services themselves, as in Bethany's case, or by referring women to Christian adoption agencies. Far more than other adoption

agencies, conservative Christian agencies demonstrate a pattern and history of coercing women to relinquish their children” (Joyce, “Shotgun”). To this end, Ann Fessler notes that support from CPCs comes at a cost—“the price of admission is giving up your child” (qtd. in Joyce, “Shotgun”). Similar to maternity homes’ relationships with adoption agencies, CPCs maintain arrangements to encourage adoption over supporting women of color and low-income or young women’s rights to mother. Thus it should be no surprise that, as Brittany A. Campbell writes, “The confusing and disingenuous strategies that CPCs employ impede women from making informed reproductive choices, thereby stripping women of their reproductive freedom” (76–77). As the 115th US Congress (2017–2019) continues to rescind legislation supporting women’s reproductive health and undermine social and economic supports for low-income families, it becomes clear that in addition to a lack of access to women’s health providers to provide accurate information concerning pregnancy, there is shrinking support for women who elect motherhood but lack the requisite finances to parent well (Briggs, *How*).

Contemporary maternity homes and crisis pregnancy centers impede women’s ability to exert their reproductive freedom. Reproductive justice includes a person’s right to parent children in a safe environment without fear of losing the ability to parent. One example of an organization advocating on behalf of unmarried mothers is the Korean Unwed Mothers’ Families Association (KUMFA) in South Korea. KUMFA champions the rights of unwed pregnant women, mothers, and their children. Part of their advocacy efforts includes working toward increasing government support for unwed mothers, since the South Korean government provides high levels of aid to Korean parents who domestically adopt (McKee, “Monetary”). At the same time in the United States, women are increasingly finding support from grassroots organizations such as the Brooklyn Young Mothers’ Collective and the Colorado Organization for Latina Opportunity and Reproductive Rights. Organizations in the United States that seek to support women who relinquished children and advocate for the rights of birth parents also have arisen in the last fifty years. These organizations include the long-established national group Concerned United Birthparents as well as emerging organizations such as the Ohio Birthparent Group. Both groups seek to reframe dialogue concerning adoption and birth parents and support women after relinquishment.

When socioeconomic inequality, societal stigma, and ideas of *good* families intersect, barriers are constructed that encourage specific types of families while undermining the ability of other families to sustain themselves as an intact unit. Rooted in notions of mothers as reproducing citizens of the moral, Christian nation, white mothers are deemed *fit* parents in twentieth-century American adoption debates (Moosnick; Melosh). In the context of domestic adoption, white motherhood directly intersects with socioeconomic status in the assumption that only upper-middle-class white mothers are deserving parents in comparison to their working class or poor white woman counterparts. For example, Loretta Ross and

Rickie Solinger note in their introduction that the relinquishment of white children by white mothers institutionalized in unwed mothers' homes in the mid-twentieth century is part of a broader history of reproductive oppression and the maintenance of a particular type of *right* white family—heterosexual, two-parent, married households. Notions of parental fitness underscore the ways in which national and racial hierarchies operate to fuel transnational and domestic transracial adoptions. After all, international adoption remains a mechanism to provide children to the West without investing in social or economic policies to allow mothers and families in the Global South to care for their children (Howell).

Birth and adoptive mothers are located on opposite ends of the motherhood spectrum, where, although both mothers are stigmatized for their reproductive failures—motherhood or pregnancy—adoptive mothers are considered brave and humanitarian (Wegar). To this end, birth mothers—regardless of origin—face limited options in comparison to adoptive mothers, who are presented a myriad of choices to encourage and aid their parenting (Solinger, *Beggars*). For example, when Black birth mothers become pregnant, they are often considered also to be parents to existing children (Moosnick). This assumption preys upon fears of Black women's hyperfertility and pathologizes Black motherhood. Examining the forced removal of Black children in the US, Dorothy Roberts discusses how welfare requirements serve as one disciplinary technique to force the relinquishment of Black children into the foster care system. Black women's parental rights are severed to encourage the adoptability of their fostered children. At the same time, however, these children often are "in relatively low demand since these children are more likely to be seen as having 'problems' compared to children available via international adoption" (Raleigh, "Assortative" 508). The transracial adoption of Black children in foster care fails to address the systemic causes that lead to the termination of parental rights. In her interview with Shannon Gibney, Roberts comments, the argument "that there should be easier and speedier termination of Black mothers' rights so that these children can be adopted transracially . . . [is] a horrific argument that completely demeans Black women and devalues their relationships with their children, and doesn't account for the harm that children experience when they're unnecessarily removed from their mothers; it just doesn't show understanding for the reason for the large number of Black children in foster care. It's a racist argument when they specifically cite termination of these Black women's parental rights as a way to have these children adopted into white homes."

Roberts' discussion of the fast-paced termination of Black mothers' rights underscores the ways in which "increased criminalization and surveillance of poor communities and communities of color threaten reproductive autonomy" of certain categories of women (Luna and Luker 379). This devaluing of birth parents of color is not limited to the US. Consider the language deployed to discuss birth parents of internationally adopted children. Whether it's the Korean birth mother as prostitute or the hyperfertile, illiterate Guatemalan birth mother (Siegal), these

individuals are considered ready or somehow more willing to sacrifice their parenthood. At the same time, agencies and orphanages characterize these parents as either altruistic or too morally deficient to function as *good* parents.

When preservation of the original family is no longer a priority, one must consider what it means to prioritize the best interests of the child. Both the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Hague Convention on the Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption seek to protect the rights of children and place primacy on maintaining kinship and community ties to children's countries of origin. While this merits longer discussion that falls outside the scope of this essay, more attention must be paid to efforts to preserve families and to address the social and economic constraints that birth families experience which may lead to relinquishment. Consideration also should be given to supporting domestic adoption and fostering within the broader kinship structure or community of a child's natal origin if family preservation is not possible.

The Consumer Model of Adoption

The pathologized construction of birth parents in the US and abroad provides the groundwork for adoptive parents to encourage speedier timelines for adoption completion in an effort to rescue their children from lives of potential poverty or degradation. Adoptive parents' desires are centered in this mainstream conceptualization of adoption. The rush to accommodate adoptive parents illustrates the market economy of adoption practices. Children, regardless of the language used to describe their exchange and entry into adoptive families, are commodities. For example, domestic adoption functions as a racially stratified market whereby fees vary based on the child's race—fees to adopt Black children are lower than their white counterparts (Fedders 1696). As a result of children's nonpersonhood and status as abstract objects in adoption discussions, the adoption market is able to function. Elizabeth Raleigh argues, "By selecting foster care, private domestic, or intercountry adoption, hopeful parents make an implicit choice about the profile of a son or daughter they would accept—and conversely reject" ("Assortative" 507). This market also is reflected in the ways in which adoptive parents select children for adoption—from photograph listings of waiting children in the US and abroad to choosing to adopt a child from an African country versus an African American child (Cartwright; Raleigh, *Selling*).

To give agency to infant or toddler adoptees as actors who are involved in the adoption process requires that birth parents have agency and voice. Yet birth parents are often erased from adoption conversations. Even when they are included, in cases of open adoptions, contact may be limited (e.g., phone calls or letters) or even reduced from what was initially outlined in agreements between birth par-

ents and adoptive parents (Lee and Twaite). Arrangements also may improve for contact between birth parents and their child over time as adoptive parents gain security in their roles and if life changes occur for the birth mother (Grotevant et al.). Adoptive parents also may elect to end contact with birth parents based on their perceived understanding of birth parents' interest in continuing engagement. While some states may have protections whereby consequences exist if such agreements are ended, others do not and leave birth parents unprotected. In their interviews with twenty adoptive parents, Mandi MacDonald and Dominic McSherry report that fluctuating contact with birth parents led some adoptive parents to cease contact. Discussing adoptive parents' indifference, MacDonald and McSherry include a short yet revealing comment: "One adoptive parent acknowledged their passivity saying: 'Well, nobody's come back and asked and we haven't pursued this, to be honest'" (9). Varied levels of commitment from adoptive parents to sustain a relationship with birth parents raises questions of what it means for adoptive parents to negotiate communication with people they purportedly want to support as loving individuals in their children's lives. After all, the fear of birth parents seeking out their children in domestic adoption spurred many adoptive parents to choose international adoption (Gailey 109). Birth parents may elect to terminate contact or engage in passive or ambivalent communication with the adoptive family, and so estrangement may be a result of both adoptive and birth parent actions. Nonetheless, the repression of birth parents from being seen as parents, attributable to the various measures of disenfranchisement that may lead them to believe they have no right to their children or to their complex feelings about relinquishment, must be accounted for in any discussion regarding why birth parents' participation may be limited. Reframing society's understanding of both birth parents' decisions and relinquishment must occur for a clearer understanding as to why birth parents' relationship with their children and the adoptive family may ebb and flow in open adoptions.

The consumer nature of adoption becomes more visible in international adoptions as adoptive parents openly critique the wait times to complete international adoption. These wait times vary based on country of origin. According to *Adoptive Families*, 53 percent of parents adopting from China wait a minimum of twelve months for a child referral, and then 42 percent of parents wait an additional three months prior to the child's entrance into the United States ("Latest"). Advertising their Chinese international adoption placements, Holt International Children's Services notes, "With Holt, the process to adopt a younger child with a correctable or manageable condition takes about 18–30 months from time of application to placement. The more flexible you are with age, gender and special needs, the sooner you will be matched. . . . *China is one of the fastest and most stable adoption programs*" ("China"). In contrast to this lengthy process, adoptive parents' minimum wait for a completed adoption from Ethiopia was six months in the first decade of the twenty-first century, with 53 percent of parents waiting a minimum

of three months or less for a child referral, and then 42 percent of parents waiting an additional three months until the child enters the US (“Adoption”).

Parents may turn to online communities to discuss these wait times. Public adoption forums catering to prospective adoptive parents rarely mention any concerns for the rights of adoptees or birth parents. For example, an adoptive parent notes, “We waited longer than four years. International adoptions slowed down tremendously when the Hague [C]onvention was enacted. There has also been an increased interest and demand in international adoptions, so the process became backlogged. We were waiting to adopt a healthy, young child and there is a long waiting list to do so from China” (“Adoption”).

This adoptive parent’s comments are not isolated. Many adoptive parents and agencies criticize the slowdown in international adoptions as a result of countries implementing the Hague Convention, which is intended to provide worldwide standards to safeguard transnational adoption as a practice. The Hague Convention aims to standardize adoption practices for signatories and delineates expectations concerning transparency in the adoption process from relinquishment to adoption finalization (Bureau of Consular Affairs, US Department of State). Adoptive consumer frustration increasingly finds itself highlighted in mainstream media (Greenblatt; Mann; Voigt and Brown), which presents sympathetic narratives that lack nuance and overlook how many of these regulations and program shutdowns are in response to gross ethical abuses such as child trafficking and the denial of birth parents’ rights (Siegal; Joyce, *Child*). The best interest of the child and the rights of birth families are seen as irrelevant in a consumerist model that places primacy on the rights of adoptive parents. The procedures and processes in place to protect those most vulnerable are seen as obstructions to adoptive parents’ desire to form their families.

Framing adoption as a set of inconveniences or obstacles to adoptive parents ignores broader sociopolitical concerns over corruption in adoption management and the black market of children. When the larger issue is which country program will get prospective adoptive parents a child faster versus which country ensures birth parents are not forcibly coerced to make a fast decision, it becomes apparent whom adoptive parents believe adoption is designed to serve, and adoptive parents’ voices are highly influential in policy debates. The implementation of more ethical adoption practices must be able to occur without encountering charges that these regulations produce a backlog and impediments for adoptive parents. Ethical considerations must be taken into account to create a more equitable approach that recognizes the rights of all parties involved.

Situating adoption within the rubric of reproductive justice activism thus provides space to discuss the work of adoption triad members to support the rights of birth parents. For example, TRACK (Truth and Reconciliation for the Adoption Community of Korea) began Single Moms’ Day in 2011 in South Korea in response to the government’s established Adoption Day. TRACK notes, “We were inspired

by the First Nations people in the U. S. who celebrate 'Native American Day' on Thanksgiving in order to challenge the dominant narrative and draw people's attention toward a different center of gravity" (Perscheid). Moreover, adoptive parents and organizations working on behalf of the adoption community in the US (e.g., Pact: An Adoption Alliance and the Korean American Adoptee Adoptive Family Network) center the voices of adult adoptees and seek to elevate birth parents' experiences. The integration of the experiences of adoptees and birth parents contributes to the decentering of singular, reductive adoption narratives placing primacy on the expertise of adoptive parents. The efforts of these various groups contribute to a shift in how adoption is understood. Weaving reproductive justice and adoption together to understand the rights of birth mothers elucidates the broader connections between birth mothers' rights and the rights of women of color and low-income women to parent.

Conclusion

A reproductive justice lens disrupts narratives of adoption as a form of child rescue and humanitarian practice. It requires adoptive parents to question the manner in which their children arrived into their homes. Such a perspective works toward dismantling historical inaccuracies concerning adoption stories. No longer is adoption framed as an act of child-saving or humanitarian rescue. Critical adoption studies research dispels these myths. Slowly, the singular narrative that promotes adoption while simultaneously pathologizing birth parents and sending countries is being erased. The voices of birth parents, adoptive parents, and adoptees counter this deception as they weave a narrative that exposes the complexity of adoption. For example, in recent years adoptees and their allies have begun employing the hashtags #AskAnAdoptee and #FlipTheScript to challenge the erasure of adoptees' lived realities in mainstream adoption narratives. At the same time, birth parents' rights are slowly being recognized in the context of both international and domestic adoption. Aligning birth parents' rights and adoption more broadly with reproductive justice exposes the systemic inequities fueling adoption's continuance.

If we recognize birth parents' rights as human rights and in turn recognize reproductive rights as birth parents' rights, it becomes evident that systemic change is required to meet the adoption constellation's needs. The multiple and intersecting power arrangements that allow for the continued decimation of communities of color and Indigenous communities for the benefit of adoptive families must be acknowledged. By recognizing the characterization of adoptees as "resources" to be obtained by the adoptive parents, we become more aware of how adoptees represent lost members of a future generation of their communities of origin.

This essay encourages a broader understanding of adoption and the violence it enacts on women's reproductive autonomy. In doing so, I create space to rethink

adoption in the context of reproductive justice, which centers the need for a more intentional discussion concerning adoption ethics to better account for the rights of birth parents. Situating adoption as a reproductive justice issue facilitates new possibilities for advocacy and activism as the twenty-first century continues.

Notes

1. Ross discusses the origins of the term *women of color* to describe the collective experiences of nonwhite women (*Origin*). In connecting Indigenous women and women of color, I aim to both recognize the organizing between different groups of nonwhite women and acknowledge that Indigenous women operate under a mode of racialization and dispossession of sovereignty.
2. African American prospective adoptive parents often find themselves disproportionately screened out of the adoption process (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute). For more information concerning Black adoptive parents in contemporary America, please see Kreider and Raleigh. For more information regarding the experiences of Black prospective adoptive parents in the mid-twentieth century, please see Potter.
3. Although a study of US fertility from 1988 to 1995 (Mosher and Bachrach) notes that relinquishment of children by white and Black women accounts for 2 percent and 3 percent of nonmarital births, respectively, from 1982 to 1988, the rate of Black children entering foster care and becoming eligible for adoption has increased (Roberts; Briggs, *Somebody's*), creating a disproportionate effect whereby the parental rights of women of color are being terminated more frequently. In its report on adoptions from foster care, the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute reports, "African American children are removed from their families and placed in foster care at a rate more than two times greater than the proportion they represent of the total U. S. child population" (11).
4. In her examination of Korean intercountry adoption, Kendall's research offers first-person birth mother accounts and provides personal narratives of birth mothers and the reasons their children were given up for adoption, dispelling beliefs that many of these children were unwanted or abandoned.

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