Adoption Geometries

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EMILY HIPCHEN

ABSTRACT: This essay interrogates the triad, the geometry that usually describes identities formed in adoption transactions. It uses life writing from two adoption websites to explore the relational, contingent, gendered, and polytemporal nature of adoption identity, then suggests that the nova limns adoption identities and adoption relationality better than the triad.

KEYWORDS: adoption triad, adoption identity, adoption relationality, Bastard Nation

THE WAY ADOPTION scholars and the general public "see" adoption matters because historically its workings have proven difficult to see. Much has often been obscure, indeed sometimes still is: the existence or importance of birth parents, of adoptive parents' grief and longing, of matters of race and ethnicity, of adoption's intersection with global and historical inequities, of the many different kinds and qualities of transactions the term *adoption* might include, and of the fact that stories of normative family-making deviate from data about how actual families form. Critical adoption studies arose in part to address the unseen or inadequately examined in adoption as broadly understood. Adoption scholars seek to make visible and critique how, why, to whom, and where adoption happens in our cultures and to gauge the impact of adoption relationality on our sense of who and what we are in adoption (as nations, institutions, cultures, individuals).

One of the difficulties in seeing adoption has been the standard visual model of the transaction. As Margaret Jacobs's examination in this issue argues, the

form in which adoption is usually visualized—the triad—is limiting. One way to a more accurate, complex, and inclusive view is to re-see the triad, and since the form establishes adoption identities in relationality, one way to revise it is to set up a conversation between adoption studies and life-writing studies, particularly the latter discipline's examination of identity formation and selves as constituted relationally. Such a conversation could enrich discussion particularly around the ways in which scholarship about adoption inflects any understanding of relational identities and in which relationality complicates how adoption might be reenvisioned. The first task, then, is to describe the current way adoption scholars engineer adoption geometries—the visual representations of adoption transactions and the selves they produce; the second, to invoke an example: here, Bastard Nation (BN), an adoption activist website that shows how adoption selves and adoption relationality might be read as expanded well outside what those in adoption studies generally use to describe the interaction and creation of those selves. This critique suggests a different, more inclusive, more accurate model for visualizing the relational selves produced by adoption, one that not only expands that model to include many other selves coaxed into and by the adoption transaction but also reflects the transaction's polytemporality and the contingent nature of the selves it produces. Re-seeing the geometries of adoption relationality with life writing will also intersect complicated questions about the "gender" of adoption and adoption identities—something that will require further study in other essays but that informs an understanding of adoption identities and adoption relationality.

For those not familiar with the commonplace geometries of adoption transactional relationality, the accepted and widely promulgated model is the adoption triad introduced in the late twentieth century by social scientists and other adoption workers to describe adoption transactions and the selves they produce.[1] The triangle, on whose three points are located the adopted person, the adoptive mother or sometimes the adoptive parents, and the first or biological mother[2] or sometimes parents, is still the usual way of describing in visual terms the relationships between the selves created by adoption. The triad is everywhere: in a meeting with adoption professionals in 2016, we discussed balancing the composition of committees and conference panels in this language; virtually every essay or book on adoption includes language about the triad; as Jacobs notes, the Children's Bureau of the US issues an e-brief monthly called *The Adoption Triad*; and so forth.

The triad's genesis is well meaning and important, arising as it did in the context of what historically counted as adoption in most of the discussions about it at that time—in-race, US domestic, "formal" adoption, which legally transfers responsibility for children from the people who bore them to other sets of parents in a prescribed, bureaucratic process full of paperwork and interventions like the home study. Before agitation for access to birth records and reunion, before agitation about the ethics of transnational and transracial adoption transactions and a generalized and global critique of practices such as closed records adoption, the

Baby Scoop and Operation Babylift, and other fraught ways of placing children,[3] there was usually no officially articulated sense of triangulation at all nor much sense of adoption relationality specifically. In stories such as those in Ann Fessler's *The Girls Who Went Away* or indeed many adoption memoirs (including Betty Jean Lifton's *Twice Born* and Florence Fisher's *Searching*), one can see how relinquishment and adoption often obscured the selfhood of the adoptee while the adoption was in process, then hid the relationship as adoptive afterward—the adoptee was the object exchanged[4] between adoptive parents and birth or first parents (normally mothers) or their parents into an "as if" bionormative family. Afterward, adoptive families often wholly obliterated the selfhood of first or birth parents, some adoptive parents literally killing them off in the stories they told their children, as is particularly obvious in anecdotes collected by Lifton (*Lost* 27); biological or first parents were encouraged to forget or pretend the birth and relinquishment hadn't happened.

To have a triad at all, therefore, is at least to acknowledge the existence of the three most proximal parties in the adoption transaction, and therefore it's to be taken as progress. And it usually is, though it's of course been critiqued, most often on the basis of its tendency toward false equivalency or misrepresenting the strength of the relationships and visibilities between the three parties: representations of the adoption triad are always equilateral triangles (see in particular discussions by Laura Briggs; John McLeod; and Barbara Yngvesson). That geometry does not recognize how, in all adoption transactions—as is generally acknowledged in adoption studies but which is discussed at length in Kimberly McKee's essay for this issue—adoptive parents are structurally the most visible and most powerful subjectivity, even in open adoptions and even in the current adoption climate in which birth or first parents have a great deal more power than they had before cultural and policy changes and drops in birth rates meant fewer healthy white infants were relinquished into the adoption market. Adoptive parents are usually also the most public persons in the triad, the wealthiest, the most powerful, and not inconsequentially, usually the whitest.

It should be clear, then, that the triad—this triangle with three points on which sit three interested parties in adoption transactions—has come to represent the various positions, relationships, and selfhoods of adoptive parents, adopted persons, and birth or first parents. As Jacobs notes in her contribution for this issue, the shape is "a *liberal* conceptualization, . . . 'liberal' . . . in its classical sense as a philosophy that extols individual rights and liberties and the free market." Jacobs uses the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) to challenge the triangle's geometry, noting that the ICWA "recognizes additional interests" and subjectivities (collective and single-bodied) in adoption transactions. In her essay, Jacobs replaces the triad with the many-pointed Lakota quilt star. She uses the contested placement of Jeremiah Halloway in the 1980s to populate by example the extra points with extra "persons" defined, very often, as those in life-writing studies would instantly rec-

ognize. In addition to the members of the traditional triad, adoption transactional identities form around social workers; the adoption agency that handled the placement; the state (in this case, Utah); the LDS (the adoptive family and their agency were Mormon); the nation (federal laws bound [or refusing to be bound] by treaties with the tribe); the child's extended family, including siblings, grandparents, aunts, and uncles; the adoptee's local Navajo tribe; and his tribe as extended racially to include "Native American" as an identity marker.[5] Though Jacobs's essay does not explicitly state this, it implies strongly that even such collective selves as the child's ancestors and those involved in historical conflicts among the tribes and the white colonists and the US government might be considered as having a presence in the transaction, since they were part of legal and paralegal considerations in the legislation that governed the child's—and any Native American child's—transfer to adoptive parents in an extratribal adoption. What Jacobs's analysis produces is a much more complex geometric version of the relationality of adoption selves: not a triangle but a series of triangulations in a single plane.

The selves that people the points on Jacobs's star—the LDS, the federal government, the adoption agency—are relational in at least two distinct ways. They are constructed internally of selves in relation to one another and are called into being relationally, by being in relation to others. One of the central concerns of life-writing scholarship is the nature of the "auto" in *autobiography:* its unity, shape, consistency, and actual presence are often matters of long-standing conversation. Calling any of the organizations involved in Halloway's adoption a "self," therefore, comes in the context of a contentious discussion in the discipline about what constitutes selfhood. The idea of relationality and relational identity were initially framed in life-writing studies to move the Enlightenment understanding of the self toward a different one, toward individuals' enmeshment in selves and their narratives outside the singularity defined by the edges of their integuments. Relational selves are selves-in-relation.

This idea has its firmest expression in early feminist interventions in opening the canon and in life-writing theory, in work by Susan Stanford Friedman, Nancy K. Miller, and Susanna Egan, among others, and later in the work of Arnold Krupat, Paul John Eakin, and particularly theorizers of selves outside the West or of people of color—among such theorizers, here, is Jacobs herself.[6] Initially, Stanford Friedman argues, the "concept of autobiography is premised on a model of the self that [Georges Gusdorf] identifies as endemically Western and individualistic" (72), but women "develop an alternative way of seeing themselves by constructing a group identity" (76); "instead of seeing themselves as solely unique, [in their life writing] women often explore their sense of shared identity. . . . Individualistic paradigms [of the self] do not take into account the central role collective consciousness of the self plays in the lives of women and minorities" (79). Nancy Chodorow notes that for women, relational identities are normative and part of the psychology of family and gender differentiation in that institution:

"a girl continues to experience herself as involved in the issues of merging and separation, and in an attachment characterized by primary identification and the fusion of identification and object choice" (166). Relational identities were initially coded female and non-Western/nonwhite and the relational self presented as an anomaly, the way women and Others wrote their autobiographical documents in opposition to those of men such as Augustine, Rousseau, and Franklin, the paradigmatic autobiographers in the canon: relationality was at first a gendered and a geographic concept, how Others wrote their lives. By the late 90s, though that identification had not disappeared, it had become more fluid, and the self of all life writing is now sometimes theorized as inescapably relational, as Miller sees it in "Representing" ("what if . . . autobiography was very precisely the genre [or cultural practice] in which the self necessarily performed its relation to the other . . . ?" [3–4]), as Judith Butler frames it in *Giving* ("there is no 'I' that can fully stand apart from the social conditions of its emergence" [7]; its narration of itself must "include the conditions of its own emergence" [8], which are found in relationship to its social contexts);[7] and as Eakin sees it in the second chapter of *How Our Lives Become Stories*: "These two stories [Jonathan Krakauer's *Into the Wild* and Carolyn Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman*] . . . crystallized my belief that *all* identity is relational" (43); "all selfhood . . . is relational, despite differences that fall out along gender lines" (50).

Relational selves can be kinds of corporate or collective persons. Imagining corporations as having selves is, in a legal sense, certainly possible; however, to think of groups as selves-producing challenges those early notions of selfhood implicit in theories of life writing stretching back through Georges Gusdorf and Phillipe Lejeune ("a real person" with an "individual life" is difficult to understand as multiple-bodied or metaphoric [Lejeune 4]) to Eakin, whose 1999 *How Our Lives Become Stories* includes a chapter on corporeality and the necessity of the body in selfhood, another difficult-to-transfer concept if we extend selfhood to a collective. On the other hand, descriptions of the "I" of *testimonio*—as in the case of Rigoberta Menchú's *I, Rigoberta Menchú, A Woman of Guatemala* and the ardent debate about the selfhood of the narrator, and of the practice of including group experiences under the aegis of the singular first-person pronoun "I" as described in Arnold Krupat's "Native American Autobiography and the Synecdochic Self"—look very much like corporate selfhood and the collective, expanded first-person.[8] Very like, for instance, any selfhood of the LDS, the federal government, or the adoption agency.

In thinking of an adoption agency, for instance, as having a selfhood, that self must be both relational and collaborative, derived from the work of several bodies narrating and performing the agency's corporate purpose (its mission statement, its teleology) in relation to one another and to its clients. The agency, therefore, might be seen as a tribe, as a culture, as a unit expressing an identity. This might be understood as the agency's "brand" or its purpose, the way it unifies itself

through its image or its purpose, the way it cements individuals into a single, well-defined corporate body that works in a focused way on an organized set of goals. "Working in a focused way on an organized set of goals," of course, might well describe a self that is having a productive life. The agency, with its goal of finding adoptive homes for relinquished children—and perhaps of fostering good mental health in and between adoptive families and remaining solvent or even providing returns for investors—becomes this kind of corporate self, a cluster of people working together to realize the agency's purpose. Like a tribe or a culture or a nation, the agency thus can have a relational identity.

Second, the interactions and transactions required to complete the adoption help to create the agency's relationality in concert with and against other adoption selves: the adoption calls into being, through the agency's action as a corporate body in the adoption transaction, the agency's adoption identity, which is merely latent in its mission. We can of course think of this narratively and talk about the agency's selfhood as having a story and a physical presence encompassing/housing/made of (literally, in its data banks and file cabinets) the stories of other adoption selves (the adoptive parents' journey to adoption, the birth or first mother's story, and so forth).[9] The agency's adoption identity is also called into being against other adoption identities: it is not a birth or first parent, an adoptee, the federal or state government, or any other adoption self. The agency is, however, usually crucial to the adoption transaction since it creates, polices, and produces much of adoption's bureaucracy and ritual. It might also be interesting to highlight here the polysemy of *agency* in this context, given the term's primacy in the liberal understanding of selfhood.

The agency, however, is just one of several relational selves coaxed into being by the adoption transaction. I borrow this idea of coaxing from Ken Plummer via Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, who describe it as "any person or institution or set of cultural imperatives that solicits or provokes people to tell their stories" (*Reading* 64), then suggest that coaxing is part of a strategy of self-definition (66–67); coaxing prompts people, as Smith and Watson say, to "get . . . a life" (64). In life-writing studies, the connection between story and self is deeply rooted, from Joan Didion's classic "we tell ourselves stories in order to live"—the title of her collected works but also a sentence in her essay "The White Album"—to the title and premise of *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* and much of Eakin's other work. The auto-, bio-, and -graphy are very tightly bound in the discipline, especially where -graphy is (in Lejeune's words) a "prose narrative" (4). Talking about the adoption transaction as a coaxing force helps reveal adoption relational selves as latent before the many acts of the adoption transaction call them into being. *Coaxing* then simply means "bringing out of latency into being by acts or words," in this case specifically by the transactional necessities and the implications and effects of adoption.[10] Any adoption transaction may begin at the moment of conceiving

the adoption by any party in that transaction and may carry on through and past, even long past, the lives of any of the living persons who are most proximal to it.

It may start to be clear, given these framings of relationality and the relational self, how the triad is inadequate as a geometry for visualizing adoption relationality, embodied or otherwise. The adoption body is (I argue elsewhere) peculiar in the context of "the family body"—that is, a relationality of resemblance that partitions the body, then reattaches it at points of resemblance to create "family" biogenetically ("Images" 168). This happens at the microscopic level in conversations about genetics: people share bodies with those who share their DNA, literally, and these become extended, relational, collective bodies—"family" bodies. These are "family" people can discover and document through science, through companies like 23andMe and Ancestry.com, or through other ways of understanding "bloodlines," like genealogies that trace relatives by birth. Thus a single body extends collectively via DNA into group spaces with names. A 23andMe report might list such names as "Scottish, West African, Irish, and Turkish"—one collective identity, therefore, is literally a set of proper adjectives that correspond to places on a map. These of course also connect to historic moments, often of conquest or immigration. For instance, in a relatively recent documentary on PBS, a local radio station asked residents of an English village to get DNA tested. It then revealed to them who had been products of Viking incursions in the area, then nestled scenes of these revelations in the context of stories about the history of Viking raids and immigration in the area (Wood). People also have another kind of collective microscopic identity, as the role of our biome in linking us to our (narrative) history, our (historical) geography, and our "people" is increasingly discovered (Hair and Sharpe), and in fact there is good evidence that in many important ways bacteria are what people imagine as "themselves" (Gligorov et al.). So to a certain extent people already are embodied collectives relationally enacting "selves" they may only imagine to be unitary, solitary, and individual. At the level of biology, people embody families and are connected to their families through genesis.

Though of course adoptive bodies have microbiomes and are connected to a family via DNA, these bodies can prove disruptive in the adoption, and this disruption may make apparent the contradictions in ideologies of connection and only-ness, both of which have significant cultural weight at least in the US. On the one hand, life-writing scholarship and US culture in general privileges roots: ethnographies, ideas of race and ethnicity as connective, even recently the theorizing of "autobiogenography," in which "Genomic life writing will be organized around the discovery of the biochemical self, predictive genetic data that will determine life choices, map an entirely new domain in biosociality, and eventually climax in an examination of racial, cultural, and ethnic ancestry and belonging" (Nayar 217). On the other, Americans love a self-made man, a hauler of bootstraps, the underdog who comes from nowhere and has nothing and makes good. Adoption bodies bridge this ambivalence. Clearly, adoption bodies belong somewhere. But

that's often elsewhere (with their "real" families, in their "real" countries, with their "real" people). They are different in their families in that they do not stick to their family body via genetics that may be visible through resemblance. And so adoptees can seem sole and only, as can adoptive parents who don't have genetic offspring, or even first or biological parents who relinquish their children.[11]

Thus adoption in life-writing scholarship can be used as one of the limit cases for individuality, a particularly weighty ideology in the US where our important myths require both that our ethnicity, our places, and our kin are apparent and that people imagine themselves absolutely in control of their destinies, their successes and failures (these days, of their preexisting conditions and their genetic frailties, too). The American dream needs people to imagine themselves moving through the world without connection to or consequences for others, for which adoptee selves are perfectly suited, literally and metaphorically, as Carol Singley argues at length in *Adopting America.* However, the geography of adoption selves in the adoption transaction suggests the myth of adoptee rootlessness and disconnection. And this, as Jacobs herself observes in the case of Native American extratribal adoption, may ultimately show us the "limitations of the liberal paradigm of adoption"—and probably, really ultimately, of the self understood as unitary itself. Looking at adoption relationality, then, helps to test what people think they know about both who they are and how they became themselves. To think with adoption relationality in mind reconfigures the body, the family, the corporation, the state, the nation.

But all this reconfiguring requires a good model for adoption relationality to represent the identities it brings into being. Here, though I think almost any adoption text will provide similar material, I want to use a set of activist web pages as an example of the complexities of finding the right way of seeing adoption selves. I've chosen a website not just because of interest in digital selves signaled by several important publications on them (for example, collections by Anna Poletti and Julie Rak, and by Laurie McNeill and John Zuern) but also because a web-self makes instantly visible what is more latent in a text-self: namely its contingency and its abundant, even exuberant relationality. Thinking with adoption about relationality enriches and sharpens the qualities of relationality and puts them in high relief against claims for essentialist, static, or liberal ideas of the nature of the self. This is clear, for instance, in Karen Salyer McElmurray's *Surrendered Child*—a text memoir. It reveals, if one is looking for it, the relational selves coaxed into the adoption transactions she describes: these selves include her parents and their pasts and futures; her boy-husband and his family; places like Mammoth Cave and its narratives, including one in which a man gets lost, stuck, and dies in the cave; her friends and their agendas; "Appalachian" as an identity category tagged with its histories of incursion, abuses, human strengths, class system, even its geography; and so forth. In a sense, one might say the mobile relationality of the selves in McElmurray's text may account in part for its unusual, fragmented, and

recursive structure. Another example, perhaps closer to the structure of a website given its polyvocality, is Fessler's collection of birth or first mother stories, in which narrated selves are produced in the context of historical phenomena, social science statistics, art and art history (they come from Fessler's installation work and thus trail its structures and purpose into the textual iteration), and law (the title includes *Roe v. Wade* and thus coaxes into relationship with these stories US laws about women's reproduction and fights for reproductive justice from back past Margaret Sanger and forward to 2017's US Supreme Court choice, and likely beyond). The text serves in the same capacity, too, as the adoption agency, warehousing and contextualizing stories in relation to one another, and has a corporate purpose like an agency, which is largely to inform readers about treatment of birth and first mothers before abortion was legalized and single motherhood mostly destigmatized. Jacobs's own materials, which have been discussed here—the way in which the discussions, the legal case, and Jacob's narrative of them move backward and forward in time and includes bodies not generally considered singular and that may not be "seen" as produced by adoption (for instance, the adoption agency, residential schools for the Indigenous whose legacy informs the ICWA, and so forth), are yet another example.

The Bastard Nation and *The Daily Bastardette* websites demonstrate here some of the possibilities specifically for an expanded sense of the adoption self and for its relationality and provide illustrations of the collective adoption identity (coaxed into being by the adoption transaction), including not just legislative bodies but history, geography, and other modes of collective identification. A look at BN and *The Bastardette* will also help frame relational adoption identity as a shared and coopted narrative that can be "embodied" outside "the body" proper: that is, in institutions, corporations, contracts, events, even objects. BN and *The Daily Bastardette* provide a model—as well as a metaphor—of what is widely the case in representations of adoption selves, in that the sites are multiple, messy, and as a set of virtual documents, changeable and contingent.

Bastard Nation is a very informal coalition of persons and pages, so informal in fact that there is no published roll of members nor any membership fee or gatekeeping; anyone can join simply by clicking a link that allows BN to send a newsletter. Its homepage is a collection of news items arranged around open-records activist concerns: today, 18 November 2017, these include news concerning Florida HB357/SB576, legislation that complicates open records in that state, and about opposition to that bill; a map of "free states," where adult adoptees currently have free access to their original birth certificates; an advertisement for a BN-sponsored book; a piece opposing the deportation of transnational adoptees who were not naturalized by their adoptive parents and who under the current administration are being deported as undocumented aliens; a call for volunteer legislative liaisons to work with the government on open records and other proadoptee legislation; merchandise marketing and SNS links; and so forth. *The Daily Bastardette,*

a blogsite associated with BN, is run by Marley Greiner,[12] one of BN's thirty-four "founding foundlings."[13] A link on the BN's FAQ page takes us to a description of the organization's beginnings; there is another link and another version of this story under the "Learn" tab, linked to a page called "Who We Are: [T]he History of Bastard Nation." The foundling page states that these thirty-four adoptees were simply the first to sign on, but the "Who" page tells us Greiner is an original and organizing principal of the group who "coined the term 'Bastard Nation' and started signing her posts [to the Usenet group alt.adoption in 1996] with it, with others soon following suit" (Plum). Through *Bastardette,* Greiner campaigns for records reform and other proadoptee positions via information-sharing with other activists and her readers, by using social media to promote adoption causes, and by agitating for votes against the enemies of open records and adoptee access to original birth certificates. The blog periodically addresses adjacent concerns as well. For a time around the Artem Saveliev disruption in 2010, in which an unaccompanied seven-year-old adoptee was returned to Russia with a note saying, "I don't want him anymore," Greiner gathered statistics and wrote scathingly about Russian adoption corruption. She has repeatedly combatted Safe Haven and Baby Drop laws, and she is hypercritical of transnational adoption in general where she sees its process as corrupt.

But just this list of what BN and the *Bastardette* address indicates some of the parties that should be visible, in relationship, and open to critique in any adoption transaction.[14] There are legislators and their laws, with or against which adoptees find their first or birth origins and in the context of which "parents" are coaxed into being (or erased). There are nations, sender and receiver nations in particular, and their adoption politics, laws, and cultures, especially Russia for the *Bastardette.* The Bastard Nation site itself only briefly features South American, Indian, Caribbean, and Asian adoptees in a piece about deportations co-written by Greiner (Greiner and Grimm). On the whole, Greiner and BN do not often concern themselves on these sites with some nations and transnational adoption practices that nevertheless haunt their rhetoric, Asian transnational adoption in particular: Greiner's objections to Baby Drops and Safe Haven laws, and to Russian, Haitian, and Guatemalan adoption generally, are the same as those that activists such as Tobias Hübinette and Kim Park Nelson use to critique Asian transnational adoption cultures and transnational adoption in general. Thus, though certain nations may be specifically coaxed into adoption transactional identities, they also trail analogues in adoption activism.

For instance, under its informational tab "Activism," the *Bastardette* catalogues organizations such as Concerned United Birthparents in a list called "Good Guys," the American Adoption Congress in a list called "The Mushy Middle," and the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute in a list called "Bad Guys." Everyone on these lists, from the Adoption Rights Coalition (good) to the White Oak Foundation (bad: "fake records access 'advocate'; obstructionist"), is party to any adop-

tion transaction by virtue of their political or media influence, some of which can be substantial, such as that from the Donaldson Institute, or in some cases by their actual influence over the adoptee, birth or first parents, or adoptive parents. Specific persons outside the traditional triangle are also coaxed into an adoption identity by the transaction, including historical or mythic adoptees (Lifton's initial chapter in *Twice Born,* one of the first adoptee memoirs, is all about Oedipus, for instance). Those who make the news and thus influence people's idea of their adoption identities are there, too, including Saveliev and his parents and Sherin Mathews, the three-year-old adoptee whose father, in 2017, confessed to killing her by force-feeding her milk until she drowned, and her parents. There are also public adoptees like Steve Jobs and Dave Thomas and celebrity birth or first mothers, such as Joni Mitchell, Roseanne Barr, and Patti Smith, and celebrity adoptive families, like Madonna's and Brangelina's. Politicians and government bodies who control adoption narratives, like those called out on BN's homepage and by the *Bastardette* for facilitating, or more often preventing, access to original birth certificates, also end up with relational adoption identities simply through their mediating influence on the adoption transaction.

Adoption thus becomes a cluster of relational, collaborative identities formed in and around the transaction, which derive from and influence it and may influence future adoption identities through narratives or through friction with or sharing with modes of being in adoption. Any adoption discussion or description, more or less self-reflectively, will reveal this cluster of relational identities; Bastard Nation represents this phenomenon more or less paradigmatically.

That the triad is obviously an inadequate visualization should now be clear: there are too few points, many too few, and "point" itself is insufficient to describe the complicated collaborative or corporate selves that are coaxed into a presence in the adoption transaction. But there's another relationship that isn't described in a geometry even as point-filled as the Lakota star Jacobs uses to complicate the adoption triangle in her analysis of the Halloway case. The phrase "adoption transaction," something both descriptive and critical in the way adoption scholars have noticed the similarities between some forms of adoption and some kinds of human trafficking, is inadequate in its temporal limitations: that is, typically, a transaction is a one-time deal, done and over with. Even if the transaction itself is negotiated and takes time to complete, there is a moment of completion. Something is signed, something moves across a table or a room, something is transferred and something given for it, even if and when that transfer is in the best interests of the transactional parties, including of that which is exchanged. But the problem with adoption identities is that they are atemporal, or rather polytemporal, shifting in time from the moment of the apparent completion of transfer to this moment; and this one; and this one. What geometries like the triad and even the Lakota quilt star don't take into consideration, haven't yet anyway, is also the way in which time affects adoption identities that appear in the transaction, or appear around it or because

of it. In the case of the adoption transaction—which is, after all, relational identities moving in and out of connection with each other—the transaction is in a kind of perpetual motion wherein all identities are contingent, shifting, temporally inflected. Any adoption transaction can be, seems to be, lifelong: in fact, some of the old ways of performing adoption may create trauma by pretending the transaction is finished at some point (often when the adoption papers are signed, or possibly when the relinquishment papers are signed, or maybe when the original birth certificate is opened and read, or sometimes in reunion or the rejection of reunion, or perhaps when someone in either family dies or the adoptee does, or so on).

That adoption relationality and adoption transactions are not static or unitary requires a different visual paradigm of adoption, one that allows us to see adoption better so that we may represent, understand, and critique it better, and also so that life-writing scholars can think with adoption about how we understand contested ideas of relationality, embodiment, and family. Instead of seeing adoption relationality in a fixed, two-dimensional shape like quilt star or a triangle, I propose instead a nova—that is, a star in almost infinite expansion, sending itself not into a void but into more and less populated space, each bit spinning in the force of its outward movement, into and away from, part of, influenced by and influencing what set it in motion and into being. Instead of three finite points or eight or a thousand, the nova produces a cloud, not in two-dimensional space but in three or four dimensions necessarily including time: my adoption identity at the moment of transaction is not the same as it is now; my reading of a site of adoption is not the same as it was in October when I began thinking about this project, or a year ago, or five years ago, or even the day I was born or conceived. Relations, collaboration, and connection can appear to be weblike or netlike (Eakin's "intertwined" [*How* 52]; Krupat's "composite composition" [219]; even Julie Rak's central tangled-roots-and-tree image). I tend more and more to think of relational identities as infinitely shifting, changing in time and space and motion.

Imagining the legacies of relationality for thinking with adoption means tackling the way in which adoption relationality and ideas of gendered life-narrative interact. The connection between relational identities and the feminine persists, even specifically in responses to early drafts of this essay, which gendered adoption and family as "female concerns," even specifically in the embodiments of scholars of adoption studies, who identify, by and large, as women. As I elaborated earlier in this essay, relationality in life-writing studies is deeply rooted in the need for inclusion and begins with the critique of early, Enlightenment ideas of selfhood, a critique that came from thinking about selves and life writing outside the West and about those texts and selves created by women. Even if for two decades identity has been frequently described as relational—even if scholars have noticed how texts like Franklin's and Augustine's are (for all their trying to be otherwise) expressions of relational identities—relationality has stuck hard to women's writing, maybe because life writing's best theorists, including Miller and

Stanford Friedman, Bella Brodski and Celeste Schenk, have connected the two so cogently that people can't forget. But when I look around at adoption scholars and adoption scholarship, at adoption life writing in all its forms, I am reminded of sitting in many a meeting of the Alliance for the Study of Adoption and Culture and wondering where the men's voices are.[15] Maybe it's a demographic consequence ("people don't usually relinquish boys"; "maternity is about mothers"; "family making is women's work"—all answers I got when I asked informally about my observation), but to what degree is adoption relationality, particularly its expression in places like the *Daily Bastardette* and BN, gendered? And if it's gendered, is the observation useful or right? How might thinking with adoption about the way in which adoption relationalities are coaxed, polytemporal, contingent on transaction to move out of latency and not networked so much as dispersed, inflect thinking about gendered relationality more generally in life writing?

Scholars know that adoption "others" the family, sets it outside the linearity of a blood*line* or a genealogical chart; even if it's the case, factually, that biogenesis is not normative, its normativity as a cultural production sets adoption aside, reveals how these ideas travel some of the same theoretical paths as feminist (and, one has to note, postcolonial and queer) thinking does. If adoption is "other," then adoption identities are "other," and perhaps the whole mess of family otherness can be said to share space with and be useful to feminist and queer critiques of the family that point to its patriarchal rigidities, the narrow linearity of primogeniture, the way in which women in particular can become dehumanized in the idea of a normative, biogenetically related family or its adoption-produced, "as if" copies. In which case, what about "other" adoptions and their relationalities and their production of adoption identities, about adoption in other places and adoption in other ways—what do those relations look like? For instance, what about children who are never told: what kind of adoption identity can they have? Do they have any? For instance, what about adoptions that are temporary or contingent? Does even the transient or disrupted relinquishment and placement coax an identity? If so, what might be said about the otherness of that self, and how might it correspond to any image of the relationships such a transaction produces? What about kinship adoption, especially that which is kept secret or is simply tacit or is never discussed? What about relational identities for children or their parents in conspicuous adoption, or those of the disabled or by the disabled? When I think about gender and the visual tropes of adoption, when I think about the figure of the nova that expands and collides with and incorporates and destroys, I can see how adoption geometries inform and share space with theories and practices that similarly open up the single planes and straight lines of how we tend to imagine normativity more generally, how shifting, contingent, multiple adoption relational identities can be useful in all the critique we do of the patriarchal family.

Notes

1. Carp notes, as do most public documents (for example, the National Adoption Center's glossary of adoption terms), that the original "triangle" quickly morphed to the slightly less visual "triad." "The earliest use of 'adoption triangle,' or at least a phrase very similar, was in 1974 by Ralph D. Maxfield, founder of an anti-ARM [Adoption Rights Movement] organization, the Association for the Protection of the Adoptive Triangle. See R. D. Maxfield to Joseph Reid, Oct. 1, 1975, CWLA Recs., Suppl., Box 10, 'Sealed Adoption Records Controversy' folder. Three years later, in March 1977 the Children's Home Society of California (CHSC) used the term, 'adoption triangle' in its report on attitudes toward sealed adoption records. Children's Home Society of California, *The Changing Face of Adoption* (Los Angeles: Children's Home Society of California, 1977), p. 34. The earliest use of the term 'adoption triad' dates to 1977. See C. Wilson Anderson, 'The Sealed Record in Adoption Controversy,' *Social Service Review* 51 (1977): 146" (Carp, *Family* 270n16).

    Another less-preferred but sometimes-occurring geometry is "the adoption circle," which tends to erase individual subjectivities and positions, since there are no points on a circle—in the triangle model or indeed any angular form, those points indicate "persons." That the circle is not the preferred geometry for understanding adoption relationality obviously supports part of Jacobs's critique of the triangle as a liberal construct that emphasizes individuality over group identity, but the circle may be inadequate in other ways. See also Jacobs's discussion in her essay in this issue, as well as Carp, *Family* 149–50; and "Adoption."

2. Because I need to talk about separate selves coaxed by adoption transactions, I need to distinguish between different parental identities. However, I believe all parents to be equally the parents of their child, and I resist a designation that marks either form of parenting as lesser or displacing (which has been historically the case with modifiers like "real," "natural," "birth," "first," and "adoptive"). I use *child* here only out of a sense that *parenting* as a verb is done with children, realizing that *adopted child* is a fraught phrase, and in avoidance of gendered terms like *son* or *daughter.* I mean, of course, "person," but that is complicated by the implied ownership of the available syntax to describe parental relationships in English. I can't say "parents of their person" if I wish to avoid the language of ownership of adults, and I do. In future projects, it might be useful to examine the semantic geometries and syntaxes of adoption identities, dependent as they are on each other for their appearance: I might suggest that they become the place where one sees very clearly the necessary relationality of such terms and such identities, and possibly scholars start parsing relationality a little differently for the different kinds of relationality that might create identities. I'm thinking here especially about the posthuman and nonhuman, but also relationality as it applies to objects. Here, one might see Gillian Whitlock and G. Thomas Couser, and the work of Cynthia Huff in animalography.

3. These agitations and critiques are, in essence, the canon of adoption studies; but see, for instance, Fisher; Lifton, both *Twice* and *Lost;* Paton; Carp, both *Family* and *Paton;* Modell; Herman; the essays in Volkman; Trenka; Park Nelson; Callahan; Homans, both "Adoption" and *Imprint;* Jerng; Yngevesson; the essays in Trenka et al.; Solinger; and Prébin. For more on this subject and for an outline of the adoption studies canon, see Callahan and Hipchen as well as the essays contained in this special issue of *Adoption & Culture.*

4. In this essay, I'm claiming that adoption is transactional along several axes; there is no party in adoption that gives without receiving. First or birth parents, for instance, re-

linquish for a panoply of reasons, some of which might include the restoration of good reputation, money, or even simply to leave behind a difficult life events and start over. See Fessler for some of these reasons, but see also books by McElmurray, Moorman, Schaefer, Ellerby, or nearly any first- or birth-parent memoir. What parties receive in the transaction is sometimes hazy or badly understood, especially when it isn't material (a child, a check); the transaction may also be fundamentally immoral or inequitable. I discuss the nature of adoption transactionality later in this essay.

5. See Jacobs, note 1, for a discussion of terminology around Indigenous identities and race. I borrow her strategy throughout.

6. The various positions and debates are summarized cleanly in Smith and Watson, *Reading* chapter 8 (in particular, pages 215–18), and can be seen in edited versions of their original published versions in Chansky and Hipchen. Relational identities have been posited for many kinds of non-Western, nonwhite Others, including the enslaved in slave narratives or civil rights (auto)biographies such as Frederick Douglass's *Narrative,* Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents,* and Malcolm X's *Autobiography.* See Andrews; Lamore; Gates, *Figures* and *Finding.*

7. Butler's work in *Undoing Gender* suggests similar constructs of the self, as "beside" itself or, in the light of grieving, "in this experience something about who we are is revealed, something that delineates the ties we have to others, that shows us that *those ties constitute a sense of self, compose who we are. . . .* I think [grieving] exposes the constitutive sociality of the self" (18–19, emphasis added). In Butler's work in particular one can see the relational model of the self working in conjunction with her sense of the performative and the queer to critique essentialist, reductive models of many institutions, including "the self" and the patriarchal family.

8. See Gusdorf; Lejeune; Eakin, *How;* Menchú; Arias; and Krupat. For discussions of the "I" of life writing, see in particular Smith and Watson, *Reading.*

9. Here again, I can call on Eakin, as well as Lejeune, Butler, and a whole host of theorists including early Olney and more recently work by Gilmore, who tell us that selves are storied into being, that selves are narrative. See Eakin, *How* and *Living;* Lejeune; Butler, both *Giving* and *Undoing;* Olney; and Gilmore, "Refugee/Citizen" and *Tainted.*

10. Smith and Watson also discuss the overlapping of coaxing and coercion, which might be a fruitful site of further inquiry in the production of some kinds of adoption identities particularly. See *Reading* 64–69.

11. There are clever and interesting differences for kinship and open adoptions, and in another way, for conspicuous adoptions in which bodies narrate their only-ness without their consent. In kinship and open adoptions, the family body is extended, on the one hand generationally or outside the nuclear family when a relation like a sister or brother raises a child, on the other definitionally, in that it tests the idea of "family" itself when a child can have two mothers and fathers or even two whole sets of siblings whom they know and may interact with as "family." For conspicuous adoptions, body difference in clear relatedness (here, imagine family photos or Instagram accounts with children's pictures and captions that claim kinship) can cause cognitive dissonance for those for whom the family body is produced only via resemblance/DNA. Consent for the dissemination of family photographs of children is part of a very contentious conversation—see Haelle; and Susser. These permutations may be yet another fruitful site for further inquiry in other essays.

12. Greiner is likely an in-race Baby Scoop adoptee. That she can be identified in this way suggests a certain hierarchy of relational selves formed around her position in the transaction ("adoptee"); roughly indicates the time she was adopted ("Baby Scoop"),

which offers a narrative to connect to the narrative of Greiner's own placement and suggests narratives around her parents, too; and provides a set of racial narratives into which Greiner's fit and with which hers will in some ways intersect. There might be other methods of talking about Greiner's adoption identity (she's an activist, she was adopted in the US, she's a woman, and so forth). These all suggest different narrative crossings and places that participate in her adoption identity and that appear when she is placed in the context of the adoption transactions in which she was involved.

13. I could not locate a direct link on the BN site to the *Bastardette* site, but the *Bastardette* site links directly to the BN homepage. Greiner's Facebook page lists her as executive chair at Bastard Nation.

14. Though some of this expansion and proliferation may be an effect of the fact that BN is an internet website connected to social media, which has the possibility for a near-infinity of links and collaborations, this expanded sense of the adoption relational self is visible outside any internet presentation. For instance, any adoption memoir will present you with multiple invested selves, contingent and otherwise: in mine, there are two whole families for several generations in at least three countries (some members dead; others never encountered, just storied); my doctor; my boyfriend at the time and then my husband; Catholic Charities; the registry that managed the paperwork; and then things like information I got about the falsification of my records, which was based on research complete strangers had done; and even the buildings where I was born, was housed in before my adoption, and was relinquished from have a kind of characterization. The phenomenon is everywhere, though the internet proliferates and tangles it. See Hipchen, *Coming.*

15. This is not to say there are none, of course. Adoption scholarship and adoption life writing includes male writers and critics, including Mark Jerng, John McLeod, David Smolin, Matthew Sasseles, Tim Green, Jesse Green, and Dan Savage, just to name a few. But women scholars and writers outnumber them in the field many times over.

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