

Reflecting on the Rhetoric of Adoption in Trans Youth Care

Florence Ashley

is an Assistant Professor at the University of Alberta Faculty of Law and John Dossetor Health Ethics Centre. A transdisciplinary transfeminine jurist and bioethicist, they write across a wide range of disciplines relating to trans communities and are the author of *Banning Transgender Conversion Practices: A Legal and Policy Analysis*.

✉ fashley@ualberta.ca

Adoption is increasingly being discussed as an alternative to procreation for trans youth given the impact of gender-affirming medical care on fertility. In this article, I caution against idyllic views of adoption and offer a critical perspective on the social, political, and ethical dimensions of adoption. After reviewing adoption's relationship to sexism, racism, imperialism, and cisheteronormativity, I sketch an alternative view of adoption as a complex and multi-valenced form of care in an unjust world.

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An emerging scholarly literature in trans youth care has elevated adoption as an answer to the conundrum posed by gender-affirming care's impact on fertility (e.g., Chen et al. 2018; Chen et al. 2019; Chiniara et al. 2019; Garborcauskas et al. 2022; Halloran et al. 2023; Harris, Kolaitis, and Frader 2020; Hudson et al. 2018; Stark et al. 2021; see also Clark 2021). These publications, primarily originating in adolescent medicine and fertility counselling, identify adoption as a desirable and desired form of family-building for trans youth. Quantitative and mixed methods studies identify 71% to 93% of trans youth as being open to or interested in adoption (Chen et al. 2018; Chiniara et al. 2019; Halloran et al. 2023; Stark et al. 2021; Walton et al. 2022).

Discussions of adoption in the literature push back against hegemonic understandings of adoption as an inferior form of family-building by highlighting its alignment with the desires of trans youth. Adoption is described in articles as a means of avoiding dysphoria (Chen et al. 2018; Clark 2021) and a solution to infertility for youth who change their mind about not wanting children (Hudson et al. 2018). By far, however, the most salient desirable feature of adoption noted in the publications is its altruism. Quotes from trans youth depict adoption as a way of giving back to society by “saving” one of the “thousands, millions” of children in need of adoption (Chen et al.

2019, 109; see also Chen et al. 2018; Harris, Kolaitis, and Frader 2020; Stark et al. 2021). As one youth explains, “adoption is a really awesome way to go. I don’t see any issues with it whatsoever” (Clark 2021, 163).

The centering of adoption in trans youths’ reproductive futures arises in the context of rising sociopolitical opposition to gender-affirming care, with concerns over fertility and reproductive potential surfacing as an organizing rhetoric of anti-trans movements (Paxton 2022). By endorsing adoption as a desirable and desired alternative to conception for trans youth, proponents of gender-affirming care offer a counter-rhetoric that legitimates puberty blockers and hormone therapy notwithstanding their impact on fertility. One author also points out that valuing diverse forms of family-building can be beneficial for trans youth in the present given “high rates of family rejection, foster care involvement, and homelessness experienced by [them]” (Clark 2021, 170).

Such narratives offer a rosy picture of adoption that obscures the ethical quandaries invoked by adoption and glosses over the stakes involved in being an adoptive parent. Because they approach adoption as an individual decision, articles by-and-large do not engage in a nuanced or comprehensive discussion of the sociopolitical and ethical considerations raised by the adoption industry. Discrimination against trans youth stands out as the only structural barrier discussed in the articles, yet most articles only mentioned it in passing (Chen et al. 2018; Halloran et al. 2023; Harris, Kolaitis, and Frader 2020; Stark et al. 2021; cf. Garborcauskas et al. 2022). Missing from the articles is any acknowledgement or reflection on the political and moral nuances of adoption—a telling silence given the saviorist narrative deployed by some articles. The fact that much of the adoption industry is predicated on white parents adopting non-white children born to non-white women, often under coercive and exploitative conditions, remains unmentioned. Betraying a lack of rhetorical nuance, an idyllic view of adoption is not far from the literature’s surface. Only the cis deal in absolutes.¹

In this article, I wish to complicate the rhetoric of adoption in trans youth care by introducing critical perspectives on the social, political, and ethical dimensions of adoption. I do not wish to suggest that adopting a child is always unethical or that adoptive relationships are any less authentic or legitimate than other family arrangements. Rather, I argue that adoption is a complex sociopolitical phenomenon that cannot be reduced to a personal choice occurring in a vacuum. To adopt is to become involved in a system that is inextricable from trauma, racism, imperialism, capitalism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, and desirability politics. As Kit Myers (2018) explains, “violence is a condition of possibility for adoption.” If trans youth care wishes to situate adoption at the epicenter of trans youths’ reproductive futures, it must acknowledge adoption as a site of harm as much as love, trauma as much as healing. While I focus on adoption in the United States, my discussion is also relevant to the rest of the Global North.

How trans youth think about adoption does not arise in a vacuum. They are influenced by clinicians, parents, LGBTQI+ spaces, and society at large (e.g., Harris, Kolaitis, and Frader 2020; Stark et al. 2021;). Scholarly publications on adoption in trans

1 The quote is more normative or aspirational than descriptive. Just as absolutes were not the sole province of the Sith, some of the authors who deploy a rosy view of adoption are trans.

youth care are part of a broader rhetorical movement that sanitizes and, thus, supports the adoption industry. Injecting nuance into how adoption is discussed in trans youth care is not only important on its own terms but, given their altruistic motives, is likely something that trans youth would want to be aware of. Rather than seeing adoption primarily as a way of “saving” children, avoiding dysphoria, or circumventing infertility, I suggest understanding it as a complex and multi-valenced form of care that cannot be dissociated from the multiple systems of oppression that shape the adoption industry.

This article is divided into four sections. The first section addresses how adoption relates to sexism and anti-abortion movements. The second section discusses how adoption is imbricated with racism and imperialism. The third section explores how adoption interfaces with cisheteronormativity and the ideal of the nuclear family. The fourth section highlights the reality of adoption trauma and suggests re-framing adoption as a form of care for marginalized and vulnerable youths rather than an individual alternative to conception.

My article contributes to the academic literature by synthesizing critical perspectives on adoption for a trans studies audience. By reviewing these perspectives, I hope to foster productive conversations on the rhetorical deployments of adoption in the trans youth care literature and in trans communities more broadly. Despite trans writers like Emi Koyama having long written on the politics and ethics of transracial adoption (Koyama 2004a; 2004b; 2003), these conversations remain rare.

EXPLOITATION, COERCION, AND SEXISM

The industry around adoption gives rise to concerns about gender equality and sexism. Adoption depends on the gestational labor of another. That labor, which is performed principally by women, is unrecognized and un(der)compensated. To the extent that adoption frees people from the burden of childbearing, it does so on the backs of those who give birth. Gestation and childbirth are physically, emotionally, and financially taxing, painful, and risky. Those who perform gestational labor are disproportionately unwed, marginalized women, whereas adoptive parents are disproportionately white, non-disabled, richer people in a socially normative relationship—a stark asymmetry that raises the specter of economic exploitation.

Adoption is associated with limited access to sexual education, birth control, abortion, and support networks as well as poverty, violence, stigma, social pressures, manipulation, coercion, and the exercise of state power (McKee 2018). Structural and individual determinants of relinquishment are not evenly distributed across society and disproportionately impact marginalized groups (Sisson 2022). Adoption is not always chosen by the gestational parent yet even when it is, it often reflects a range of options severely limited by society. The availability of children for adoption is predicated on the constrained autonomy of gestational parents (Ellerby 2018). The adoption industry depends on something “going wrong” in the life of gestational parents. How much of adoption is predicated on poverty and the state’s refusal to offer material support to gestational parents? How much of adoption is predicated on the inaccessibility of abortion? How much of adoption is predicated on coercion, manipulation, and pressure? How many have had their children taken away because of their race, political

convictions, socioeconomic status, or disability? As stated by critical adoption scholar Margaret Homans (2018), “adoption depends on structural injustice to birth mothers.” Taking a feminist perspective on adoption, trans youth studies must acknowledge the role of reproductive (in)justice in the adoption industry and take note of how the availability of adoption as a form of family-building depends on some people being denied the right to parent (McKee 2018). These injustices are disproportionately borne by women.

Coercion, manipulation, and forced relinquishment have a long and troubling history. During the “Baby Scoop Era,” which began in the postwar period and declined following the legalization of abortion, unwed mothers were systematically pressured to relinquish their infants. Speaking of her experience during the Baby Scoop Era, Janet Mason Ellerby (2018, 10) explains that she “was coerced into believing I was unfit for motherhood, that I had no choice but to surrender the infant whom I loved instantly with a ferocity that still surprises,” describing her encounter with adoption as coercive and exploitative. While it can be tempting to dismiss coercion as the byproduct of a bygone era, the adoption industry remains marred by manipulative and coercive elements. At the domestic level, crisis pregnancy centers not only coerce, manipulate, and pressure women into choosing adoption instead of abortion but also condition support on placing the child for adoption (Joyce 2009; see also Goldstein 2022; McKee 2018). Conservative organizations, especially Christian evangelical ones, often seek to facilitate adoption in parallel to anti-abortion advocacy, at times without basic safeguards (Goldstein 2022). Forced births and pressures to adopt are expected to rise in the wake of *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* (2022), which rescinded long-standing constitutional protections for abortion. Even outside conservative organizations, many gestational parents who relinquish their children do so because of coercion by a partner or relative, or because they lack the support necessary to raise a child (Wiley and Baden 2005). Moreover, many infants and youths adopted from foster care are forcibly taken from the gestational parent, sometimes as early as birth, often due to poverty, disability, and/or race. Recent years have also seen a surge in migrant children being taken away from their parents and placed into adoption (Briggs 2012; Burke and Mendoza 2018).

Coercion, manipulation, and pressure appear particularly common in inter-country adoption due to the economic incentives created by United States demand for infants (Davies 2011; Graff 2009). Many countries that were or are leading sources of adoptive children for the United States employ coercive and forcible means to increase the supply of adoptable children. Guatemala’s child welfare system housed children forcibly taken from communists, Indigenous families, and impoverished parents (Acevedo 2019; Briggs 2012; Londoño 2021). Gestational parents in China were pervasively coerced into relinquishing their child due to the country’s one-child policy, which imposed severe financial penalties for having more than one child, as well as deceptive and manipulative practices and governmental abduction (Johnson 2016; Stuy 2014). The demand for transnational adoption creates markets for child abduction and trafficking, which some governments, organizations, and individuals readily participate in (Meier and Zhang 2008; Smolin 2006).

Adoption can be traumatic to gestational parents. Studies have associated relinquishment with unresolved grief, anger, trauma, depression, post-traumatic stress

disorder, psychosomatic symptoms, and relationship difficulties (Askren and Bloom 1999; Condon 1986; Deykin, Campbell, and Patti 1984; Wells 1993; Wiley and Baden 2005). Rather than decreasing, dissatisfaction with relinquishment tends to increase over time (Askren and Bloom 1999; Madden et al. 2018). Many gestational parents describe adoption as having had “a protracted negative influence on their lives” (Deykin, Campbell, and Patti 1984). As a gestational parent who relinquished her child, Janet Mason Ellerby (2018) spoke of experiencing “resentment and regret, sentiments that have not substantially subsided in over fifty years.” Grief and regret are linked to feelings of being coerced or pressured into placing their child in adoption (De Simone 1996; Kushel et al. 2005), which could also extend to relinquishment motivated by poverty or lack of social support.

Decisions over whether to place a child for adoption are neither atemporal nor independent of sociopolitical context. Adoption decisions are influenced by social conditions and state policies, and adoption in turn shapes state policy and social conditions. The neoliberal erosion of the welfare state and concomitant decrease in support for gestational parents who lack the finances and support for childrearing contributes significantly to the feeling of “having to” choose adoption for the sake of the baby (McKee 2018, 82). According to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, 18.5 million people in the United States live in extreme poverty and 5.3 million live in absolute poverty (Alston 2018). While the United States is wealthy as a country, inequality has long been rising (Piketty 2014). We know that poverty is one of the leading motivations for abortion, which is in close relationship to relinquishment (Biggs, Gould, and Foster 2013; Finer et al. 2005). It is likely that a large proportion of gestational parents placing their child in adoption would want to raise a child but cannot do so due to poverty, itself a result of unrestrained capitalism and the dismantling of welfare programs.

The relationship between adoption and the erosion of social support is not accidental. On the contrary, religious conservative groups have mobilized in favor of adoption as “a strategic alternative to federal and state governments subsidizing (disproportionately minority) children in the foster care system or their families on welfare” (Perry 2016, 1844). Adoption facilitates the abolition of social welfare programs, which in turn increases the supply of children available for adoption due to poverty and lack of support. Not only is this cyclical dynamic unjust, but it cannot account for the much larger and rising number of youths in foster care who cannot or will not be adopted, and who must survive in a withering child welfare system (Johnston 2017).

Conservatives’ promotion of adoption is also intertwined with anti-abortion movements. Presenting adoption as an ethical alternative to abortion, religious conservative movements encourage parents to adopt and deploy the demand for adoption as a reason to discourage or ban abortion (Joyce 2013a). In striking down the constitutional right to abortion, the majority opinion in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* (2022) emphasized that “a woman who puts her newborn up for adoption today has little reason to fear that the baby will not find a suitable home.”² In a footnote, Justice Alito quoted the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, reporting that “the domestic supply of infants relinquished at birth or within the first month of life and

2 Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization, 142 S. Ct. 2228, 213 L. Ed. 2d 545 (2022).

available to be adopted has become virtually nonexistent.” In this political context, the decision to adopt becomes part and parcel of the justification for violating bodily autonomy and gender equality, weaponizing adoption against the rights that feminists have fought for. Forced births and pressures to adopt are expected to rise in the wake of the court decision.

SAVIORISM, RACISM, AND IMPERIALISM

Adoption also involves severe concerns around racism and imperialism. Children of color form the majority of adopted children and are predominantly adopted by parents of a different racial background than them, with white parents accounting for over three-fourths of legal adoptions (McKee 2018; Zill 2017). The exploitation, coercion, and violence involved in adoption primarily burden women of color, to the benefit of white parents. This is especially true in transnational adoptions, where 84% of adoptions are transracial (McKee 2018). In light of the ongoing disenfranchisement of children and the historical treatment of children as their parents’ property, the commodification and exoticization of non-white infants in domestic and international adoption markets carry racial significance, as do concerns over exploitation of gestational labor, coercion, and lack of social support for non-white parents (Hart 1991; Hübinette 2005; Rollo 2018; Smolin 2004). Some authors have described transnational adoption as a form of forced migration, abduction, and child trafficking (Hübinette 2007; Moyo 2008; Smolin 2004).

Domestically, adoption is intertwined with child welfare systems known for their ongoing role in racism. Foster care is one of the main avenues through which children are adopted (Kalisher, Gosciak, and Spielfogel 2020). As a result of structural racism embedded in child welfare systems, children of color and particularly Black children are overrepresented in foster care. The child welfare system has long served as a tool of anti-Blackness and settler colonialism, disrupting Black and Indigenous communities and furthering governmental agendas of population surveillance and territorial dispossession (Crofoot and Harris 2012; Dettlaff and Boyd 2020; McKee 2018; Stephens 2022). The government historically pursued the adoption of Indigenous children by non-Indigenous families in an effort to assimilate Indigenous communities and extinguish their claims to sovereignty (Thibeault and Spencer 2019). The 1978 *Indian Child Welfare Act* was later adopted to end the large-scale removal of Indigenous children from their families. A white evangelical family recently challenged the statute’s constitutionality before the Supreme Court, threatening to undermine tribal sovereignty and reinstate widespread adoption of Indigenous children by white settlers (Asgarian 2022). The statute was thankfully upheld by the Supreme Court in June 2023, but remains unevenly enforced by states (Lussenhop 2023; Lussenhop and Philip 2023).

For their part, child welfare policies targeting Black children were steeped into fears of Black reproduction and intertwined with anti-poverty and sterilization programs that also sought to discourage pregnancy among unwed Black women (Briggs 2012). Governments and conservative groups trafficked in racist stereotypes such as the “welfare queen” and “crack baby” to justify racist social and child welfare policies (Briggs 2012; Nadasen 2007). As Leora Neal of the National Association of Black Social Workers explained in 1996,

the child welfare system ... has systematically separated Black children from their birth families. Child welfare workers have historically undertaken little effort to rehabilitate African-American parents, to work with extended families, or to reunite children in foster care with their families. (Briggs 2012, 28)

The adoption of Black children as part of white family-building further implicates adoption in a long history of white families exploiting Black reproductive labor. White women, who were unwilling or unable to breastfeed, often forced enslaved Black women to nurse white children, which often meant that they were unable to nurse their own children (Jones-Rogers 2017; West and Knight 2017). The commodification of Black bodies is reproduced in adoptive practices, where white women who are unable or unwilling to bear a child rely on the gestational labor of Black women and other women of color to fulfil their own family-building goals.

Recent years have seen a rise in reports of migrant children being taken away from their families by government agents and placed into adoption (Briggs 2012, 269ff; Burke and Mendoza 2018; Joyce 2018). Government agents have also used the threat of adoption to discourage people from pursuing asylum in the United States (Joyce 2018). The weaponization of adoption against migrant families came in the midst of a conservative panic around a so-called “invasion by illegal immigrants” and involved the mass detention of children and adults crossing the US–Mexico border. Given the rise of demographic anxieties and fear of immigration among white conservatives, it is likely that migrant children will continue to be separated from their families and placed into adoption.

The decrease of children available for adoption in the domestic market following the legalization of abortion has led to the growth of transnational adoption (Moriguchi 2012). While domestic adoption remains more common than transnational adoption, many children continue to be adopted from countries of the Global South. Transnational adoption occurs in a context of stark disparity not only between gestational and adoptive parents but also between countries. Interest in transnational adoption is fueled by white savior narratives whereas the availability of children for adoption is inextricable from imperialist foreign policy. Evangelical churches in the United States have played a critical role in popularizing transnational adoption as a form of saviorism, reframing it as a form of missionary work (Joyce 2013b). Transnational adoption positions the United States as a savior and altruistic force for good while obscuring the injustices that lie behind adoption and the country’s complicity in creating children in need of adoption (Davies 2011; see also Wyver 2021a).

Guatemala offers a tragic example of how United States’ foreign policy interfaces with transnational adoption. Until it reformed intercountry adoption in 2008, Guatemala was one of the leading sources of adoption for the United States (Schuster Institute 2012). Children adopted from Guatemala were routinely taken from their families on account of supporting communism, being Indigenous, or being impoverished (Briggs 2012). These groups of children were molded by US foreign policy. In 1954, the United States government backed a *coup d’état* that overthrew the democratically elected leftist president Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán and installed an authoritarian military regime that was more favorable to the interest of US multinationals (Taylor-Robinson and Redd 2003). Popular welfarist reforms were abandoned and reversed by the new

government. A few years later, a civil war began between the US-backed government and leftist groups who opposed the government's totalitarian and anti-egalitarian policies. The civil war continued until 1996 and involved widespread human rights abuses by government forces, including forced disappearances and genocide of Mayan communities (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico 1999). It is in this context that Guatemala found itself with immense numbers of children available for adoption, having not only taken away the children of individuals accused of being communists but also taking away children of those who were Indigenous or impoverished by the abandoned reforms and decades-long civil war. The United States was far from an innocent party in Guatemala's pattern of child abduction, trafficking, and adoption corruption. On the contrary, the United States' imperialist foreign policy played an integral role in manufacturing the humanitarian crisis that set the stage for large-scale transnational adoption from the country. The Guatemalan experience was not an exception and is echoed in many other countries such as Chile, Vietnam, and the Philippines (Bergquist 2009; Briscoe 2000; Hincks 2016; Londoño 2021; Promchertchoo 2020; see also Human Rights Watch 2010; Joyce 2011).

Transnational adoption frequently involves abduction and child trafficking by governments and private organizations (Leifsen 2010; Makinde 2016; Mezmur 2010; Stuy 2014). The demand for transnational adoption creates significant financial incentives for trafficking (Dickens 2002; Makinde 2016). In Nigeria, transnational adoption has notably fostered neo-slavery and the creation of baby factories (Makinde 2016). It is often impossible for adoptive parents to ascertain whether an adoption involves abduction, trafficking, or slavery due to the participation of government agents and orphanages, who also stand to benefit financially. The scope of coercion, violence, abduction, and trafficking in transnational adoption is often revealed after the fact, decades later.

Foreign policy also plays a central role in the number of children who are voluntarily relinquished by their parents. Lacking the financial and social means of raising a child is one of the most common reasons for placing a child for adoption. In some countries, widespread poverty has led to the phenomenon of "poverty orphans," youths who are nominally considered orphans but who were relinquished and placed in an orphanage by their gestational parent due to poverty (Batha 2018; Fry 2020; Joyce 2013a; LFBS 2021). Poverty in the Global South results from centuries of colonialism followed by political and economic policies that established a global capitalist system of resource extraction and labor exploitation for the benefit of the United States and other countries of the Global North (Brand, Dietz, and Lang 2016; Gindin and Panitch 2012; Lenin 2022; Selwyn 2019). Far from accidental, the transfer of wealth from the Global South to the Global North was meticulously structured by the US through trade and tax treaties, international organizations, monetary policy, foreign aid, global investments, and military intervention (Gindin and Panitch 2012; Parmar 2015; Weaver 2011).

To the United States, other countries are little more than a pool of labor and natural resources to exploit. US hegemony not only creates the market for transnational adoption but is replicated in it—transnational adoption exploits the labor of birth parents and treats children as commodities for the taking (Yngvesson 2000). Children are an export like any other. Mirroring its foreign policy emphasis on free trade, the

US played an active role in ensuring the continued possibility of private transnational adoptions during the negotiations leading up to the Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction, despite known patterns of coercion, abductions, and trafficking (Dickens 2002, 80; Pfund 1994; see also Winslow 2012). Preserving the ability to adopt children from other countries was more important than protecting children and gestational parents from grave rights violations, refuting the claim that transnational adoption is first and foremost a matter of altruism.

Beyond economic exploitation and commodification, transnational adoption also participates in the formation of national identity by situating the United States as a benevolent force on the global scene and situating white adoptive parents as superior to non-white parents from other countries (Davies 2011; Winslow 2012). By reifying hierarchies of parenthood that are intertwined with race, transnational adoption participates in the US racial imaginary and reinforces white supremacy. As historian Rachel E. Winslow (2012, 5) explains, the US “used international adoption as one way to tell a story about their nation as a benevolent power that used its authority to throw off colonial structures of racism and hegemony.” US involvement in the transnational adoption market is predicated on an ideology that sees non-white parents as inadequate and white parents as saints, an ideology reimagined as colorblind under the auspices of global capitalism.

Adoptive parents are typically unaware of the oppressive systems they are participating in (Wall 2012). Clinicians and parents’ uncritical gesture towards adoption as an avenue of family-building for transgender youth reveals the whiteness of trans youth studies, rhetorically recruiting trans youth in a morally complex institution that is intertwined with racial oppression and imperialism. The rhetoric of adoption in trans youth studies mirrors the implication of queer people in transnational adoption in the 1990s, during which time gay and lesbian families were disproportionately likely to adopt babies from Guatemala since the country didn’t prohibit them from adopting (Briggs 2012). In so doing, they provided sustenance to anti-welfarist and imperialist movements that live off forced births, coercion, violence, abductions, and trafficking. As Laura Briggs (2012, 264) observes:

White queers (or those rhetorically imagined as white in policy debate) disproportionately served as the safety valve in this system, unburdening child welfare agencies of their “hard-to-place” children, either as foster parents or as adoptive parents.

Given the saviorist elements found in the trans youth care literature, trans youth are likely to serve a similar safety-valve function in the child welfare system.

Racial disparities in access to gender-affirming care and adoption only further enhance this concern. Since white trans youths have greater access to gender-affirming medical interventions before puberty and greater access to the adoption industry (Tordoff et al. 2023; Zill 2017), the racial dynamics prevailing in adoption likely extend to future adoption by trans youths. By failing to mention the racism and imperialism involved in the adoption industry, the trans youth care literature makes it possible for white trans youths and their families to adopt a colorblind politic that obscures their complicity in systems of racial oppression (Bonilla-Silva 2022). This, in turn, facilitates a post-racial mythology wherein race is no longer a defining factor in the allocation of life chances, negating the need to fight the ongoing operations of racism and an-

ti-Blackness in society (Gines 2014). Acknowledging the saviorism, racism, and imperialism of the adoption industry is critical—as is fighting them.

QUEER PARENTHOOD, NUCLEAR FAMILIES & CISHETERONORMATIVITY

The imagined role of adoption in trans youth lives is predicated on the belief that adoption will be accessible to trans youth upon reaching adulthood. Yet adoption is expensive, putting it out of reach for many trans youths given widespread poverty in trans communities and especially Black and Indigenous trans communities (Carpenter, Lee, and Nettuno 2022; Dodge 2020; Goldberg et al. 2020; Goodwin 2006). Even without financial barriers, the persistence of transphobia, homophobia, and religious conservatism in domestic and transnational adoption casts doubts on the feasibility of adoption as a form of family-building for most trans youth.

Countless countries prohibit transnational adoption by queer, trans, and/or unmarried people, whether as a matter of policy or practice (Briggs 2012). Domestically, religious organizations play an outsized role in facilitating adoption—organizations that would simply not let trans people adopt since they do not conform to their conservative image of the family. The legal standing of LGBTQI+ adoption is uncertain. A 2017 decision by the Supreme Court of the United States struck down an Arkansas law that effectively prohibited same-sex adoption (DeMillo 2017). However, the decision was based on the court's defense of same-sex marriage in *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015), which is under threat following *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (2022). It is unlikely that same-sex adoption will remain constitutionally protected in years to come. Federally, the *Every Child Deserves a Family Act* prohibits discrimination against LGBTQI+ people in adoption by organizations that receive federal funding, but it does not apply to organizations that do not receive federal funding and some states have been granted an exemption from the application of the law (Tatum and Flaherty 2019). Stateside, some legislatures have enacted bans on discrimination in adoption, whereas others expressly allow it (Warbelow, Avant, and Kutney 2020).

Law is a poor proxy for practice, however, and many organizations are likely to discriminate against LGBTQI+ parents regardless of anti-discrimination statutes. Furthermore, there are some indicators that the availability of adoption is decreasing for LGBTQI+ people. In 2006, Catholic Charities requested an exemption from Massachusetts's anti-discrimination statute after nearly two decades of permitting adoption by queer couples (Briggs 2012). The sharp rise in anti-LGBTQI+ legislation and public discourse in the last few years also suggests that adoption will become ever more unavailable to trans youths. Rising accusations that LGBTQI+ people are “groomers” are particularly telling, since bans on same-sex adoption are often predicated on the view that queer adults are inherently or disproportionately sexual predators (Ciesemier 2022; Lin 1999; Paz 2022; Tenbarge 2022). The legal persecution of trans communities by conservative state governments also raises concerns about the risk of trans parents being targeted by child protection agencies—an ongoing threat of family separation even among trans youths who overcome barriers to adoption (Goldberg et al. 2020). Access to adoption does not entail protection from discrimination and trans parents often face significant discrimination (Cohen 2017; Stotzer, Herman, and Hasenbush 2014). Asking the adoption and child protection industry to cease and de-cis is more easily said than done.

Beyond the feasibility of trans adoption, queer theory also proffers critiques of its desirability. Queer critiques of the family are particularly salient in a context where adoption is often being elevated as a goal *for* trans youths more than *by* them. To the extent that trans youths locate adoption in their reproductive future, it is often at the encouragement and/or under the influence of clinicians and parents. Harry Benjamin, often considered the father of trans medicine in the United States, saw “[m]arriage with the adoption of children” as the goal of most trans women, evincing the normative ideals that underpinned his understanding of gender transition (Benjamin 1966). The fact that many trans women used his book as a roadmap to secure gender-affirming care highlights the prescriptive role of such statements. They do not only describe desire but shape it. Given the role of clinicians and parents in shaping reproductive futures (Harris, Kolaitis, and Frader 2020; Stark et al. 2021), we must ask whether adoption should maintain the place it currently holds in trans youth studies. In the words of Jasbir K. Puar (2013, 31), “we must not only be critical of familial homophobia but also of the model of family itself—even queer family.” Who benefits from the family?

The exaltation of parenting is possessed by the ideal of the nuclear family. The purported natural order of things is for children to be born from a marriage between a father who is the primary earner for the family and a mother who gives birth and raises the child without compensation. Lying at the heart of patriarchal oppression, the division of labor between mother and father aligns with the capitalist need for both production and reproduction (Federici 2014; Oyèwùmí 2002). The nuclear family also ensures the ongoing concentration of wealth and property by establishing lines of inheritance (Engels 2021; Jaggar 1983). Invested in patrilineality, the nuclear family maintains inequality along race and class lines, erases different family arrangements, and idealizes “fighting for our children,” an idea uncomfortably reminiscent of the white supremacist slogan: “We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children” (Ashley and Buchanan 2023; see also Edelman 2004; Oyèwùmí 2002; 2000). It is no accident that those praising reproduction as the ultimate purpose of life are often the most hateful, and that “save our children” has served as a slogan for some of the vilest movements in history. As queer theorist Lee Edelman (2004, 2–3) points out, reproductive futurism is fundamentally conservative “insofar as it works to affirm a structure, to authenticate social order, which it then intends to transmit to the future in the form of its inner child.” White supremacy, imperialism, and patriarchy all rely on the nuclear family.

From a queer standpoint, trans youth studies’ normalization of parenting as a natural desire through adoption is suspicious because it re-centers the nuclear family so valued by racial capitalism and fails to question its role as an instrument for the oppression of queer and trans communities (Gleeson, O’Rourke, and Rosenberg 2021; O’Brien 2019; Puar 2013). Adoption, especially, requires families to approximate conservative ideals of the family—those who are further away from monogamous marriage between two cisgender and heterosexual adults risk being denied adoption. To the extent that same-sex adoption is permitted, it requires same-sex couples to uphold dominant norms except for their sexual orientation. Polyamory and communal childrearing are out of the question. In the words of historian Rachel E. Winslow (2012, 421): “While the family might have been symbolically universal, the nuclear family with explicit gender roles was still promoted as the only true home for an orphan.”

Adoption must subscribe to dominant norms due to the role it plays in shaping national identity—a fertile ground for (re)inscribing the gendered division of labor and the subjugation of youth into trans lives. And yet, trans adoptive parenthood will always be considered a travesty³ of cisheteronormative procreation because of its limits in reproducing whiteness and racial capitalism (Ashley and Buchanan 2023; Myers 2013).

From this vantage point, trans youth studies' appeal to adoption invites trans youth into a respectability politics that unquestioningly submits to hegemonic conceptions of the good life and empties transitude of its revolutionary potential. The rhetoric of adoption doesn't merely rebut anti-trans critics; it also participates in the recuperation and inclusion of trans childhoods that least diverge from oppressive, hegemonic norms (Puar 2013; Tsfati and Ben-Ari 2019). Instead of questioning anti-trans appeals to fertility, clinicians and parents produce a new picture of the trans child as domesticated, palatable, respectable. This transnormative picture sanitizes trans childhood, depicting trans youths as "good citizens" that can be enlisted into the projects of dominant society such as racial capitalism (Bradford and Syed 2019; Tsfati and Ben-Ari 2019). A neoliberal society in which adoption collaborates in the privatization of child welfare and eventual abolition of the welfare state is to the detriment of marginalized communities (Briggs 2012; McKee 2018). Who benefits from the family? Not trans youth.

FROM ADOPTION AS REPRODUCTION TO ADOPTION AS CARE

A critical perspective on adoption does not entail that adopting is always or necessarily wrong. Adoptees often have nuanced perspectives on adoption and many report being open to becoming adoptive parents themselves (Koyama 2004b; Parkhurst 2022; Stark et al. 2021; cf. Garborcauskas et al. 2022). Recognizing the injustice of the adoption industry does not stop children from being relinquished or taken away. By the time of adoption, many of the harms and injustices of the adoption industry have already occurred. Deciding not to adopt does not undo those injustices nor meaningfully challenge the oppressive forces that generate them.

Calling for the abolition of the adoption industry does not necessarily mean that no one should adopt in the present, even if it is an eventual goal. However, ethical engagement with adoption cannot proceed from viewing it as a replacement for procreation, as a means of fulfilling trans youths' family-building desires. Trans youth studies must make space for the realization that adoption "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" (Turner Strong 2001, 471).

Recognizing the injustices that make adoption possible is a necessity for those hoping to care for adopted children. As Kimberly McKee (2018, 80) observes, the elision of reproductive injustice "results in the myth that adoptees are a blank slate upon their adoption" and "reflect the social death they experience upon the severing of ties to their birth families." Cutting off adoptees from their gestational parent and birth culture is often deeply traumatic, and adoptees disproportionately live with trauma,

3 Pun intended (Oxford English Dictionary 2009, s.v. travesty; see also Hübinette 2007, 143).

mental illness, attachment problems, and difficulties in identity formation. As therapist and adoptee Theodora Blanchfield (2022) explains: “Growing up hashtag blessed doesn’t erase the trauma of being removed from my birthmother almost immediately after birth.” To many, adoption trauma translates into feeling flawed: “But you always, always live with the idea that [you’re] never, never good enough—no matter what you do, what success you have, there’s always a little bit that holds back” (Dalton, McLaughlin, and Cassidy 2022, 78).

In a study of siblings, adopted children were around four times as likely to have attempted suicide (Keyes et al. 2013). Among adoptees who had a history of child welfare involvement, a study found that over 93% had experienced mistreatment (Murray et al. 2022). Adoptees often struggle to form healthy emotional bonds with their adoptive parents and may display trauma responses such as hoarding food, stealing, and aggressiveness towards others (Vasquez and Stensland 2016). Attempts to “treat” these behaviors as disorders rather than understandable responses to trauma can aggravate the trauma, further harming adopted youths (Chaffin et al. 2006).

Many adoptees express a disrupted sense of identity, describing their sense of self as a “fragmented and chaotic mess,” “fractured,” “unsettled,” or lost (Merritt 2022, 9; see also Dunbar and Grotevant 2004; Grotevant 1997; Hoopes 1993; Merritt 2020). Identity development is a lifelong process, and it is not uncommon for adoptees to (re)discover latent trauma and experience identity crises later in life (Dunbar and Grotevant 2004; Grotevant 1997; Merritt 2022). Preventing youths from learning about or being in contact with their gestational parents can further inhibit the development of a healthy and integrated personal identity (Grotevant et al. 2013; Von Korff and Grotevant 2011). Despite the potential harms of confidential adoption records, few states allow unrestricted access to records by adoptees (Baffer 2020). Transracial and transnational adoptions create additional barriers to identity development because they interfere with racial and cultural bonds, resulting in adoptees feeling alienated from both their adoptive and birth communities (Davies 2011; Wyver 2021b). Reflecting on her youth, Sara Jones (2022), who was adopted from Korea by white parents, explains that “there were many moments growing up where I wished that I was white like the other kids around me.”

Adopted children are disproportionately likely to experience marginalization due to race, disability, sexual orientation, and gender modality. This is especially true for trans adoptive parents due to their expected role as caregivers for children considered “hard-to-place” (Briggs 2012, 264). Because of the normative underpinnings of the adoption system, adoptive parents are often ill-equipped to understand and help their child avoid, heal, and deal with experiences of marginalization. Trans youths who become adoptive parents are more likely to be white and socioeconomically privileged and may contribute to the racial marginalization of their children due to ignorance and unexamined prejudice. Adoptees often report racial microaggressions from their parents and speak of their parents failing to give them the tools necessary to handle racist interactions (Davies 2011; Tigervall and Hübinette 2010; Wyver 2021b). Speaking of her experience as a Black woman adopted in a white family, writer Laura Fish (2006, 203) explains that:

My parents believe that everyone is equal and that colour doesn’t matter. This was the rule at home but the moment I stepped outside the

warmth of my family, colour seemed to matter horribly. In fact, to my great surprise, it was the first thing that everyone noticed about me.

Like Fish, many adoptees not only live with white parents but live in areas where their racial background is rare—further othering them and impeding if not preventing the development of community bonds with other people of color (Tigervall and Hübinette 2010).

Adoptive parents' tendency towards saviorism clashes with the needs of adoptees (McKee 2018). As adoptee Alé Cardinale explains, "Adoptees are told to just be grateful that we were chosen. ... And yet so many of us are struggling" (Sasani 2022). Trans youths' unique experiences with identity formation, belonging, and marginalization can be both beneficial and harmful to adoptees' process of learning and (re)constructing their sense of self. On the one hand, it can make them more understanding and equipped to support their child's identity development and resilience (Hübinette 2011). On the other hand, their own experiences surrounding attachment, identity, and trauma can create relational difficulties and get in the way of supporting others' identity development especially if their adopted child does not or struggles to see them as their "real parent." Will trans youths turned parents be able to decenter themselves as their child strives to develop an integrated identity? Will they be able to decenter themselves during their child's search for their gestational parents? Will they have the emotional resilience to interact and maintain contact with birth parents? Will they have the socioeconomic means to pursue therapy for themselves and their child? Will they educate themselves on adoption trauma, racism, and how to best care for adoptees? Will white trans youth be able to unlearn racial bias to meet the needs of non-white adoptive children? Will they have the emotional maturity to acknowledge and accept "being perceived as the worst kind of colonizer" (Watkins 2006, 269)? Will they have the knowledge and social resources required to foster the child's racial and cultural community ties? Will they be able to do all those things without making their child feel like a burden? An affirmative answer to each of those is not a given, yet is necessary for adoptive parenthood. While trans youths are as deserving of parenthood as others, nobody is entitled to a child—especially if they have not done the work of deconstructing their attitudes, prejudices, ignorance, and trauma. As educator and adoptee Mia Thaicha (2022) has pointed out, the ability to procreate is irrelevant to whether someone should adopt. What matters is whether they have the capacity to support and nurture their adoptive child. Education is critical (Forkey et al. 2015; Hartinger-Saunders, Jones, and Rittner 2019).

Dislocating reproductive futurism, I tentatively propose seeing adoption not as a form of family-building but instead as a complex and multi-valenced form of care in an unjust world. It is, in a sense, unjust care insofar as demand for adoption participates in and sustains the injustices that enable the adoption industrial complex. Alternatives exist in the form of kinship care and legal guardianship, which hold space for forms of caregiving that do not permanently sever youths' relationship with their birth parents (Barra 2020). These options should be considered before turning to adoption. And yet, considered individually, the decision to adopt may nevertheless offer forms of care, love, and happiness that would be impossible in orphanages and foster care systems grievously underfunded by the confluence of global capitalism and neoliberal privatization. The ethics of adoption are inescapably ambivalent, as family and kinship so often are. Adopting a child can be wonderful, but it is also hard.

The approach I am sketching sees critical adoption studies, Indigenous studies, Black feminist studies, and trans theory as rich sources of guidance, suggesting a more expansive view of family and kinship that decenters the nuclear family and displaces the right to parent with the right to care, love, and support. While offering a praxis of trans adoptive parenthood is beyond the scope of this article and perhaps beyond my knowledge and ability, the following ideas may offer a starting point for such work. Critical adoption studies scholar Kit Myers (2018, 19) speaks of “adoptive kinship (rather than family) as a descriptor and analytic might be more capacious for adoption praxis,” rooted in a “mutuality of being.” Indigenous studies scholars Sandra de Finney and Lara di Tomasso (2021) stress the value and centrality of Indigenous caring practices and communal caregiving in supporting youths’ cultural permanency and sense of identity. Black feminist scholars Rhonda Wells-Wilbon and Gaynell Marie Simpson (2009) draw on African diasporic practices to propose a new model of caregiving outside of the strictures of the Euro-American nuclear family. In their work on gender affirmation, trans philosopher E. M. Hernandez (2021) deploys the notion of loving attention and caring for people on their own terms to challenge processes of marginalization and epistemic domination. Trans philosopher Amy Marvin (2019) draws on the caregiving practices of Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson to offer a theory of caregiving that emphasizes the simultaneity of dependency and solidarity, the mutuality of caregiving, and the necessity of care practices outside the family. And lastly, trans studies scholar Hil Malatino’s (2019) work helps us understand caregiving in a mode of survival, speaking to the “creative and caring acts of trans intimacy” that makes life “not only livable but also, sometimes, joyous.” Each of their work is replete with teachings for trans adoptive parenthood, teachings that trans youth studies should foreground if it wishes to approach adoption critical, from a place of care rather than commodification.

CONCLUSION

It is critical for trans youth studies to take seriously adoption’s potential for harm and ongoing role in oppression and injustice. Adoption, both past and present, is inextricable from regimes of coercion, violence, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, racism, and imperialism. Often, adoption means adopting a child who was unjustly taken away from Black, Indigenous, Latine, or Asian parents pursuant to racist policies that strive to exploit, destabilize, and disenfranchise communities of color and cast the United States as an altruistic and benevolent ruler of the international community. Adoption as an industry cannot be distanced from the white supremacist belief that racialized parents are inadequate and that white parents are superior. The pervasiveness of trauma and marginalization among adoptees alters the stakes of parenting, complexifies it. Beyond their inherent moral valence, these injustices are fundamentally at odds with trans youth studies’ emphasis on autonomy, self-determination, and equality. Trans youth studies should also avoid overstating the feasibility of adoption in an industry plagued by cisheteronormativity, ableism, and racism. By articulating trans youths’ reproductive futures around adoption, clinicians and parents may be planting the seeds of disappointment.

This is not to say that adoption is necessarily bad or that trans youths should not become adoptive parents.⁴ Adoption can be a site of love as much as harm, healing as much as trauma. Yet adopting does not make one a saint, and should not be approached cavalierly, without a developed understanding of its social, political, and ethical dimensions and of how to approach it with care. Often, trans youths' desire or adoption is less an informed and naturally emerging desire than one that was shaped by clinicians and parents, by social norms around the family, and by the rhetoric of adoption in trans youth studies and advocacy. While stressing the possibility of adoption may be personally and politically valuable to trans youths, trans communities and their loved ones are duty-bound to approach discussions with thoughtfulness and critical reflection. We must not let ourselves get cistracted by opponents of gender-affirming care. Adoptive children and gestational parents are not rhetorical pawns nor commodities.

In embracing a rhetoric of adoption, trans youth studies risks becoming a collaborator in the violence and exploitation of the adoption industrial complex. Instead of depicting adoption as a 'solution' to infertility, trans youth studies should militate against the injustices that make adoption possible and strive to ensure that trans youths are adequately prepared for the complexities and difficulties of adoptive parenthood. Those who adopt or promote adoption have an individual and collective duty to push back against reproductive injustice and oppression, to resist the sociopolitical forces that make the adoption industry possible. As scholars, clinicians, relatives, and potential parents, we must push back against closed adoptions, neoliberal erosion, racist child welfare policies, the foster-care-to-prison pipeline, anti-abortion movements, imperialism, and global capitalism. Doing so is a bare minimum. Because silence is acquiescence—or worse, support.

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- 4 Perspectives among adoptees and scholars differ between domestic and transnational adoption, with more sharing the view that transnational adoption causes more evil than good and should not be practised in any country. Many adoptees and gestational parents support abolishing adoption in favor of kinship care and legal guardianship (Barra 2020; DelBalzo 2012; Drennan ElAwar 2012). In this article, I do not take a firm stance on whether and when adoption should be permissible.

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