

SARA DOROW

AMY SWIFFEN  
University of Alberta

# Blood and desire:

## The secret of heteronormativity in adoption narratives of culture

### ABSTRACT

In this article, we use narratives of cultural identity among U.S. parents of children adopted from China to conceptually explore the ideas that underwrite socially intelligible kinship. Although these narratives address the cultural heritage of the child, we find that they also perform a kind of social labor. The ways adoptive parents respond to the “culture question” (their children’s birth heritage) also speak to family identity in relation to a foundational imaginary of heteronormative kinship, namely, the equivalence of biological and social family origins. We assert that the “secret” of socially intelligible kinship is revealed in the shifting meanings of blood and social desire in ideas of kinship, which has important implications for new kinship studies as well as for adoption scholarship. [*kinship, heteronormativity, adoption, culture, race, desire*]

And by speaking of the problem of origin, I do not at all mean the difficulty of retrieving a proper origin but rather the impossibility of origin as an empty sign that is always set up as something devoutly to be wished for.

—Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*

The last 15 to 20 years has seen interesting developments in kinship theory. One of these was the arrival of “new kinship studies,” an often-referenced and sometimes-maligned attempt to retheorize kinship relations beyond the assumptions of the heterosexual, biologically reproduced nuclear family. A second development was in transnational–transracial adoption scholarship, which in the 1990s stretched beyond the question of the adopted child’s psychosocial identity to focus on adoptive kinship as situated within a globalized political economy, racialized national projects, and gendered cultural constructions. These two branches of analysis have met and interacted in various ways, their interlocation perhaps most pronounced in studies focused on the decentering and recentering of blood ties, gay and lesbian parenting, and the hybridization of racial and cultural family identities (see, e.g., the *AE* Forum: Are Men Missing? in *American Ethnologist* 32[1]; Toby Alice Volkman’s 2005 edited volume *Cultures of Transnational Adoption*; and Sarah Franklin and Susan McKinnon’s 2001 edited volume *Relative Values*).

In this article, we develop what remains an underexplored conversation between the critiques of heteronormativity found in some of the new kinship studies and the scholarship of transnational–transracial adoption. The adoption literature has certainly taken up new kinship studies’ central concern with nonnormative family formations: Some scholars have examined if and how adoptive kinship moves beyond the bounds of heterosexual biological reproduction, for example, in queer and single parenting (Eng 2003; Shanley 2001; Sullivan 2004), and others have interrogated the “trans” of racial and cultural kin relations (Dorow 2006; Volkman 2005; Watkins 2004). But we are interested in how these two domains are linked—in

how the negotiation of nonbiological adoptive kinship happens in and through the question of cultural identity. Specifically, we examine the “culture question” as taken up in interviews with parents in the United States who have adopted children from China. Indeed, we hyphenate *Chinese-culture* to emphasize its currency in the social enactment of kinship. We find that, across the narratives of single-parent, straight, and queer families, Chinese-culture works as a socially intelligible sign that mediates blood and social family origins. But more than this, narrative labor around Chinese-culture leads us to rethink how ideas of blood origin and social desire operate in the construction of socially intelligible kinship in general: Each does not so much collapse into the other as require the other in particular ways. Thus, specific operations of race and culture in adoption offer insights into new kinship studies’ theorization of heteronormativity, in particular how it might be reproduced “even” amidst hybrid, multiple family forms.

Interviews with U.S. parents of Chinese children catalyze our analysis. In the late 1990s, as China became the top sending country in international adoption, coauthor Sara Dorow devoted several years to a study of the cultural economy of the process, focusing on raced and gendered exchanges in the formation of adoptive kinship (Dorow 2006). Several years later, when we together revisited a selection of 15 of the interviews Dorow had conducted with adoptive parents in the United States, we were struck by the parents’ sometimes-implicit grappling with heteronormative ideas of kinship. We noticed a series of confluences and slippages around questions of blood, race, and cultural origins of the child and family. These questions prompted significant narrative labor by adoptive parents, which, in turn, prompted us to explore the questions further. Our interest was also piqued by the occurrence of similar questions about origin across single-parent, straight, and queer families. Although each family had a unique narrative, there were points of commonality among them, especially in moments in which the lack of correspondence between blood and social family origins seemed to be accompanied by the sign “Chinese-culture” and its race correlatives.

This article is the product of our interactions as we pursued the line of inquiry that emerged out of our collaborative reading of Dorow’s interviews with adoptive parents. In her original research, Dorow interviewed a broad representation of some forty adoptive families in the San Francisco, California, Bay Area and the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota, placing their negotiations of their children’s racial and cultural identities in the context of adoption as a set of transnational exchanges. In going back to the interviews several years later with a new set of questions about heteronormativity and kinship, we took up Malin Åkerström and colleagues’ methodological insight that “a return to dusty [ethnographic] material from the past . . . may not only be fruitful but also intellectually stimu-

lating” (2004:344). We selected the 15 interviews to which we “returned” from across the straight two-parent, queer single-parent, and single-mother participants in the original study.

In the first part of the article, we review relevant feminist arguments in new kinship studies, especially Judith Butler’s notion of “intelligible kinship.” We then turn to exploring the interplay of blood and social family origins in adoptive kinship, especially around the figures of mother and father. In the second half of the article, we move to a discussion of how, within adoptive-parent narratives, the sign “Chinese-culture” becomes a means to manage the heteronormative demand for social intelligibility.

A few words are in order about the characteristics of the China–U.S. adoption program from 1994 to 2006, the period during which it grew into the most popular adoption program in the United States (parents interviewed for the study had adopted mostly in the mid-1990s). First, we note the fact of abandonment and its attendant unknowns: Nearly all children adopted from China had been found in public places and then brought to orphanages. There was little or no information about their birth families and preadoptive biographies. This lack of information was nevertheless accompanied by a plethora of professional and popular narratives addressing it, whether in the form of children’s stories on adoptive mother love or advice on preserving adoptee birth heritage. Second, the fact of abandonment in China was also the fact of desire on the part of U.S. parents. Many of the Chinese children available for adoption were healthy girls, desirable to many prospective adoptive parents.<sup>1</sup> Third, compared with most other international adoption programs, the China Center of Adoption Affairs in Beijing put relatively generous parameters on the age, health, and marital-status requirements of adoptive parents when it officially opened to international adoptions in the early 1990s. New restrictions were imposed in 2001 and again in 2007: Adoptions by lesbian and gay prospective parents were officially prohibited, adoptions by single people were curtailed and then stopped, and new regulations regarding health, age, and income were put on all prospective adopters of Chinese children.<sup>2</sup> We finally note that, although its numbers have dropped in recent years, China–U.S. adoption remains the largest of contemporary intercountry adoption migrations. Each year, some six thousand Chinese children are adopted into the United States alone. Most adoptive parents are relatively well-off, well educated, and white (Dorow 2006; Tessler et al. 1999).

### **One father, two mothers: Social intelligibility and adoptive kinship**

A key feature of new kinship studies is criticism of the heteronormative assumptions that underpin anthropological concepts of kinship, a critique that, instead, foregrounds

the social flexibility and historical particularity of kinship forms (Campbell 2002; Wade 2005). For example, Louise Lamphere (2005) urges researchers not to treat heteronormative kinship as an ideal type but as one possible configuration among many: "Anthropologists should assume no basic units and propose no universals; rather, they should work for a plurality of models" (2005:34). Butler (2000, 2002) is eloquent on the subject, arguing that cultural ideas of kinship do not correspond to natural structures in the ways expressed by politicians and social scientists but, instead, are norms regulated through ideological grids of intelligibility. Heteronormativity constitutes this grid for cultural ideas of kinship, and the result is the conflation of heteronormativity and kinship under the rubric of "culture," in which kinship is taken as always already heteronormative and heteronormativity is taken as natural. In Butler's hands, the idea that "stable kinship norms support our abiding sense of culture's intelligibility" (2000:71) is turned on its head, and, instead, cultural intelligibility of kinship assumes a blood relation, which is constructed as essential and teleological and is a matter of politics.

This grid of intelligibility, asserts Evelyn Blackwood, still continues to underpin much anthropological and ethnographic study of kinship. The absent presence of the "patriarchal man" even structures concepts intended to capture alternative kinship arrangements; for example, the concept "matrifocal" depends on heteronormative ideas of kinship because the patriarchal man (who in the matrifocal case is "missing") is still the organizing term. The "patriarchal man" assumes the center or origin of kinship in two main ways: biologically "activating" kinship and culturally "controlling" kinship (Blackwood 2005:6). Whereas the mother is the biological site of origin, the father is the biological and social agent of reproduction. The cultural production of socially intelligible kinship rides on the ideological conflation of biological and social origins. Blackwood and Butler thus take a truism most explicitly articulated by Claude Lévi-Strauss, that kinship is the simultaneity of a blood and social origin, and expose it as an ideological construct (Borneman 1996; Schneider and Gough 1984).

We explore the presupposition of blood suggested by Butler and Blackwood using adoptive parents' narratives of Chinese-culture as leverage. Peter Wade (2005), drawing on the work of Marilyn Strathern, has argued that, in practice, Western notions of kinship do not operate within the heteronormative limits that have been assigned to such relatedness, but, rather, kinship is a process in which the social and biological interact in multiple ways. Scholars such as Janet Carsten (2007) and Barbara Yngvesson (2007) have used adoptee narratives as evidence of this interplay, focusing especially on shifting meanings of biology that occur in the "web of intertwinings, separations, and rejoinings between what is apparently inherited from the past, and what is created anew" (Carsten 2007:403).

The attention to what Wade calls "kinship as hybridity" provides a cautionary footnote to the suggestion that a kind of biological foundationalism automatically reproduces the dominance of heteronormativity. But, at the same time, there is a striking absence in many of these more "optimistic" works of a concerted analysis of gender, patriarchy, or sexuality. And so we approach our China-U.S. adoption narratives interested in a tension that has not been fully addressed in new kinship studies between, on the one hand, hybridity scholarship (including some of the adoption literature) that emphasizes flexible and newly formulated relations between blood and social kinship, and, on the other hand, critical feminist scholarship that foregrounds how kinship continues to be made socially intelligible through the conflated and gendered relationship between blood and social family origins. Even as the contingency and uncertainty of this relationship is increasingly exposed in contemporary formations of parenthood (see, e.g., Stacey 2006),<sup>3</sup> the relationship of socially intelligible kinship with blood remains. Some recent scholarship, for example, has demonstrated how disaggregating biological and social fatherhood results in "confusion" that seems to require some kind of management. Rosanna Hertz (2002) notes in her study of single women who use sperm banks that the sperm-donating father tends to figure as a stand-in until a "real" social father comes along, and Deborah Dempsey (2004) finds in a legal study of custody claims involving children in lesbian-parented families in Australia that courts face the dilemma of either recognizing a biological father or recognizing a "fatherlike" social relationship (see also Lewin 1993). If such an inextricable relation of social and biological origins underpins intelligible kinship, then adoptive parents' narratives foreground the kind of labor required when the gap in that origin is brought into focus.

In new kinship studies, adoption is often interpreted as a "no" to normalized kinship in that it creates family outside and often independent of blood lineage (Weston 2001). Indeed, some scholars have argued that adoptive kinship potentially calls attention to and challenges several hegemonic discourses of family: that is, that it is blood based, and prepolitical (Modell 2002; Volkman 2003). Butler points out how the critique of a formal notion of kinship within anthropology that is centered on "the fiction of bloodlines" (2000:74) has not led to "a dismissal of kinship altogether" (2002:15). She cites *Families We Choose*, by Kath Weston (1991), as an example of research that attends to kinship formation by replacing the centrality of blood with that of choice. Adoption literature often focuses on the idea of "chosen" family, suggesting that adoptive kinship helps to unmask normative assumptions of the family in general.

Focusing on the idea of "choice" is a move away from the conventional assumption of blood that has underpinned kinship studies, but we argue that the idea proves inadequate. As Corinne P. Hayden points out, the very

idea of “chosen families” only becomes meaningful “in the context of the cultural belief in the power of blood ties” (1995:45). But more than this, privileging choice might mask other modes in which heteronormativity operates. In this article, we draw on the narratives of parents with children adopted from China to consider how the connection of blood and social origins persists in adoptive kinship as desire, even if it has been rejected in much of new kinship theory. We have already suggested that the desire of adoptive parents connects with the fact of abandonment and a nonconsensual relocation of the child from the country and family of birth. Desire for intelligible kinship is caught up with cultural difference. For adoptive families with whom Dorow spoke, their choice in having a family comes along with their child’s Chinese-culture, the meaning of which is overdetermined—including by blood—but operative in discernibly varying ways. In the next section, we demonstrate that the question of origins for China–U.S. adoptive families is a site of tensions between biological and socially chosen kinship and that these tensions are palpable in narratives of cultural heritage. The continued centrality of blood is still experienced in adoption in the gap between origins of the child and social desire (choice) of parents, which includes the desire for social intelligibility.

The circumstances under which individual children in China have been made available for adoption are usually not known. For the adoptive parents with whom Dorow spoke, anxiety was often attached to a lack of knowledge about blood origins, and it was often manifested in forms of narrative labor on the complicated social causes of adoptive kinship, including biological parents’ reasons for abandoning their children and their own desire for parenthood or for particular kinds of children. The anxiety of uncertainty functioned as a source of frustration and sometimes of fear, both before and after the adoption. As adoptive father Fred Coombs put it, “I think the hard part is the decision that the biological parents had to leave their child. But I think the words I just said are as far as we can go with it.” When Dorow asked single mother Nan Heinman whether she had talked with her daughter about birth parents and abandonment, she replied, “Yeah, that whole subject—I don’t even know how . . . that scares the hell out of me, that whole subject. I don’t know how or when to even go there. And I have to say, that I’ve been to a number of lectures on parenting of these girls and how to talk about the adoption thing.” The anxiety over blood origin as neither known, shared, nor chosen by their daughters was also, in the same moment, an expression of the adoptive parents’ desire for a family and a social origin of the family.<sup>4</sup>

Some have pointed out that, in its popular imaginary, this anxiety focuses on the mother(s).<sup>5</sup> Adoption narratives conjure a child exchanged between two women (Berebitsky 2000; Clark 1998). As adoptive mother Ginger Adley lamented, “What makes me the most sad is that I can’t

find her mother. And her mother—and father, I shouldn’t be sexist—have no idea that their child is safe.” The mention of the birth father is an afterthought; it is the birth mother who mediates between one (birth) family and another (social) family.<sup>6</sup> This spectacle of exchange suggests that one mother takes up at the point at which the other left off. It is the social notion of motherhood—of nurturance and motherly love—that is the basis for understanding why one woman can be seen to “stand in” for another. Acknowledging two mothers at once might be difficult, but we consider how this idea of exchange alone does not unravel the tension around origins but, instead, compares to the question of unresolved fatherhood.

In Dorow’s interviews, adoptive parents’ narratives were marked often by silence regarding the blood father; he was an afterthought who came in and out of conversation. Jennifer Bartz noted that she and her daughter periodically played a game in which they imagined what her daughter’s birth mother might be like, and then she added, “Hmmm, I don’t think I’ve ever played the game with her about who her father is, quite honestly.”<sup>7</sup> In general, parents appeared to be nonchalant toward the father question. However, the fragility of the social father’s position was not far under the surface. For example, questions of racial difference seemed especially likely to raise anxiety about fatherhood, which is not to say that they were a problem for all parents. Adoptive father Terry Schlitz, gay and white, took some pleasure in remembering how one of the straight white fathers in his travel group was “outed” as nonnormative, made particular and suspect as he stood on a street corner in China with a Chinese child in his arms:

You know, when you’re gay and have kids and people realize it, you’re just always on display. . . . So what I laughed at is when we were in China, all these [straight white] parents would be saying, “God, we went to the bus stop and people just stared at us!” . . . And the ignorant bossy white male in our group, he hated it the most. And I just secretly savored that. [Terry Schlitz, gay white father]

For Terry and his partner, Matt, anxiety when traveling to China hinged not on racial markers of blood difference but, rather, on the always-present danger that they might not get their child if authorities discovered they were gay. The anxiety for the adoptive straight white father of a baby from China is another thing altogether: He will get his child, but can she really ever be “his”—that is, how is kinship enacted—if the link between biological and social fatherhood no longer holds (something Terry said he had “grieved” when he came out years before)?

Race anxieties often signal the fragility of socially intelligible kinship, and for adoptive families of Chinese children, those anxieties are narrated most often through the

question of culture. Dorow (2006), Ann Anagnost (2000), and others have argued that anxiety over how and to what extent a child's birth culture should or can be embraced and integrated is in some ways a displaced anxiety over motherhood. But we explore the possibility that it also functions, albeit differently, to displace anxiety over fatherhood. It just might be that, in adoptive parents' constructions of their cultural identity, one begins to discern heteronormative imperatives in regard to fatherhood. The next section, which considers interview material, is devoted to fleshing out this idea.

Our treatment of the interviews has three unique qualities. First, we do not offer a conventional ethnographic analysis of the field data. Rather, we mine the narratives of Chinese-culture in the interview material as a way to think through this theoretical tension in the relations of blood and social desire. Second, given that most popular and scholarly work on adoption focuses explicitly or implicitly on absent-present birth mothers or on the construction of adoptive motherhood in relation to birth motherhood (Anagnost 2001; Berebitsky 2000; Dorow 2006; Rapp 1999), we quite deliberately plumb the question of fatherhood. This is a process of "reading between the lines" rather than making generalizations about the experience of adoptive families. And, finally, we found our analysis hindered by treating families by "structural type" (e.g., straight, queer, single parent) and, instead, follow Butler in understanding kinship to be "a kind of doing . . . [that] can only be understood as an enacting practice" (2002:34). In this sense, we look at single, straight, and queer parents in turn, but with the assumption that heteronormativity operates in all of their enacting practices. Put another way, we understand each parental form as a singular relation to the demand of socially intelligible kinship.

### **Adoption narratives: Kinship and "Chinese-culture"**

In a heteronormative North American context, adoption narratives respond to a demand and desire for social intelligibility by somehow negotiating the discontinuity between social and blood origins. Françoise-Romaine Ouellette and Hélène Belleau (2001) have argued that, because kinship is largely defined first through blood and because distinct cultural origins are reminiscent of bloodlines, adoptive parents must negotiate their family's relation to their children's cultural heritage. Often, archives of photographs and souvenirs serve to contain and manage the Otherness of culture that might pose a threat to the family's own social and legal claims to kinship. When blood origins are tied to particular national, cultural, or racial spaces, as is the case in China-U.S. adoption, "culture" figures in especially complicated ways.

Ouellette and Belleau's insights are important, but our own reading of adoptive parents' narratives bears them out only partially. Some parents do, indeed, try to contain or normalize the origin of their family, but some of the adoptive parents Dorow spoke with were enthusiastic about exposing their child to "her" Chinese culture, and others wanted their children to interact with people from similar "backgrounds." What is important for our purposes is that, in all the narratives, Chinese-culture mediated constructions of kinship by functioning as something that could be narrated, which in itself promises some degree of mastery over the knowledge gaps and racial difference that threaten social intelligibility. We think that Chinese-culture understood in this way is a powerful entrée to theorizing kinship and the persistence of heteronormative desire precisely because it is performed at the (dis)juncture of blood and social origins.

The connection between fatherhood and culture was perhaps most explicit for many of the single mothers with whom Dorow spoke. Theirs were families for whom the absence of a father seemed to leave in suspension, or at least to defer, the question of family intelligibility and, connectedly, cultural identity. The question of the social intelligibility of their family was left open, leaving a space between blood and desire. For example, Sharon Anderson could play with rather than against the discontinuous origins of her family to make intelligible both the absent father and the racial-cultural difference of her kinship:

You know, you have some interesting encounters around, reactions to a Caucasian woman with a Chinese baby. . . . I remember getting into the parking ramp elevator at the hospital [in California] with her when she was a baby. And there was a Japanese woman who got on the elevator with me, and she looked at me, and she said, "Oh, is your husband Asian?" "Oh, no, no" [I replied]. "Is the baby's father Asian?" And I said, "Yes." (Sharon laughs.) The doors open on the bottom floor, and she says, "The baby certainly looks like her father." [Sharon Anderson, single white mother]

Many single mothers seemed to find enjoyment and perhaps comfort in this ambiguity, in which an absent father is also the suggestion that there is one. This is an evocative space in which heteronormalized ideas of kinship have not been realized, but neither have they been disappointed. Perhaps this is why the figure of the father seemed to haunt the future in the narratives of single mothers, as they imagined how their children might be affected in various ways by the absent social father and what he represents.

I think this single parent thing will loom a lot larger, actually, in the future. My daughter is very clearly aware of it now, and it bugs her. You know, she said, "Why didn't you take care of that [i.e., find a father] before you got

me?" It'll loom a lot larger than it does now in terms of what she didn't have, and therefore does that cause her to want to, maybe more than some other kids, try and figure out what she would have had in China that she didn't get: two parents, siblings, the whole nine yards. [Nan Heinman, single white mother]

I hope in the future my daughter is very secure, that she's very loved and that there's a lot of people that care about her. And I think that being from a single family, that's different. This suburb is a very family—single families aren't real common in this area. So she's gonna be different because of that, too. . . . I guess I'm going to have to be very adamant about making sure that she understands that she is—that she knows that she is Chinese, but that she's here because she's very loved and cared for. [Laura Vigdahl, single white mother]

Laura and Nan both stressed a desire for their daughters to have a sense of their Chinese cultural identity; Nan had hired a Chinese nanny to teach her daughter language and culture, to give her as much as possible what she "would have had in China but didn't get." This function of Chinese-culture responds to a string of differences, including the absent presence of a father into the child's future. Unlike Nan and Laura, Hannah Carter acquired a male partner after she adopted her daughter; she suggested that the presence of socially recognized fatherhood would fulfill her daughter's (future) belonging. When Dorow asked her if she was involved with the local Chinese cultural and adoption support group, Hannah's reply indicated a correlation:

I've been reading their newsletter on the web. I think it's good. One of the things—one reason I haven't gotten involved in things like I thought I would is that after I came back I met this really wonderful guy, who is wonderful with Rose, and just always wanted to have kids. And so I haven't had the time that I might have otherwise. And for me, I had to make a decision that this was the best thing for her, for her future, was if I do find somebody, she'll have a dad. I mean he would definitely be her dad, and we've already talked about that. [Hannah Carter, single white mother]

In the narratives of several single mothers, the sign Chinese-culture signaled the family's kinship as "unfinished" and was seen as partially making up for the absence of a father. The discontinuity of origins to which it referred might threaten or supplement the adoptive kinship of single mother and adopted child, leaving in suspension the question of intelligibility. Narrations of Chinese-culture by single-parent families suggest that demands for social intelligibility act on single mothers' adoptive kinship not so much through anxiety over the discontinuity of blood and social origins but through the ambiguity of their relationship.

One might assume straight couples who adopt to have less of a conflict with the question of social intelligibility, but the "almost but not quite,"<sup>8</sup> usually made visible in racial difference, makes the discontinuity ever present. Even, and perhaps especially, for white heterosexual couples, the visibility of race materialized in narrative labor on Chinese-culture. When it is the equivalence of blood and social origins that makes kinship intelligible, in a variety of ways Chinese-culture is a vehicle for managing the gap held open by the "almost but not quite"; it is enlisted in some instances to externalize difference and in others to maintain a family identity's social coherence. Blood origin is variously excluded from or enfolded within social desire, but in all cases it lingers as racialized difference, a complex thing for many reasons.

Straight couples expressed varying levels of discomfort with regard to Chinese-culture as a potential threat to the family's coherence, that is, to broader social claims of kinship with the child.<sup>9</sup> This worry was most pronounced among some of the straight adoptive fathers.

You don't want to do too many Chinese things. As we grow with our daughter, I find myself questioning at what point it's more important growing within our family, you know, *or* us taking her for Chinese food or taking her to a Chinese parade. [Billy Peterson, straight white father]

I don't want her to have anything to do with that culture that threw her away. . . . I think you ought to spend your time trying to raise your kids to be happy well-adjusted little citizens, not happy well-adjusted little Asian-American people perhaps with a focus on their Fukinese abstraction [*sic*]. [Chet Cook, straight white father]

We read this either-or proposition—she is "Chinese" or she is "ours"—as a form of narrative labor on the gap between biology and desire, in which social intelligibility depends on containing the continuities of difference represented by Chinese-culture.

For some straight white couples, the "almost but not quite" of their kinship—a normative family structure with the obvious absence of the correspondence of blood and social origins—surfaced most palpably with regard to racialized difference. Sandra and John Padding both said they initially had wanted a baby that looked like them. John said that he experienced dissonance in "having a Chinese baby without a Chinese past in my life. If she wasn't Chinese, she'd be a Jewish baby to be raised—and my heritage would be her heritage, and there wouldn't need to be this other culture added." Sandra narrated the anxiety this way: "It's like, how do you honor the Chinese cultural stuff without it turning into a different religion? . . . There's a connection in doing something that has some parallels to Chinese

tradition, but it's [also] Jewish tradition." To deal with this tension, the Paddings had created a hybrid ritual for Jewish and Chinese festivals that fall at the same time of year—Sukkot and the Mid-Autumn Festival, respectively—in which, as a family, they erected a sukkah, looked at the moon, and thought of their child's birth family. Chinese-culture was integrated into a more general family narrative, creating a seeming detente between blood and social origins.

The salience of race in negotiating kinship is underscored in those few families for whom it actually helped to relieve anxiety around origins. George and Patty Lou, an interracial couple (he is Asian, she is white), conjured cultural intelligibility through the interplay of race, family, and nation:

**Patty:** There was no issue of culture, different country, different language than she was used to. We just brought her home and she was ours! We want her to know, of course, that she's adopted, and that she's Chinese but also American.

**Dorow:** How do those things fit together for you, that she's both Chinese and American?

**Patty:** It's not an issue. Because if we had a natural, a biological child, it would be half Chinese, half Caucasian.

For George and Patty, an interracial popular imaginary allowed their family to "pass" (especially if George was present),<sup>10</sup> something not available to the majority of couples adopting from China.

Queer couples seemed to most embrace Chinese-culture. Their narratives of Chinese-culture usually worked with the discontinuity of blood and desire rather than laboring to contain or manage difference. Jennifer Bartz compared her experience to that of straight couples she had observed.

Traditional married couples usually come from this place where they've tried to have kids themselves, they went through the whole infertility thing generally, struggled with that, they want their kind of traditional family. So adoption is a way for them to get what they always wanted. Whereas the rest of us are kind of more open to the alternatives. . . . [Some straight] people will say (lowers her voice with a swagger), "I didn't bring her here to be Chinese, I brought her here to be my daughter." And it's like of course she's our daughter. But I think it's partly that—I find it fascinating, too, the whole idea of her learning Chinese. [Jennifer Bartz, lesbian white mother]

For queer families, the entire adoption process is a reminder that they are on the margins of socially intelligibility; this reality is not carried only by racial difference. All queer

families with whom Dorow spoke had to temporarily conceal their queerness in the course of the adoption process. Joyce and Marion, a white lesbian couple, put it this way:

**Joyce:** Since we're lesbians only one of us could be the adoptive parent. . . . Marion traveled to China. I did not go. Our agency actually prohibited it because they had had an experience with two lesbians going, where one of the other families outed them, and then there was a real problem.

**Marion:** Because of the whole lesbian thing, they kept saying, "Don't tell anyone, don't tell anyone."

Such distance from—and yet felt presence of—the heteronormative ideal is evident in the way queer parents cautiously reveled in those moments when adoption, in its bureaucratic protocols, afforded a recognition or legitimation of their kinship. Debra recounted having to write biographies and a home study for the adoption agency, adding that it was "actually kind of fun—but it was fun because we were recognized as a family, and we were recognized as good future parents." It was their "pure" desire for a child apart from the question of social intelligibility that provided the relief of being recognized as family. Relief at such recognition and frustration with the continual undermining of such recognition are two sides of the same coin but not primarily matters of racial difference.

Rather than narratives that used Chinese-culture to contain and manage the question of social intelligibility, many queer parents seemed to desire (sometimes anxiously) a full account of their child's Chinese-culture. Consequently, it is not surprising that parents engaging in this type of narrative labor told stories that were the least about racial difference and the future and the most about making the child's past in China present in the cultural identity of the family: "Somebody said to us, I don't remember who, that what happens is that we all, just because we have a child from China, we are all as a family Chinese American. Not only our children, but we have assumed that identity. . . . We talk about China—almost daily it's brought up in conversation at some point" (Terry Schlitz, gay white father cofather).

The real limits to what these parents could know about the conditions surrounding their child's birth, and of what they could understand and experience of Chinese-culture, were a source of anxiety and, sometimes, anger.

If we can't give her her birth parents, at least we can give her her birth culture, sort of?—but not all happy-slappy, to say that birth parents had to have loved her!

I think that's the only thing that bothers me about adopting from China—that it's so hard to know . . . I

have occasionally fantasized about traveling to China and somehow going door to door if I needed to and saying . . . , “Who left that little . . . who abandoned a baby on . . . ?” [Joyce Cousins, lesbian white mother]

This narration of Chinese-culture was linked to a reworking of the relationship of blood and social origins—a process that Hayden (1995) has called the “dispersal” of kinship. Whereas Hayden uses the term to refer to the multiple conceptions of biology employed in lesbian kinship narratives,<sup>11</sup> we deploy the term to think about the social and historical interplay of biological and fictive (or chosen) kin in adoption narratives:

She has two moms that dote on her. Usually you just have one mom, but she’s got two that dote on her. Plus another [Chinese] friend who’s like a grandmother, plus her real grandmas. [Marion Frank, lesbian white mother]

I imagine that the way this whole thing evolved, that there were many people involved in getting Pan Pan from her birth mother, whom she spent a night with, to her foster mother. So she’s been on a kind of an underground railroad, with people who’ve all along the way cared tremendously about her, have made sure that she hasn’t had any lapses in any care or any love. I mean, she’s been loved and challenged and taught and everything, every step of the way. [Lisa Walker, lesbian white mother]

Like Terry Schlitz, other queer parents suggested that dispersed kinship included the conscious embrace of racial difference as one of a continuity of differences. Joyce Cousins chuckled at this laundry list: “She was abandoned, she was adopted, she’s got two mothers, she’s got two mothers of a different race, she’s left-handed.”

Racial difference played a part alongside Chinese-culture in the enacting of kinship, but class was also a crucial corollary. It figured in the desire to provide for a child—including “providing” her with a cultural identity—in many ways that were economic. As one lesbian mother put it, “We’re in a position now where we’re not struggling too much financially at the moment, so we can do things that we need to do to try and take care of her. And we can let her go to a [Chinese-English] bilingual Montessori private preschool that costs a lot of money.” Eng (2003) has argued that transnational-transracial adoptive kinship is legitimized in part by middle-class consumerism, perhaps especially for queer parents. Terry and Matt suggested, for example, that people “forgave” their being gay because they had brought a child into a better life. Across the board, adoptive parents variously saw their financial provision as making up for the lack of support given to their children by the Chinese birth family and the Chinese state, as a way to provide Chinese cultural opportunities, or even as giving

girls, in particular, the kinds of opportunities they might not have had in China.

### Conclusion: Kinship anxiety and the ambiguities of new kinship

Adoption narratives reveal anxiety over a demand and a desire for intelligibility that applies to all forms of kinship. In the particular forms we consider here, from the anxiety emerges a kind of narrative laboring on racial and cultural differences, which are taken up as raw material through (and against) which to negotiate intelligibility. Narrative labor performed on “Chinese-culture” is of particular importance because of the ways it manages the discontinuous origins of transracial-transnational adoption, working to defer, contain, supplement, or disperse the conflation of blood and social origins demanded by ideologies of intelligible kinship. Parents’ negotiations of Chinese-culture thus offer a unique entrée to the operation and circulation of desire in kinship—desire for particular kinds of kinships, even and especially when they do not and cannot involve blood relations. Insights into the particularities of this “instrumental case” (Stake 2005) of China–U.S. adoption might help scholars more generally understand, and perhaps raise new questions about, the relationship between blood and desire in the reproduction of intelligible kinship in a heteronormative context.

These insights might be especially productive given scholarly splits and uncertainties regarding adoptive kinship. On the one hand, transnational-transracial adoption is quintessentially a form of “new kinship,” a dispersal of bloodlines and heterosex as the foundation of domestic belonging. On the other hand, the classed, gendered, and raced aspects that attend the desire for intelligibility in such adoptions belie the connotations of consent that accompany the concept of “chosen family.” Our exploration of narrative labor on Chinese-culture is an attempt to think about these questions otherwise: to suspend the assumed newness of “chosen” kinship and the persistence of the social command of blood long enough to ask what secrets adoptive parents’ stories might reveal about the social intelligibility of kinship.

Narrative labor in relation to cultural identity, especially when class and race are considered, can invent unexpected variations on the theme of heteronormativity. In some cases, as we found especially with single mothers, the blood-social relation was reworked as a deferral of heteronormative demands, because the discontinuity of origins left open the question of intelligibility. In other cases, labor on the gap between blood and social origins unexpectedly contributed to active remembering of birth families in China, thus stretching the normative bounds of the nuclear family unit. Although mobilized with different vocabularies, the dispersal of kinship appeared in the

narratives at least as the acknowledgment of the uncertainty of the future or as a provision of “tools” for multiply positioned differences.<sup>12</sup> Debra and Christy commented on this uncertainty:

**Debra:** Well, we have this sort of funny vision of the conferences for Chinese adoptees in 20 years.

**Christy:** (lightly laughing with Debra) Yeah, breakout sessions for the daughters of lesbian parents, parents who divorced after they came home from China—

**Debra:**—single parents . . .

At the same time, our reading of China–U.S. adoptive parents’ narratives also suggests some caution about the marriage of new kinship studies and adoption scholarship that such variation might invite. Certainly the early decades of transnational–transracial adoption (i.e., the 1960s and 1970s) were dominated by the assertion that assimilationist approaches were “best” for the child, and new kinship studies indicate how these discourses are not sustainable in the era of globalization and hegemonic multiculturalism. In this way, the “choice” of kinship is equivalent to one of a continuity of differences, which seems to upset the apocryphal of biological foundationalism. However, “difference” is tolerated only to a certain point: It is good to embrace another culture, but only so far as it remains within the limits of social intelligibility. As our discussion highlights, that intelligibility is not born of a straightforward conflation of blood and social origins; but it persists as a desire for particular kinds of kinship and as a narrative laboring on difference.

This makes us pause at the optimism expressed in new kinship studies over the multiplicity and hybridity of kinship forms. Are we to read the Paddings’ hybridization of the Chinese Mid-Autumn Festival and the Jewish holiday of Sukkot as a dispersion or a conflation of the blood and social origins of kinship? What about a single mother’s deflection of questions about her child’s father or a white gay father’s claim that he is now Chinese? If queer parents’ recrafting of their children’s histories into transnational and transracial stories of kinship does not clearly constitute an escape from the demand for social intelligibility, we might then ask anew what exactly constitutes that demand.

Wade (2005) has pointed out that essentialism is a “moveable feast,” thus complicating the task of categorizing various forms of kinship as “traditional” or “innovative.” Parents’ multiple forms of labor on Chinese-culture suggest that the social intelligibility of kinship might itself be a moveable feast, or perhaps a moving target. We simply assert that one secret of socially intelligible kinship is related to the operation of heteronormativity on the level of

desire, evidenced in the multiple and inventive forms of interplay between blood and social origins in these adoption narratives.

## Notes

*Acknowledgments.* The authors would like to thank Charles Barbour and Karyn Ball for comments on a draft of the article. Sara Dorow gratefully acknowledges funding in support of field research from the Social Science Research Council and the University of Minnesota.

1. It is crucial to note that the percentage of healthy infant girls leaving China for adoption far exceeds the actual percentage of such children in orphanages; that is, healthy baby girls are the ones demanded by and sent for international adoption (Dorow 2006).

2. Anxieties over origins and the labor toward heteronormative reproduction are thus inextricable from institutional and state regulatory practices.

3. In other words, Judith Stacey’s work also operates in the tension we have delineated between a kind of “hybridity” thinking and the power of intelligible kinship.

4. This analysis of double origins is akin to David Eng’s argument that the transnationally adopted child serves as both subject and object of kinship formation.

5. The formalization of open adoption has effected great change in practices of and desires for “clean break” adoption, but in the case of transnational adoption, open adoption is the exception. Indeed, one reason many parents choose intercountry adoption is that “there will be no birth mother knocking on our door” (as one parent put it to Dorow in an interview).

6. It is also possible to understand this exchange not as one occurring between two mothers but, rather, as an exchange of mothers, reminiscent of the “exchange of women” theorized by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1969) as a fundamental structure of all (heteronormative) kinship. In this sense, the spectacle of exchange in adoption recapitulates relations of exchange configuring all kinship, in which “the woman from elsewhere makes sure that the men from here will reproduce their own kin” (Butler 2002:32).

7. This ease with the absence of the blood father might be explained by the dominant imaginary of fatherhood, whether adoptive or biological, as being, in contrast to the innateness of motherhood, not instinctive but learned (Miall and March 2003).

8. This is a phrase used by postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha (1994) to theorize mimicry, although we do not mean to use it in exactly the way he does.

9. Anxiety about social intelligibility may be exacerbated by infertility; many couples who adopt from China are unable to have children by birth and have gone through some kind of process of grieving and of working through the associated feelings.

10. We do not want to neglect the role the national imaginary plays in underwriting heteronormative kinship, as suggested in Patty Lou’s and also Chet Cook’s narratives of family and national belonging for their children. We do not have space here to deal with this issue, but see Dorow 2006.

11. This dispersal of kinship sometimes coexists with the claim to a “doubling” of maternal love in lesbian narratives, which is itself a reworking of biology in its new intersections with chosen kinship (Hayden 1995).

12. As our method of reading Chinese-culture in adoption narratives demonstrates, relative “proximity” to heteronormative kinship makes a difference in the forms of labor available to adoptive

families as they enact kinship. At the same time, this range of approaches is not fixed to some continuum of straight–single–queer; for example, Dorow interviewed some straight couples whose negotiations of Chinese-culture more closely resembled what we have identified as a queering of double biological and social origins and so forth. This point only underscores the larger point we wish to make: The reproduction of socially intelligible kinship may depend on the (heteronormative) collapse of blood and the social into each other but might, in fact, be reproduced through the flexibility of their shifting interdependence.

## References cited

- Åkerström, Malin, Katarina Jacobsson, and David Wästerfors  
 2004 Reanalysis of Previously Collected Material. *Qualitative Research Practice*. Clive Seale, Giampietro Gobo, Jaber F. Gubrium, and David Silverman, eds. Pp. 344–357. London: SAGE.
- Anagnost, Ann  
 2000 Scenes of Misrecognition: Maternal Citizenship in the Age of Transnational Adoption. *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 8(2):390–421.
- Berebitsky, Julie  
 2000 Like Our Very Own: Adoption and the Changing Culture of Motherhood, 1851–1950. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.
- Bhabha, Homi K.  
 1994 *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Blackwood, Evelyn  
 2005 Wedding Bell Blues: Marriage, Missing Men, and Matrifocal Follies. *American Ethnologist* 32(1):3–19.
- Borneman, John  
 1996 Until Death Do Us Part: Marriage/Death in Anthropological Discourse. *American Ethnologist* 23(2):21–35.
- Butler, Judith  
 2000 *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death*. New York: Columbia University Press.  
 2002 Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual? *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 13(1):14–44.
- Campbell, Kirsten  
 2002 The Politics of Kinship. *Economy and Society* 31(4):642–650.
- Carsten, Janet  
 2007 Tracing Trajectories of Information in New Contexts of Relatedness. *Anthropological Quarterly* 80(2):403–426.
- Clark, Danae  
 1998 Mediadoption: Children, Commodification, and the Spectacle of Disruption. *American Studies* 39(2):65–86.
- Dempsey, Deborah  
 2004 Donor, Father, or Parent? Conceiving Paternity in the Australian Family Court. *International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family* 18(1):76–102.
- Dorow, Sara K.  
 2006 *Transnational Adoption: A Cultural Economy of Race, Gender, and Kinship*. New York: NYU Press.
- Eng, David L.  
 2003 Transnational Adoption and Queer Diasporas. *Social Text* 21(3):1–37.
- Franklin, Sarah, and Susan McKinnon  
 2001 *Relative Values: Reconfiguring Kinship Studies*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Hayden, Corinne P.  
 1995 Gender, Genetics, and Generation: Reformulating Biology in Lesbian Kinship. *Cultural Anthropology* 10(1):41–63.
- Hertz, Rosanna  
 2002 The Father as an Idea: A Challenge to Kinship Boundaries by Single Mothers. *Symbolic Interaction* 25(1):1–31.
- Lamphere, Louise  
 2005 Replacing Heteronormative Views of Kinship and Marriage. *American Ethnologist* 32(1):34–36.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude  
 1969 *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Rev. edition. J. H. Bell, J. R. von Sturmer, and R. Needham, eds. R. Needham, trans. Boston: Beacon.
- Lewin, Ellen  
 1993 *Lesbian Mothers*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Miall, Charlene, and Karen March  
 2003 A Comparison of Biological and Adoptive Mothers and Fathers: The Relevance of Biological Kinship and Gendered Constructs of Parenthood. *Adoption Quarterly* 6:7–39.
- Modell, Judith S.  
 2002 *A Sealed and Secret Kinship: The Culture of Policies and Practices in American Adoption*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Ouellette, Françoise-Romaine, and Hélène Belleau, with Caroline Patenaude  
 2001 *Family and Social Integration of Children Adopted Internationally: A Review of the Literature*. Montreal: INRS-Urbanisation, Culture et Société.
- Rapp, Rayna  
 1999 Foreword. In *Transformative Motherhood: On Giving and Getting in a Consumer Culture*. Linda Layne, ed. Pp. xi–xix. New York: NYU Press.
- Schneider, David M., and Kathleen Gough  
 1984 *A Critique of the Study of Kinship*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Shanley, Mary L.  
 2001 *Making Babies, Making Families: What Matters Most in an Age of Reproductive Technologies, Surrogacy, Adoption, and Same-Sex and Unwed Parents*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Stacey, Judith  
 2006 Gay Parenthood and the Decline of Paternity as We Knew It. *Sexualities* 9(1):27–55.
- Stake, Robert E.  
 1995 *The Art of Case Study Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Sullivan, Maureen  
 2004 *The Family of Woman: Lesbian Mothers, Their Children, and the Undoing of Gender*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Tessler, Richard C., Gail Gamache, and Liming Liu  
 1999 *West Meets East: Americans Adopt Chinese Children*. Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey.
- Volkman, Toby Alice  
 2003 Embodying Chinese Culture: Transnational Adoption in North America. *Social Text* 21(1):29–55.  
 2005 *Cultures of Transnational Adoption*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Wade, Peter  
 2005 Hybridity Thinking and Kinship Thinking. *Cultural Studies* 19(5):602–621.
- Watkins, Mary  
 2004 *Adoption and Identity: Nomadic Possibilities for Re-Conceiving the Self*. Electronic document, <http://uploads.pacifica.edu/gems/watkins/AdoptionIdentity.pdf>, accessed September 2005.
- Weston, Kath  
 1991 *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship*. New York: Columbia University Press.

2001 Kinship, Controversy, and the Sharing of Substance: The Race/Class Politics of Blood Transfusion. *In* *Relative Values: Reconfiguring Kinship Studies*. Sarah Franklin and Susan McKinnon, eds. Pp. 147–174. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Yngvesson, Barbara

2007 Refiguring Kinship in the Space of Adoption. *Anthropological Quarterly* 80(2):561–579.

*accepted January 19, 2009*

*final version submitted February 4, 2009*

Sara Dorow  
Amy Swiffen  
Department of Sociology  
University of Alberta  
5–21 Tory Building  
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada  
T6G 2H4

sdorow@ualberta.ca  
aswiffen@ualberta.ca