Published in final edited form as:
Hum Organ. 2014 ; 73(1): 62–71.

The Quiet Migration Redux: International Adoption, Race, and Difference

Jessaca B. Leinaweaver

Abstract

Demographers frame international adoption primarily as an unusual kind of migration. This insight offers anthropologists new ways to think about kinship. Drawing on demographic scholarship and anthropological kinship and migration studies, this article develops a new and hybrid approach to international adoption as a complex social process that is both migratory and productive of kinship. Viewing international adoption as a form of migration reveals how the stated “push factors” and actual “pull factors” of international adoption do not align perfectly. Using an anthropological life course perspective, the article then explores how the experiences of these “migrants” and those close to them, over time, are better understood as racialization than solely the product of migration. Looking at adoptees’ lives through a migration lens reveals some of the persistent discomforts that prevent open conversations about racial difference and minority status in an adoptive context, that is, one where children have been caused to migrate, recruited into families. This article draws on data from ethnographic fieldwork with Spanish parents who have adopted Peruvian children to argue that international adoption is a unique form of immigration that produces a minority category within a majority population.

Keywords

adoption; demography; migration; kinship; Spain

Demographers take an intriguing tack when analyzing international adoption, one which is productive and revealing for anthropologists studying kinship. They write about it primarily as an unusual kind of migration.ⁱ As a discipline, demography is broadly concerned with changes in population size and age structure of countries and, therefore, focuses on birth, death, and migration. Of these three key demographic processes, international adoption most closely resembles migration, because children have entered a nation by land or air rather than through a birth canal. To put it simply, one country’s population is decreased by one, while another’s is increased by one – this is the stuff of migration.ⁱⁱ This consistent focus in the demographic approach raises the question of what anthropologists might be missing by not analyzing international adoption primarily as a form of migration.ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱThis approach is also seen in policy. For example, the United States Department of Immigration and Naturalization data on numbers of migrants include adopted children as one category.

ⁱⁱLovelock (2000:933) has even observed that in Canada, international adoption was encouraged in the late 1980s and early 1990s “as a means to increase the proportion of younger persons in the total Canadian immigration intake,” tying it directly to “domestic demographic concerns.”

ⁱⁱⁱBut see some excellent exceptions, including Howell and Melhuus 2007; Hübinette and Tigervall 2009; Marre 2009.

Reading a bit more closely, however, it becomes clear that while demographic scholarship on international adoption calls it migration, it also consistently qualifies that migration in some way: “the unknown immigration” (Lozano and Kossoudji 2009), or the “quiet migration” (Davis 2011; McGuinness 2000; Selman 2002; Weil 1984). Indeed, as qualitative research has shown, many of those involved with adoption explicitly reject the label of immigration. For example, the anthropologist Diana Marre (2009:228) was told by a teacher in Barcelona that at the school she was studying “we do not have immigrant children, we have children adopted internationally.” And the sociologist Sara Dorow (2006:210) collected a listserv post from an adoptive parent that stated bluntly, “Our children are NOT immigrants. They are, once adopted, citizens of the United States.”^{iv}

In this article, I explore why – for demographers, anthropological kinship scholars, and our research participants alike – it doesn’t seem quite right to call international adoption “migration” without qualifying it. I begin from the puzzle posed by demographers: that international adoption is migration but an unusual kind. I examine that puzzle from the perspective of anthropological kinship and migration studies in order to develop a new and hybrid approach to international adoption. My aim is a productive fusion of the demographic insight that international adoption is literally migration with the anthropological approach to kinship and migration as complex social processes.

Why is it not quite right to talk about international adoption as migration? What are the important differences? Why is it “quiet?” One answer, perhaps a more demographically oriented one, could simply be that its numerical incidence remains low in comparison to other population movements such as labor migration and refugee displacement. Another answer – a more anthropologically oriented one – could be that it involves what Collinson (2007: 132) calls “the littlest immigrants”: children, minors, who are systematically disempowered and disenfranchised cross-culturally (Hardman 1973; Hirschfeld 2002) and who therefore cannot “speak” (in the sense of Spivak 1988) in the same way as adult migrants (Orellana et al. 2001). Or, to draw on a historian’s analysis of media representations, we might also observe that at least some of the available public data does not support such an analogy: “Children are hardly ever imagined in media images as immigrants, highlighting the special position that foreign-born adoptive children occupy in US cultural imaginations” (Collinson 2007:137).

The answer I wish to develop in this essay, however, draws from both demography and anthropology. International adoption is not seen as identical to the complicated and nuanced social processes of labor migration that we have come to understand over decades of research. According to international ethical norms and guidelines, international adoption is supposed to be relatively uncomplicated: it is supposed to be explicitly about giving the child a home and family. No other push or pull factors, to use classical migration-studies terminology, should be relevant. The fact that multiple additional or “confounding” factors very clearly are present – as I will demonstrate below and as this migration framing most

^{iv}Of course, this statement disregards that immigrants too can become citizens, through a process of naturalization (although they face additional steps, such as first obtaining permanent residence, that adoptees do not).

frankly exposes – is disconcerting and can leave proponents of international adoption in a contradictory position.

Viewing international adoption as a form of migration can also offer some important insights into what happens *after* the initial migration. These can be found by following the path set out by anthropological scholarship on migration, which does not center on the act of migrating itself but on the everyday, mundane, intimate, personal lives and encounters of migrants (e.g., Coe et al. 2011; Dreby 2010; Margolis 1994; Orellana 2009). This approach also requires using an anthropological life course perspective to discern how the experiences of these “migrants” and those close to them change over time, related to their own identity development as well as to broader shifts in society and cultural perspectives. Examining international adoptees’ lives through a migration lens powerfully reveals some of the persistent discomforts that preclude open conversations about racial difference and minority status in an adoptive context, that is, one where children have been caused to migrate as part of their recruitment into families. Race and racial difference play a crucial role in the identity development of these adoptees, and their significance is all the greater because of the countering effects of kinship discourse – that is, because adoptees are family.^v

Research Setting

Historians of adoption usually trace the beginnings of international adoption to a combination of humanitarian pressures and desire for children during the Korean War, when Bertha and Harry Holt promoted transnational, permanent adoption for the Amerasian children born to male United States soldiers and Korean women.^{vi} Lovelock (2000) suggests that in this period, humanitarian tendencies were primary, but after 1970, they were combined with additional pressures – declining fertility in Western countries and a decrease in the population of adoptable infants domestically.^{vii} The tendency to interpret international adoption as a benevolent, humanitarian act colors public commentary, and many believe that countless orphans in poor, war-torn or disaster-affected nations need the permanent homes that international adoption to well-off countries can provide (see Graff 2008). There is also a line of thought that suggests that high fertility rates in underdeveloped countries mean a surplus of adoptable children. Nevertheless, empirical evidence sheds doubt on the overall validity of this claim, as countries like South Korea and China have birth rates well below replacement and are relatively wealthy, yet continue to be significant sources of adoptable children (Selman 2002).

In the 1990s and 2000s, numbers of international adoptions overall rose dramatically, increasing globally by 42 percent between 1998 and 2004 with some receiving countries experiencing even sharper growth – Spain, for example, had a rise of 273 percent during the same period (Selman 2009). During this “boom”, Russia (peak year 2004), China (peak year 2005), Guatemala (peak year 2007), and Ethiopia (peak year 2010) were the most

^vThanks to an anonymous reviewer for *Human Organization* for this observation.

^{vi}See Ceniza Choy 2013, Hübinette 2007 and Kim 2010 for thoughtful examinations of Korean adoption.

^{vii}This “decrease” might be better understood as a combination of social and political factors meaning single women were more able to raise their children themselves. In the United States before 1973, 9 percent (19% White and 2% Black) of single mothers gave up babies; from 1973–1981 this percentage dropped to 4 percent and from 1982–1988 to 3 percent (Briggs 2012).

numerically significant sending countries overall (Selman 2009, 2010). Since 2004, numbers of international adoptions have fallen substantially, although numbers of applications to adopt by couples and singles in the wealthier nations have continued to grow (Selman 2009, 2010).

Since 2009, I have conducted qualitative fieldwork with adopted and migrant Peruvians in Madrid, Spain. The purpose of the study was to ethnographically chart the connections between migration and adoption (Leinaweaver 2013). Over the course of eight months spread over four years (2009–2012), I carried out one or more interviews (when feasible, following up for additional interviews in later years) with more than 20 adoptive families, migrant families, and professionals residing in Madrid. The participants were selected opportunistically using snowball sampling, with the aim of attaining thematic saturation and recording a diverse range of experiences (such as transnational parenting, family reunification migration, adopting an older child, or adopting as a single parent). I also recorded fieldnotes based on observations of informational meetings about international adoption and educational presentations to adoptive parents. Finally, I analyzed publicly available materials such as informational pamphlets on adoption and national legal documents and international conventions regulating adoption and migration.^{viii}

Spain had a late “start date” for international adoption compared to other European countries, due among other reasons to the effects of the long dictatorship of Francisco Franco. International adoption began there in the mid-1990s (Howell and Marre 2006; Selman 2009). Legal domestic adoption has until very recently been quite unusual in Spain (see Frekko, Leinaweaver, and Marre n.d.), and surrogacy is prohibited, although the egg donation and in vitro industries are thriving (Bergmann 2011). In the past 15 years, over 40,000 children from over 35 countries have been adopted by Spanish parents and moved to Spain (Giró 2012). They are arriving to a country that has also experienced significant increases in international immigration. The migrant population was recently estimated at over 6 million (OECD 2010), constituting about 14 percent of Spain’s total population.^{ix} This demographic background is relevant for understanding how international adoption resembles other forms of migration and the significance for adoptees of sharing urban space with a large number of immigrants who may physically resemble them.

Peruvians were one of the more numerically significant populations of international adoptees during the first two years of Spanish adoptions. In 1998, Peru’s peak year for sending children to Spain, the top three countries from which Spanish families adopted were Colombia with 393 children, China with 196, and Peru with 151 (National Statistics Institute 2009). Peruvians (like other Latin American adoptees) continue to hold a symbolic importance despite decreased and relatively small numbers.^x Drawing on language ideologies and beliefs about cultural affinity, many Spaniards believe that Latin American

^{viii}Research participants are referred to by pseudonyms, and all translations (from interviews, for example) are my own. I follow a loose translation practice, prioritizing the flow and sentiment over literal translations.

^{ix}These numbers have begun to decline in the past few years, undoubtedly slowed greatly by the economic crisis but also affected by Spanish naturalization policies that ease immigrants out of the category “foreigner.”

^xIn 2009, Russia sent 868 children to Spain, Ethiopia 722 and China 573. That same year, only 17 Peruvian children were adopted to Spain (National Statistics Institute 2009). In recent years Spain and the United States receive about the same number of Peruvian adoptions, and both are outpaced by Italy (Dirección General de Adopciones 2012).

children (and migrants) will be more easily integrated into the Spanish nation and society than, for example, Chinese or Ethiopian children. The presence of Peruvians in adoption flows early on means that many of them are now in their late teens and early 20s, so they have had a broader range of experiences than the more numerous younger children adopted from China, Russia, or Ethiopia. I draw on this shifting range of experiences to develop my argument.

Taking a Cue from Demography: Identifying International Adoption as Migration

In this section, I examine demographic scholarship on international adoption and contextualize it alongside international conventions on adoption to identify the ways in which adoption is, and is not, like migration, toward the end of determining what this more demographically-oriented framing can offer anthropological kinship theory.

Thirty years ago, Richard H. Weil (1984) first identified international adoption as a form of migration, laying out the conditions required for it to take place: supplies of children and social acceptance of the phenomenon in sending countries, demand for children in receiving countries, and a legal framework shared by both. The analogy continues, and recently the demographer Mary Ann Davis (2011:784–785) has described international adoptions as “similar to other migratory flows” in that they “have generally conformed to trends of originating from specific global regions and international push and pull factors as well as the availability of domestic adoptees.”

The terms used by Weil and Davis – supply and demand, push and pull – highlight the way that they equate international adoption with other kinds of migration and analyze it using the same framework. Notably, this framework draws partly on equilibrium-theory terminology such as “push and pull factors,” concepts long critiqued by anthropologists for the depersonalized rationalism that underlies them and for the way in which they occlude variation and explanation in favor of general description (Kyle 2000). Before examining variation and explanation in international adoption, however, I think it is useful to review what these scholars have identified as the “push and pull factors” because doing so will reveal some of the reasons that international adoption is not usually equated with migration.^{xi}

Davis, drawing on Lovelock (2000), identifies a set of “push” factors that vary depending on the time period and source countries for internationally adopted children. War and violence, economic or political instability, population policy, son preference, and AIDS have all served as “push factors” (Davis 2011).^{xii} In equilibrium-theory approaches to migration, the

^{xi}To apply this critique to the study of international adoption as a form of migration, we can’t stop at observing push and pull factors. Lozano and Kossoudji (2009:20) also suggest it is important to analyze “both: (1) economic and policy changes in sending countries; and (2) the incentives that different parents may have when adopting a child.” We might ask, for example, why there were so many adoptions from Guatemala but not from Costa Rica, or why certain children are deemed adoptable in the first place and others in similar circumstances are not, or why people in Norway or Spain are more likely to adopt than people in Germany, or why there has been such an overwhelming preference for international adoption over domestic adoption in the wealthier countries. Comparative studies of this nature are a crucial area for new and continuing research.

^{xii}Lindley identifies another “push factor” which is directly related to migration, in this case, rural-to-urban migration: in the Philippines, mothers who place children for adoption are likely to be recent migrants from rural areas (2010).

same kinds of push factors motivate people to leave “sending countries.” Migrants relocate because of social, economic, or political challenges they face in their home countries. They move in the context of family decisions and household plans and against a backdrop of success narratives.

One important difference, as anthropologists of childhood have observed, is that the child migrants of international adoption do not have agency in the same way that adult economic or political migrants do. The person who makes the decision about migration is not the person who is moving (Weil 1984).^{xiii} Children are *sent* by actors motivated by the “best interests” of the child. If those children also *choose* to leave or actively respond to social and political circumstances, it is much more difficult for analysts to see. Furthermore, it is not that these children are being “pushed” to leave their countries (as the terminology implies is the case for labor migrants), but rather, more precisely, a two stage process: that they have been declared to be adoptable and that authorities have selected an international adoption for them. Their formal separation from their natal families and their emigration from their home countries is conflated through the application of this terminology. Nonetheless, the fact that the push factors impelling migrants and adoptees to depart their home countries are very similar is telling and does give some support to the proposal that we frame international adoption as migration.

Meanwhile, the “pull factor” is a very specific set of ends and desires: an adult, or a couple, somewhere in one of the world’s wealthier countries, wants to have a child. As Lovelock (2000:910) puts it, international adoption “is instigated and achieved by individuals who are motivated by individual concerns and needs...within a particular domestic/international/political context.” By context she refers to the fact that this demand is not being met by sources that previously responded to it. Those once-productive sources include fertility (receiving countries typically have low fertility rates),^{xiv} domestic adoption (in countries where this is an option it is often seen as undesirable for complicated reasons addressed by Gailey 2010 among others), or formerly-productive international sending countries for adoption (Davis 2011; see also Selman 2002). But Davis also perceptively notes that this pull is more complicated than bare demand for a child. There is also an existing infrastructure of agencies that, as she puts it, “have financial incentives as mediators of [inter-country adoptions] and are heavily invested in obtaining children for adoptive placement” (Davis 2011:804) as well as a certain level of social acceptance that means international adoption is not proscribed.

The pull factors of demand and existing networks, however, are not the factors that should be dominant – this goes contrary to what is mandated by international conventions and ethical guidelines. The Hague Convention of 1993 insists that “the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love, and understanding... intercountry adoption may offer

^{xiii}In this, it resembles family reunification migration – migrant parents bringing their children to join them in a new country.

^{xiv}Low fertility is not actually the only proximate determinant of a decision to adopt internationally. For example, single people or same-sex couples may not be biologically infertile but may prefer adoption to alternative reproductive strategies. Evidence from United States adopters of Chinese children (Rojewski and Rojewski 2001) and Catalonian adoption applicants (Marre 2009) suggest that infertility may motivate fewer than half of certain subsets of international adoptions.

the advantage of a permanent family to a child for whom a suitable family cannot be found in his or her State of origin” (The Hague 1993). What “pushes” a child across borders to become an internationally adopted son or daughter, in other words, should be solely the needs of the child (Davis 2011).

One key complication that the migration approach reveals, then, is that the consistent “pull” factor is demand (supported by an existing infrastructure and supportive social context). The prospective parent’s motivation is the proximate determinant of a child’s migration through international adoption. Yet international guidelines and adoption ethics demand that adoptions should be driven by individualized “push” factors that are not generalized violence or instability in sending countries but rather the specific needs of particular children.^{xv} Migration is expected to benefit the migrant in some way – by improving conditions of safety, work, education, the extended family’s well-being, or others.^{xvi} International adoption, too, is expected to benefit the child. The demand for such children in wealthier countries complicates this story.

A second complication that the migration lens reveals is that the child’s migration is actually framed as undesirable according to current international adoption norms. Note that the quote above from the Hague Convention refers to “a child for whom a suitable family cannot be found in his or her State of origin.” The Hague Convention explicitly requires that for an international adoption to occur, authorities must “have determined, *after possibilities for placement of the child within the State of origin have been given due consideration*, that an intercountry adoption is in the child’s best interests” (The Hague 1993:Article 4b, emphasis added).^{xvii} The implication is that, if possible, children should remain in their countries of birth. Thus, international adoption is a form of migration that has a very specific end – a child’s placement into a family. Without that end, migration would not be permitted, nor would it be advocated; indeed, it appears here as undesirable, tolerated by international bodies only because it supports the child’s best interests.

In sum, taking a page from the demographic approach to international adoption turns out to be quite revealing. By considering international adoption as a form of migration, we learn that the clear-cut position that adoption should only be about giving a home to a child is perhaps overstated. Just as in other forms of migration, there are many gray areas full of complexity and nuance. Using a migration-studies-inspired approach allows us to identify more clearly what those additional or “confounding” factors are: trouble in “sending” nations, a deep desire for a certain kind of child that international adoption can meet with particular acuity, and an existing infrastructure, among others. In the following section, I take a more explicitly anthropological approach, jumping off from the demographic insight

^{xv}This is resolved in much current adoption practice through the argument that what a child most needs is parents who deeply want to be parents (Berástegui Pedro-Viejo 2006; Charro and Jociles 2007; Dorow 2006; Jociles, Isabel, and Lobato 2008). This formulation allows “demand” to become an acceptable part of the pull.

^{xvi}Studies of child migration concur – even if children travel on their own, it is “framed by the goal of ‘developing’ the children toward an adult destination valued by their families” (Orellana et al. 2001:582).

^{xvii}One implication is that a family is the best place for a child to grow up regardless of the child’s circumstances. Although the preference would be for a child to remain in his or her own State of origin, international adoption prioritizes placement into a *family* over continuity of residence (and culture, nationality, community, and so on).

about adoption as migration to put forth a life course perspective and find out what happens *after* the initial migration.

Anthropology's Life Course Perspective: Quiet Migration or Transracial Adoption?

As most demographers acknowledge, international adoptees fit imperfectly into demographic understandings of international migration. They are technically migrants, of course, because they cross borders and become citizens of new countries. But they are a unique, age-graded, privileged kind of migrant whose relocation is only possible because of how they become embedded in new families and simultaneously excised from their families of origin.

Thus, following demographers' insights to identify international adoption as a form of migration and identifying the source of the disconnect in that equation is only the first step. We now must introduce an anthropological life course perspective (e.g., Bledsoe 2002; Goody 1982) and examine how the experiences of adoptee-migrants and those who caused their adoptive migration (Leinaweaver 2013) have developed over time, related to other changes in their lives and to broader social and cultural transformations. In this section, I review anthropological approaches to life course analysis and draw on ethnographic data (particularly family interviews and textual analysis) from research with adopted Peruvians and their families in Spain in order to build up a depiction of the kinds of life experiences that unfold for such youth.

Nicholas Townsend (1997:100, 105) suggests viewing fertility as "social recruitment," as "not a biological event but a socially constructed relationship of parenthood." Cross culturally, anthropologists have identified many ways besides biological reproduction that families can recruit new members to their folds: adoption, fostering, marriage, blood brotherhood, godparenthood, and reproduction (Bledsoe 1990; Brady 1976; Kottak 1986; Mintz and Wolf 1950; Smith 2004). International adoptions can be viewed as the outcomes of adults' family-building strategies. These strategies are inflected by immigration policies and practices. What now remains is to examine the life courses that emerge from that fertility strategy as migratory act.

As Johnson-Hanks (2002:870) notes for Beti in Cameroon, "What establishes someone's status as a girl or a woman is not having achieved a set of life history transitions but, rather, the role that she inhabits in a given social interaction." The life course perspective developed by anthropologists working on population issues emphasizes social interactions, change, and differentiation (Townsend 1997). How we might operationalize this focus in analytical work remains challenging, but Johnson-Hanks (2002) has proposed an examination of the "vital conjuncture," which she defines as "a socially structured zone of possibility that emerges around specific periods of potential transformation in a life or lives...a duration of uncertainty and potential...when more than usual is in play." Identifying the vital event – the child's adoptive migration – is one important step, but we now must explore what potential futures and possibilities emerge from that event.

The demographic approach to transnational adoption emphasizes that it is a form of international migration but leaves the implications of that observation largely unexplored. From an anthropological perspective, we can contribute the observation that transnational adoption as well as many other forms of international migration can result in new membership in a minoritized community within a dominant society. Migrants often differ from the “unmarked” members of the receiving country in phenotype, language, and cultural practices. For international adoptees, if they are very young when adopted (which is not always the case), language and cultural differences can be minimized. But phenotypic differences remain.

The cases I examine here of *international* adoption from Peru to Spain are also locally interpreted as *transracial* adoption.^{xviii} An analytic focus on migration provokes us to examine the meaning and local interpretations of observed phenotypic difference. The infamous question addressed to persons of color in Europe, “where-are-you-from-originally?” (Beck 2006), implies an underlying assumption that someone who is visibly different from the majority or dominant population must be *from* somewhere else. For migrants, this assumption may accurately describe their history, but for native-born minorities, it can feel like an expression of racism, and for transracially-adopted persons, it can be that and more. The life course perspective allows an elaboration of what this observable phenotypic difference comes to mean for adoptive families and Spanish society. In what follows, I focus on how adoptive parents experience their relationship to a person who appears racially different from them and how adopted youth experience being identified as immigrants.

Race in Spain is heavily predicated on visible difference and on other cues such as place of origin and language abilities.^{xix} Adopted children and migrant youth may share a racial ascription, something which causes anxiety among many associated with adoption. At the beginnings of international adoption in Spain, this observable difference coupled with relatively low immigration rates meant that young children of color were easily identifiable as adopted. As Carmela, the Spanish mother of three Peruvian children, told me, “When they’re little everyone notices them because they’re so cute.” Outsiders, other members of Spanish society, recognize adopted children as kin by reading the racial difference between parent and child and interpreting it as transnational adoption.

The experiences of adolescent, transracial adoptees indicate that migration is an important lens for the interpretation of their experiences. As adoptees grow up, and international migration to Spain has boomed, adoptees may be “mis-identified” as immigrants (Hübinette and Tigervall 2009). I keep “mis-identified” in quotes because, following both demographic tradition and the experiences of adolescent adoptees, they may in fact *be* immigrants. But I think the jarring experience of this “mis-identification” bears examining. International adoptees experience it as mis-identification when they are interpellated as immigrants –

xviii: Indeed some adoptees are not perceived as racially different from their parents. They presumably face a different set of issues. My data are on children who do not resemble their parents phenotypically (see also Ishizawa et al. 2006). Further research is needed into whether adoptees who are not transracially adopted could find affinity with articulating themselves as migrants.

xix: See Nobles 2002 on the complexity of racial categorizations.

when someone addresses them in a particular way, and they recognize that they are being addressed (Althusser 1972).

In family interviews, I collected many examples of such experiences.^{xx} When I asked 12-year-old Tina “If someone asks you where you are from, what would you answer?” she responded “Peru.” Her mother Beatriz chimed in, “And if they tell you you are Spanish?” “Fine.” ““Fine,”” her mother mocked gently with a laugh. I responded that Tina seemed, basically, Spanish to me, in everything except where she was born, and Beatriz was quick to agree. But at an immediate, local level, it seems that Tina knows that when a stranger asks her where she is from, it is a question meant to make sense of the racialized disconnect between her body and her surroundings. When she knows what that question means and responds knowingly, she is interpellated as a foreigner.

Another example comes from a recent article in the Spanish press that reported on an experience that must be very common among the thousands of adopted Chinese-origin girls who live in Spain: Lucia “sometimes goes to a store run by Chinese and feels uncomfortable because she was once mistaken for a salesgirl. If you ask her whether she feels identified when she goes to a store like this or a Chinese restaurant, she says she feels ‘afraid’” (Giró 2012). If a native Spaniard mistakes Lucia for a salesgirl, and Lucia knows that she is the one being addressed, being asked for help with the produce, then she has already recognized that she is identified by others as different, as Chinese, as a potential salesgirl. Beatriz San Román (2013:230) makes a similar point when describing the experiences of transracially adopted girls of Chinese origin in Spain, noting that “as in the word ‘transsexual’, the term ‘transracial’ might contain the experience of inhabiting a particular body as an evident and painful contradiction with one’s own sense of self.”

This “mis-identification” of adoptees as (labor) migrants is made possible by several factors. First is their slow disaggregation from the family group, an independence that comes with adolescence. That is, the older they get, the more likely it is that they could move unaccompanied by a white family member through the streets of Madrid. That absence of a white kinsperson to help “place” the adoptee makes all the difference. Second is the vast increase of immigrants to Spain, many from the same countries or regions as these international adoptees. The Chinese girl described in the newspaper article is a case in point. In 2009, I met a distinguished Spanish migration scholar whose son had adopted a Chinese girl. He opined casually that the Chinese have the right idea: they put their kids directly into the middle classes (i.e., via adoption) rather than sending them up through the lower ranks (i.e., via labor migration). This statement belies the increasingly significant presence of Chinese people in Spain – in 2011 they were the fifth largest of non-EU migrant groups after those from Morocco and the three Andean nations of Ecuador, Colombia and Bolivia (National Statistics Institute 2011:4) – at the same time as it highlights a continuing contrast between adoption and migration, expressed in class terms.

As members of the dominant society interpellate internationally adopted adolescents as migrant youth, the adoptees themselves are in the process of developing their own complex

^{xx}The examples in this section are drawn from Leinaweaver 2013, chapters 5 and 6.

identities. It is an open question for further research how these two processes – identification of difference by self and others – relate and are jointly produced. But the data I collected in Spain suggest that there are also many adolescent adoptees who begin to identify with migrants. Diana Marre (2009:239–240), who has worked with international adoption in Catalonia, notes that some adoptive parents there have reported “that their adolescent children began to make contact with immigrants from their country of origin, looking for ‘their people’ or seeking a sense of belonging, speaking like them and adopting their mode of dress.”

In an interview, a Spanish couple, Diego and Gabriela, told me about their 16-year-old son, Pedro, adopted from Peru. Pedro was, not many months before our interview, “a real rebel... he got involved with a group, a gang,” in Diego’s words. Gabriela clarified: “Like a Latin King type.” Diego went on: “Yes, but it seems like he gave it up since he started going out with his girlfriend and became more centered.” Pedro’s girlfriend is the daughter of Peruvian immigrants and originally came to Spain through family reunification when she was “perhaps eight years old,” in Diego’s estimation. Diego explained that Pedro “dresses – well, you didn’t see it today, but sometimes he puts on earrings, a bandana, and we tell him not to wear them, but I know he puts them on once he leaves the house.... Until just a few years ago, his friends were all Spanish. But now he looks in the mirror, and he tries to identify with the others.”

Pedro’s immigrant girlfriend offered a tempering influence, but Diego was convinced that immigrants had caused the young man’s bad attitude in the first place. He compared his family to another couple with a Peruvian child that live in a northern city of about 25,000 people and said that “[adopted children there] don’t have as much trouble becoming integrated. There are fewer immigrants.” This statement suggests that Diego felt the presence of immigrants made things harder for adopted children. I could not tell whether this was because outsiders think adoptees are immigrants, creating the conditions for a painful misreading, or whether coexistence creates a temptation and possibility of affiliation with immigrants. In either case, however, his statement demonstrates that adolescent youth are being interpellated as immigrants by others, and many of them come to seek out immigrants as friends or romantic partners.^{xxi}

It is difficult to ascertain to what extent the “sudden” desire to be among those who look like you aligns with demographic changes in Spain (i.e., the increase in immigrants) and to what extent it is somehow a consequence of adolescence itself. For Diego and other parents, if adopted children begin to seek out immigrants, it happens at adolescence when they negotiate questions about their own abandonment, about racial differences within their families. As Gailey (2010:51) warns about the United States context, “Adolescents whose parents are inattentive to racism tend to fare ill in these identity-sorting years, having been reared to think of themselves as white and suddenly having to negotiate a world in which they are judged immediately on the basis of skin color.” There is something about adolescence which parents in Spain understand to be tied to the search for identity, not just

^{xxi}Many also respond to this interpellation by rejecting immigrants and wanting nothing to do with Peru; this reaction is also understandable in this interpretation (see Leinaweaver 2013).

in the sense of “who am I?” but in the sense of seeking those who are *identical* in some important way. This is a timely observation, because – as one Madrid-based social worker reminded me in 2012 – this is the time when the bulk of internationally adopted kids, the “boomers,” are on the cusp of adolescence. The challenges observed by the “early adopters” like Diego and Gabriela will only multiply in the years to come.

These examples suggest that the presence of immigrants has potentially significant consequences for adopted teens who come from the same region as do those immigrants. For Diego and Gabriela, the consequences are potentially positive, to the extent that they saw how Pedro’s immigrant girlfriend offered a tempering influence – that is, immigrants can help adoptees to understand where they are from. But Diego and Gabriela also argued that Pedro wouldn’t be going down this particular path if there were no immigrants around. Indeed, Diego’s analysis suggests that a multicultural context is also potentially a *risk factor* for internationally adopted kids.

The suggestion that an adoptee is actually a (labor) migrant – the implied question “where-are-you-from-originally?” – challenges the foundations of adoptees’ presence in the nation. Like other migrants, it references the fact that they came from somewhere else and were transnationally adopted. So it raises the memory of the migratory act, the adoption itself. This implied question indirectly marks the adopted person as different because of having been born elsewhere but also because adopted. That question could also be “just” racism, just an evaluation of the adopted person as racially different. But this too might reverberate in complicated ways for an adopted person because, again, it indexes the potential that they are (most probably) racially different from their parents and other kin in a setting where kinship is supposed to mean racial matching (Bergmann 2011). And it means that they “embody the paradox of having an appearance that is perceived as a sign of otherness inside the social groups they are supposed to belong to” (San Román 2013:240). In sum, these arguments suggest that my analysis of adoption as migration works most effectively for transracially adopted youth – meaning not all internationally adopted youth but also potentially including domestically adopted youth who are racial minorities. Demographers’ insight into international adoption as a form of quiet or unknown migration can ground a productive understanding of transracial adoptions (whether international or not) as triggering a complex process of racialization and differentiation.

Conclusion: Listening to a Quiet Migration

The demographic perspective on international adoption as migration, in its very dissonance with the view of many adoptive parents and professionals throughout the wealthier nations, subtly and incisively indexes some of the issues that many adult transracial, transnational adoptees have raised as they begin to speak about their lives as racially different others in a multicultural global north (see, e.g., Trenka, Sudbury, and Shin 2006). If we view adoption from the perspective of a person who has wanted to be a parent for a long time, it appears as closely related to family making. If we view it from the perspective of a person who has been relocated from one country to another and has grown up looking different, it may appear more closely related to migration and consequently to migrant racialization.

International adoption is, as demographers have argued, “a quiet migration,” one that is instigated by prospective parents (non-migrants) as a family-building strategy. That quiet migration is complicated by the acknowledgment that it is supposed to be in the child’s best interests, yet international policy holds that the ideal would be for the child to remain in his or her country and not migrate. Adopted children over the course of their youth, and with great divergence depending on their own experiences, geographic locations, and characters, may have experiences that draw attention to the ways in which they are similar to immigrants and racialized minorities. Transracially adopted persons may be viewed by others in their society as migrants and may also be simultaneously encouraged by family members to develop affection for their countries of origin. Scaling up further, the nation that incorporates adopted children may technically count them as little immigrants, as is the case in the United States. Indeed, the legal framework of family reunification migration is also used to bring adopted children into Spain (Leinaweaver 2011). Yet, that same nation may develop models of immigrant incorporation that do not incorporate adopted youth, suggesting that this is an imperfect fit.^{xxii}

This approach to international adoption is complicated, messy, and processual, but it captures what adoption represents for those who are involved. It is crucial to acknowledge the ways in which international adoption is simultaneously the outcome of a fertility strategy or a social recruitment to one’s family, *and* a form of child migration that triggers a vital conjuncture, presenting multiple possible futures for how that young adult will come to understand himself or herself and be understood by others within a specific and multicultural social context. To view international adoption as a kind of migration is to gain clarity on how the intersection of mobility with kinship processes and practices is both embedded in, and helps to produce, global and transnational racial formations.

Acknowledgments

Jessaca B. Leinaweaver gratefully acknowledges support from the National Science Foundation under Grant Number 1026143, the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, the Fulbright IIE Program, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) Standard Research Grant, the Howard Foundation, and Brown University, particularly its Population Studies and Training Center (R24 HD041020). She also thanks Nicole Berry, Susan Frekko, David Kertzer, Erica Mullen, Mark Moberg, and the anonymous reviewers for *Human Organization* for their generous suggestions. The article has also benefited from Kristin Skrabut’s excellent literature review. Finally, the author is grateful to all those who participated in this research.

Biography

Jessaca B. Leinaweaver is Associate Professor of Anthropology at Brown University, where she is also affiliated with the Population Studies and Training Center and the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies. She is the author of *The Circulation of Children: Adoption, Kinship, and Morality in Andean Peru* (Duke 2008), which won the Margaret

^{xxii}Still others implicated in international adoption may view the transaction quite differently. Birth parents may view it as a depletion of their own families, perhaps even a decrease in their fertility (Briggs 2012). The nation that lost a child through adoption may view it as out-migration – indeed, may issue a visa to that effect – but yet recognize that it is a peculiar form of out-migration requiring no consent on the part of the migrant. Johansson and Nygren (1991) argue that an analysis of adoption data from China helps explain a part of the “missing girls” phenomenon, in that parents might report daughters as stillborn then place them for adoption, suggesting the powerful political implications of bringing adoption more squarely into our analyses of population issues.

Mead Award. Her most recent book is *Adoptive Migration: Raising Latinos in Spain* (Duke 2013).

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