

“WHO YOU ARE IN THESE PIECES OF PAPER”: Imagining Future Kinship through Auto/Biographical Adoption Documents in the United States

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The phrase *paper pregnant* is commonly used by prospective adopters in the United States to describe “the stage in which a person or couple receives their official acceptance of their application for adopting a child, prior to the formal adoption.”¹ Using the process-oriented language of a developmental “stage” with an uncertain temporal duration, one adoptive mother and blogger wrote in 2010,

The paperwork stage can be equated with the first trimester of pregnancy, except it usually lasts several months more than that. This stage can induce some of the same symptoms of pregnancy (nausea, dizziness, etc.), such as the vast quantity of documents needed to be assembled in order to create an adoption dossier.²

Another prospective adoptive mother clarified: “What it really means is that I have this piece of paper that says I am expecting a baby . . . eventually. I’m pregnant . . . on paper. At some point in the shadowy future . . . there will be a new baby in our house.”³ The descriptor is often used by prospective adoptive mothers, but through the notion of “paper pregnancy,” in which documents become a kind of “prosthetic device,” fathers-to-be can also access a world from which adopters

“have been excluded because of their limited biological role in reproduction” (Sandelowski 1994, 203).⁴

By 2018, a shop on the handmade retail outlet Etsy offered two versions of a ladies V-neck shirt designed for prospective adoptive mothers, announcing “Paper Pegggers” and “Paper Pregs,” respectively. On the latter, a small printed definition of the concept appears below: “adoption in progress.”⁵ At least one shop also offered a men’s T-shirt.⁶ The embrace of “paper pregnancies” among prospective American adopters—a document-based version of what Signe Howell (2006) has described as “symbolic pregnancy” among adoptive parents in Norway—highlights the complex role documents play in the interweaving of futurity and kinned subject formation within the adoption process. Papers help make kin relations imaginable and then real, allowing the paper pregnant to position themselves temporally with respect to an expected transition and resulting kin relation. Through the documents, they become parents-to-be in an American cultural context in which pregnancy, birth, and child development are dominated by narratives of linear progress (Layne 2003). The word *pregnant* itself is defined temporally, deriving from the Latin for “before birth.” According to Carol A. Heimer (2006, 102), whose work investigates the role of paperwork in a neonatal intensive care unit (NICU), documents, especially those that materialize around the birth of an infant, “are particularly important in creating the sense of time and historicity that undergirds our understanding of how a human life unfolds.” Though anthropologists have typically examined documents through their bureaucratic role in mediating relationships between individuals and the state, the announcement of a paper pregnancy is not simply a comment on bureaucratic process, but instead signals the arrival of an anticipatory subjectivity: the formal transition to expectant parent, marked by paper—a sort of pre-kinning. In the absence of more widely (and externally) recognizable biological substance and embodiment, adoption documents become the material that not only transforms kinship but also dictates and marks one’s progress (or lack thereof) along the way to parenthood.

Adoption paperwork mediates and facilitates processes of exchange, interaction, and imagination—the stuff of relationships (merging both substance and code of conduct, in a Schneiderian [Schneider 1980] sense). In advance of the adoptee’s arrival, it is *the* object of circulation and investment, key to the production of institutional identities and roles (Carr 2009, 2010; Stoler 2009, 19). By generating a seemingly neutral political and legal space, the documentary materials of adoption, as “relational objects”—those that specifically “open and control a path of relations toward others” (Martín 2016, 439)—enable social workers, expect-

ant mothers, and prospective adoptive parents to envision the past and future by reading one another through documents, with immense implications for resulting kinship formations. The "birth parent" file and the "adoptive family" profile are representative, standing in for expectant/birth mothers and prospective adoptive families, respectively. These documents are generative, constituting a condition of possibility for both the creation of future adoptive subjectivity and the future of the adoption agency itself. But they are also performative (Riles 2006; Martín 2016)—they do "work." Drawing on participant observation at First Steps, a small private adoption agency where I conducted fieldwork between 2009 and 2016, as well as document analysis and interviews with adoption professionals and prospective adopters, I argue that adoption paperwork is instrumental in adoptive kinning (Howell 2006)—which I am inflecting temporally here as *pre*-kinning and *re*-kinning—through documentary modes of "temporal folding" (Cole and Durham 2008, 12), in which the past and future overlap and become imaginable and actionable in the present.

At First Steps in particular, the rise of new documentary forms necessitated by increasing openness reveals how contemporary adoption documents fold together a range of temporalities, while providing new ways of reading not only the future and past but adoptive subjects as well.

Although adoption paperwork, abstractly conceptualized—as evident in the example of paper pregnancy—does lend itself to narrating a normative sense of linear progress, following its transit through the intimate and bureaucratic process of open adoption (in which kin relations are negotiated before the arrival of the [physical/living] child) reveals the various ways in which documents stretch, compress, enfold, and otherwise disrupt a linear sense of time. Since open adoption threatens to produce *two sets of parents at once* for the same child, documents—through pre/re/de-kinning—split biological kinship from social kinship, relegating the former to the past and announcing the latter as both present and future. In the remainder of this article, I elaborate on how these insights about kinship and temporality fit into the broader historical significance of documents to American adoption, before describing the workings of paper at First Steps specifically, through examples from the birth parent file and the agency's corpus of adoptive family profiles.

THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF DOCUMENTS AND THE HISTORY OF ADOPTION

In a recent ethnographic monograph based on my fieldwork at First Steps, I argue that future-oriented experiences of waiting, apprehension, and speculation

prove central to the American adoption process, which is constituted through a set of interwoven practices of anticipation, economic investment, and observation/surveillance that I term “intimate speculation” (Mariner 2019a). In a series of related articles, I have traced the intimacies and intricacies of domestic transracial adoption through twinned modes of surveillance and monitoring in the ultrasound and home study, which allow social workers to mobilize a penetrating gaze (Mariner 2018); the entanglements of race and kinship evident in white adoptive parents’ care of their Black children’s hair (Mariner 2019b); and the contemporary reverberations of historical racial trauma in the 2018 disappearance of the transracial adoptee Devonte Hart (Mariner 2020). The previous arguments I have developed about the relationship between social inequality and adoption—particularly regarding race, class, and gender—inform the current analysis, but cannot be reproduced here. In what follows, I build on this existing work by elaborating how the specific material form of paperwork helps structure the simultaneous unfolding of time and the renegotiation of kinship within adoption.

Anthropologists have examined the power of documents within a range of contexts: as a material tool of bureaucratic ideology (Hull 2012b; Chelcea 2016), as a mediator of migration and citizenship (Chu 2010; Reeves 2013; Seo 2016; Abarca and Coutin 2018), as an instrument of state surveillance (Scott 1985; Torpey 2000), and as a mechanism linking the politics of historical archiving, memory, and lived experience (Tarlo 2003; Stoler 2009). Existing literature reveals a strong tendency to conceptualize documents and the practices that produce them within the analytic frames of bureaucracy and state control (Hull 2012a). While anthropologists have examined the temporal role of documents in constructing the past through archives and collective memory, less attention has been paid to their production of anticipatory subjects and imagined futures. This disconnect becomes apparent in the history of adoption, in which documents’ significance is usually rendered in terms of their ability to link adoptees to their backgrounds, to vital historical information about selves and pasts. While adoption documents certainly serve to link individuals and their histories bureaucratically to the state, the documents I discuss here are significant for their ability to create newly (p)re-kinned subjects heavily invested in potent imagined futures.

Importantly, paperwork does not simply produce parents-to-be (or not-to-be); it also produces the very social workers who mediate these exchanges. Documents have been integral to the development of American social work expertise since the birth of the profession. The adoption historian E. Wayne Carp (1998, 61) argues that the maintenance of the case record—of which the adoption file is a

type—was “the central task of social workers during the first quarter of the twentieth century.” In addition, paperwork has occupied an extremely contentious role historically for adoptees and parents, primarily due to its utility for revealing or erasing what was taken as a problematic past or origin—in most cases illegitimacy. Tensions emerged notably around access to the adoptee’s original birth certificate, spurred by the Adoptee Rights Movement (ARM) in the mid 1970s (Carp 1998). Adoption documents have since taken on immense political significance as a key to lost histories, identities, and relationships.

In the 1990s and 2000s, a trend emerged toward open adoption—non-secretive arrangements often involving a plan for future contact between birth and adoptive families—and some level of openness is now the primary goal for most domestic adoptions in the United States. It is through openness that adoption reformers have attempted to resolve the notion of a problematic and hidden past. One result is an emphasis on the future, but in bringing the past forward (see also Gray Albert Abarca and Susan Bibler Coutin [2018, 16] on the “retrospective quality” of documents), the linear temporality of normative American kinship gives way to something else: a folded timeline in which past (birth/biological) and future (social/legal) kinship are brought together and made to touch. Since expectant mothers now *choose* prospective parents, new forms of expertise have become necessary to manage and disseminate knowledge. Emphasizing the role of material artifacts in the tension between confidentiality and openness, between known and unknown pasts, the anthropologist Judith S. Modell (2002, 69) adds, “Still, ‘disclosure’ refers not to intimacy or love but to data—files, case records, government documents.” It seems unsurprising, then, that in her discussion of the increasing openness that has come to characterize adoption in the United States, Modell (2002, 1) describes the social practice as coming “out of locked filing cabinets.” Throughout adoption’s history, paperwork has served to control knowledge by shaping modes of remembering and forgetting, via techniques and technologies of transparency and secrecy. Social workers tightly control the information contained in adoption documents, and the stakes for future kinship (or lack thereof) are incredibly high.

Scholars of paperwork have employed the metaphor of folding as a way to bridge the concrete and abstract realities of documents (cf. Reed 2006; Thomson 2012). In their discussion of the importance of children in “figuring the future,” Jennifer Cole and Deborah Durham (2008, 12) define *temporal* folding as “the bringing together of different chronotopes and temporalities”—but adoption documents do not just bring past, present, and future together. They enfold an imag-

ined, and then real, child into a new family—and transform that child’s parents into first/birth/past parents. The practices of completing and exchanging paperwork constitute an important site in which the future is negotiated in the present, and through which certain representations of the past are projected forward. One potent example of this process is crystallized in the FBI background check clearance certificates that must accompany every prospective adopter’s home study. By certifying an adoptive parent’s lack of criminal conduct in the past, these documents serve as evidence of a parent’s ability to conduct his- or herself in a certain way in the present and future. The document renders certain (safe) futures—and corresponding future parenthood—imaginable, by recording an absence of past transgressions, in the name of candor (see also [Mariner 2019a](#)).

Existing ethnographic explorations of adoption-related paperwork have primarily concerned access to the past and movement across national borders. [Laura Briggs \(2012\)](#) describes how, during the Obama administration, the children of undocumented Guatemalan immigrants were vulnerable to being adopted or placed in foster care after the deportation of their parents—insights newly resonant with the recent visibility of the crisis of detention and separation at the border. Using the lens of legal anthropology, [Barbara Yngvesson and Susan Bibler Coutin \(2006\)](#) present a preliminary exploration of adoptive temporality within the comparative context of international adoption in Sweden and immigration and deportation in the United States, arguing that certain forms of paperwork prove instrumental in molding adoptees’ and deportees’ experiences of return, or going “back” to an origin point, a process in which time and space intermingle as social and national borders are crossed. Through the birth certificate, adoptee subjects are (re)constituted in both the past and the present ([Yngvesson and Coutin 2006](#), 178). On return, adoptees and deportees must also confront “selves that might have been” ([Yngvesson and Coutin 2006](#), 181), a reference to futures that never unfolded. In a similar vein, [Briggs \(2012](#), 130) contends that the creation of second birth certificates for transnational adoptees creates the “legal fiction that the birth parents never existed,” replacing one past with another. In the case of adoption from Korea (as well as other examples of closed and/or transnational adoption), agency documents carry a particularly “heavy symbolic load,” as they often constitute the only tangible link that adoptees have to their “distant and irretrievable pasts” ([Kim 2010](#), 142–43). The historian [Arissa H. Oh \(2015](#), 119) has observed how in post-war Korea, formal relinquishment documents, often stamped with lipstick thumbprints by birth mothers, served as “especially poignant memento[s]” for adoptees.

The adoption process highlights the connection between certain documents, which describe and illustrate a present, and notions of the past and future (real or imagined), which are constructed in that present. Central to this process is “the way moments of document creation anticipate future moments in which documents will be received, circulated, instrumentalized, and taken apart again” (Riles 2006, 18). Within the walls and filing cabinets of First Steps, paper served to create social relations, categories, and expectations, all of which existed simultaneously within and outside the legal and official aspects of adoption. Examining two specific genres of adoption paperwork that circulate in open domestic adoption—so-called birth parent files and adoptive family profiles—demonstrates how documents perform temporal folding through (p)re-kinning an imagined child and its parents. For open adoption to work (i.e., for social workers, expectant parents, and prospective adopters to work together to successfully transfer parenthood from one individual or couple to another), both sets of documents must be legible in particular ways: expectant mother histories need to be made incorporable into prospective adoptive family futures, and prospective adoptive family presents need to be rendered into futures imaginable to expectant mothers. This temporal folding determines the outcomes of pre- and re-kinning.

THE ADOPTION ARCHIVE

Before examining specific documents, it is necessary to describe the landscape in which they function and circulate. In defining my objects of analysis in this ethnographic context, I follow Ann Marie Leshkovich’s (2014, 143) dual notion of form(s): (1) “the structure, content, and context around which individuals compose their autobiographies”; and (2) “written documents that require individuals to submit particular details about themselves for official scrutiny and record-keeping.” This definition encompasses a range of adoption documentation, while emphasizing these documents’ materiality as instruments not only of bureaucratic record-keeping but also of communication, interpellation, and imagination—the object of what Ann Laura Stoler (2009) terms “ethno-graphy.”⁷ Leshkovich (2014, 149) describes particular Vietnamese documents as “technologies of self,” alluding to their subject-making power. Parallel to Jessaca B. Leinaweaver, Diana Marre, and Susan E. Frekko’s (2017, 563) mobilization of “homework” within the context of Spanish adoption home studies—performative labor that brings a house into “architectural, aesthetic, and moral” alignment with social workers’ expectations—I use the term *paperwork* to encapsulate the documents themselves, as well as the labor they both perform and contain.

First Steps specialized in transracial adoption in a highly segregated urban context: Chicago. The agency occupied an office in a liminal space between an affluent and majority-white suburb and a very low-income African American neighborhood. As a result, expectant mothers were predominantly African American and low-income (with economic factors being the most-cited motivation for relinquishment), and prospective adopters predominantly white and of higher socioeconomic status. The social workers were all white. I have written elsewhere about the challenges of collecting ethnographic data on the experiences of expectant parents from the vantage point of an adoption agency (an institution interested in relinquishment as a desired outcome), particularly due to the myriad ways they are rendered invisible by the adoption process (Mariner 2019a). Dominic Boyer (2008, 38), contends that this type of access challenge is often a feature, rather than a glitch, of any “anthropology of experts,” noting that cultures of expertise often present obstacles to ethnographic access and require a level of “collegial discretion” (Boyer 2008, 44). However, “inadequacies in ethnographic knowledge,” he notes, “should not be papered over as embarrassments but rather lingered on as prismatic gaps through which the contingencies/limits/opportunities of the anthropology of experts are fully revealed” (Boyer 2008, 44). Because my contact with expectant parents was limited and always mediated by a social worker, the present analysis is ethnographically weighted toward the accounts of social workers, adoptive parents, and the documents themselves. This further supports my contention that these two forms of paperwork function quite differently in the construction of these structurally opposed client subjects.

First Steps was a small agency, not only in terms of staff but also in terms of space. Its two-hundred-some-square foot office housed no less than seventeen filing cabinets: four times as many as the number of employees at any given time. The human beings in the office were easily outweighed by the agency’s volume of paper: what was not spread across desks or stacked at our feet was contained within the aforementioned troop of filing cabinets, perhaps offloading or substituting less readily available human labor. The paper literally altered the physical landscape of the office, choking the cramped space in ways at times unpredictable and even dangerous. More than once, I witnessed social workers trip over placement files left in precarious stacks on the floor, and one shudders to think of the fire hazard produced by the ever-increasing piles of paper.

In the summer of 2013, I watched a social worker give a new intern a “tour” of the filing cabinets, explaining the organizational logic behind the documentation of parents and children. Stella dragged out a high drawer to show Alicia all the

files inside, while explaining that the first few cabinets contained domestic files in alphabetical order (A–R, by the adoptive family’s surname); S–Z were stored in an adjacent room, relocated the previous year because of space concerns. Closed, or finalized, adoption cases were kept separate from open, or ongoing, cases; the closed files lived in a separate cabinet, each folder bound with a thick rubber band. The band literally kept the file/case from spilling open, the materiality of the file mirroring its organizational reality. The top drawer of another cabinet was reserved for applicants waiting to be matched with an expectant mother domestically or with a child abroad—in Stella’s words, those “in the pipeline” or “still in the mix.” The next drawer down stored files from “families awaiting finalization,” which would occur six months after placement of the child. “These people are all in their one-to-six-month thing,” Stella remarked, pointing to the drawer and collapsing people into paper. As the tour unfolded, the temporal strata of the adoption process became discernible. As the files made their way from one drawer to the next, kinship relations transformed. But the documents not only made new forms of kinship possible; they dissolved old ones too.

Several of the myriad forms of paper in the agency’s office were instrumental in the mediation and creation of adoptive kinship, or what [Howell \(2006, 8\)](#) has termed *adoptive kinning*: “the process by which a fetus or newborn child is brought into a significant and permanent relationship with a group of people . . . expressed in a conventional kin idiom.” [Howell \(2006, 9\)](#) identifies three forms of kinning: “to kin by nature, to kin by nurture, to kin by law.” I argue that there exists a fourth: to kin by paper, a process that overlaps with legal kinning, but also transcends it—very few adoption documents were actually legally binding—through the creation of very specific materialities and temporalities. The paper-pregnant adopters described in the opening vignette have an acute sense of the power of these documents, which can cleave social and legal motherhood off from biological motherhood.

For [Howell \(2006, 4\)](#), the process of kinning has an opposite: de-kinning, through which the transnational adoptee:

is denuded of all kinship; denuded of meaningful relatedness whether its identity is known or not . . . By being abandoned by relatives (whether biological or not is irrelevant in this context) and left for strangers to look after, the child is at the same time “de-kinned” by them, removed from kinned sociality.

This nakedness, argues Howell, allows states to exchange these children—and as such constitutes a process unique to international adoption. Similarly, Oh (2015, 118) describes how specific documents “produced an orphan, ostensibly free of family ties, who was available for overseas adoption” from Korea. Domestic adoption diverges from these examples in key ways. While the voluntary surrender or relinquishment of parental rights in the United States prompts a legal version of de-kinning, domestic adoption does not socially denude children of meaningful relationships. In an era of open adoption, while kinship may be stripped legally, domestic adoptees can rarely be considered orphaned. At First Steps, paperwork rendered expectant/birth parents and prospective adoptive parents as acquaintances rather than strangers, and began the process of transforming their kinship relationships to a particular child.

The notion of de-kinning remains useful, however, when considering the ways in which the process of domestic adoption *transforms*—rather than strips—existing kinship, instead fashioning a *re-kinning*. Because social kinning—fostering a sense of social belonging within a family unit—occurred mostly outside the scope of the adoption process as mediated by the agency (i.e., *after* the agency’s work was complete), the transformation facilitated by documents was not simply re-kinning but also *pre-kinning*. As described below, parts of the birth parent file permanently altered a mother’s legal kinship tie to her child, while the file itself rendered certain kinned futures imaginable (and others unimaginable).

BIRTH PARENT FILES

As Stella’s tour of the files illustrated, most of the filing cabinets at First Steps contained placement files: portfolios of information about the adoptive parents, birth parents, and infant involved in a particular adoption. Inside each blue-tabbed folder hid three further tabbed folders, labeled “Adoptive Family File,” “Birth Parent File,” and “Baby File.” The temporal folding of the adoption process was made uniform and legible through each file’s identical structure: each sheet of paper had two holes at the top, secured with two thin malleable metal prongs that held all the other sheets of paper in the file. Unlike a three-ring binder, in which pages can be inserted or removed easily from any particular position in the folder, the placement files were structured such that in order to add or remove a given page, each page that came before had to be removed first, making the review, manipulation, and modification of the files much more linear (and laborious). Though no explicit mode existed for tracing a file’s journey from one filing cabinet to another, no face sheet to record how “far along” a given adoption was, the folders swelled percep-

tibly as birth and adoptive placement approached. An ultrasound image tucked in here. A counseling summary appended there. A stack of intake forms added on the heels of a hefty home study. By the end of the process, a typical placement file was about two to three inches thick.

The arrangement of the documents within these placement files mirrored subjects' temporal involvement in the process: a prospective adoptive family would apply to the agency and complete their paperwork; a woman would become pregnant and be matched with the waiting family via a profile; a baby would be born, surrendered, and adopted. The adoptive family file usually came first in the placement file, and was the thickest, containing the entire home study, as well as all the foster-care licensing paperwork, adoption application materials, and the family profile, which I will discuss in the following section.⁸ All birth parent files contained a uniform and standardized set of thirty-eight documents arranged in a predetermined order according to a standard table of contents. Their organization dictated that they be read in a uniform way. The standardization of the files mimicked the classification and stereotyping of expectant mothers as a group, while their idiosyncratic content individuated them. The last folder in the placement file was the baby file, which was also the sparsest, and usually contained relevant copies of forms found elsewhere in the placement file, as well as the adoption court orders and medical records. The expectant/birth mother stood literally and documentarily *between* the prospective adoptive parents and the adoptable child. Any information on the fetus (early genetic testing, prenatal care, ultrasound records, etc.) would be placed into the birth parent file until the baby was born, a material and symbolic mirroring of the biological reality of reproduction; until that time, the baby file remained empty.⁹ Throughout much of the adoption process, the birth parent file was physically pregnant with fetal documents. As Heimer (2006, 100) notes, "The transition to a separate physical existence is marked with the creation of a separate documentary existence."

The very naming of these documents was imbued with futurity. I have argued elsewhere that the practice of referring to this set of documents—as commonly done in the agency office—as a "birth parent" or "birth mother" file projects a mothering subject more accurately described as "expectant" or "expecting" into an imagined future in which she has given birth and relinquished her parental rights (Mariner 2019a, 28). A similar temporal and ontological argument could be made for the "adoptive family" profiles I will discuss in the following, which in many cases were created by pre-kinned subjects who had not yet adopted. From the perspective of the agency, one became a birth mother not by giving birth, but

by completing the intake forms (i.e., by creating an adoption plan). The paperwork creates the formal start of the adoption plan for the expectant mother, transforming her into an expectant-mother-with-plans-to-relinquish. The adoption plan always already constitutes a future plan. If the adoption paperwork completed by prospective adopters renders them paper-pregnant parents-to-be, the intake birth mother paperwork, by contrast, in formalizing the intent to relinquish, creates the anticipatory subjectivity of a mother-not-to-be.

The physical location of the birth parent file mirrored the legal necessity for a certain documented action by the expectant parent(s) before baby and adoptive parent(s) could be united, namely, the signing of the irrevocable surrenders, which terminated the biological parents' parental rights. This liminal position also reflected the expectant parents' social location with regard to the new adoptive kinship formation, a liminality emphasized by practices of open adoption, which require the simultaneous creation and dissolution of kinship ties between birth family and adoptive family, structured by the possibility of future reconnection. The birth parent file contained the paperwork that initiated the adoption plan, as well as the irrevocable surrenders, which finalized it by terminating all legal and most, if not all, social kinship, thus (p)re-kinning the child and both sets of parents.

These documents could be prognostic. Birth parent files projected the expectant mother's past and present into the imagined future of the child and adoptive family, at the same time that they rendered her a legible subject to adoption social workers and prospective adoptive parents. The files contained medical records, social histories, and self-reported physical descriptions of biological parents, which helped illustrate social workers' and adoptive parents' imagining of the future child. A so-called birth mother contact sheet, which contained information about drug or alcohol use during pregnancy, could help predict possible future complications. It would also record each of her previous births, if applicable, and contain descriptions of any existing children. A socio-medical history of the biological family that showed a history of depression or predisposition to certain cancers could help color the imagined future life of the child. This form read, "It is important that the adoptive parents have this information so that it can become part of their family history." As the expectant mother completed the form in the present, her history would become fused with the already-adoptive family's history, through a child not yet born. The form also rendered the future present for the expectant mother by asking, "What kind of contact, if any, do you want with the adoptive family after placement? What is your current feeling about being

contacted by the child when he/she is an adult?" The use of "the child" rather than "your child" presages the impending legal de-kinning. A separate form recording the expectant/birth mother's address facilitated the future exchange of information.

The file also contained a formal, non-binding agreement about openness, structuring the level of future contact between birth and adoptive families. An accompanying "Letter of Commitment to Contact" would be signed by the prospective adoptive parents and included in the birth parent file. It outlined the terms of the open adoption agreement, in which the adoptive family agreed to send photographs and letters to the birth parent(s) in order to update her/them on the child's progress. This form was not legally binding: "This is an ethical commitment, made in good faith, and we (I) fully intend to uphold it." In practice, openness ranged from regular in-person visits to little or no contact at all. The Illinois Adoption Registry form collected personal information for future search and reunion, in the event that the adoption was or would become closed. The documents in the birth parent file helped determine future family structures, fleshing out to what degree the biological parent(s) would be included in, or excluded from, the resulting adoptive family (i.e., the level of kinning that would take place). They created a coherent biographical narrative of the expectant mother (and to a lesser degree, the father) as a so-called birth parent, before the baby was even born.

In addition to the preliminary adoption paperwork, the birth mother file also contained the surrenders—arguably the most important set of documents in the file—which could not be signed by the mother until at least seventy-two hours after the birth. During my fieldwork, I sometimes served as a witness to the relinquishment of parental rights. In the summer of 2009, I accompanied Stella to a neighborhood on the South Side to meet with an African American mother and father—Tamra and James—who had chosen, primarily out of economic necessity, to place their newborn with a First Steps adoptive family. Seated across from the couple in their living room, Stella cradled a bundle of papers in her lap and explained the relinquishment process. Tamra sniffled and dabbed intermittently at the corners of her eyes. James put his arm around her and sat quietly, listening to Stella explain the "irrevocable" nature of the surrenders. Once relinquished, one's parental rights to a specific child could never be recovered—the properly documented surrenders themselves foreclosed any return or going back. Yet although social workers always referred to the *signing* of the surrenders as the act that terminated parental rights, Tamra's and James's signatures on the forms remained insufficient for a complete legal de-kinning. After five copies of the surrenders were

signed, Stella removed a small tape recorder from her bag, and leafed through her papers in search of the “Checklist of Understanding.” She switched the recorder on and read each statement on the checklist, waiting for a verbal affirmation from the parents (not-to-be) before moving to the next item. Back at the office, she would remove the minicassette from the device, place it in a plastic case, and tape it inside of the couple’s file.

The mandatory recording of the surrenders illustrates the limits of paperwork to accomplish certain goals within the adoption process. However, the emphasis placed on signing the surrenders rather than speaking them—and the associated symbolic significance of the forms themselves—is illustrated by a conversation I had with Stella in 2013 about a mother who had signed and then experienced regret:

And if you sign that and then are unhappy with that, I’ve done something wrong. Well, not necessarily. I mean, there are—I had one situation where I—up-down, everything—brought the family in, had her meet them, you know, blah blah blah. She signed the surrender, and then she said, “Well, I don’t really like them.” . . . You know, all of this spilled out after she signed, and I’m like, “Oh, crap, if you had told me that twenty minutes ago, we wouldn’t be sitting with this paperwork.”

Stella frames the paperwork itself, the physical signed documents, as the obstacle to regaining the mother’s parental rights (in effect, removing agency from herself as bureaucratic expert and gatekeeper). The recorded surrenders (like the required witness signature) constitute a kind of insurance against future kinship claims—they repeat the exact text of the forms, and no one actually listens to them. In this way they function as an extension of the paperwork, rather than their own sensory or material genre.

Similar to the birth certificate as described by [Yngvesson and Coutin \(2006, 178\)](#), after the adoption is finalized, the birth parent file “leads one back to the birth.” Yet even when these documents function as records of past origins, their value is conceived in terms of future contact. For example, when First Steps closed permanently in 2015, staff packed up and moved about 1,700 files to the state capital for archiving. Parents who had adopted felt distraught, unsure how to maintain the possibility of contact between their children and their children’s birth parents: “Where the hell is my file going?”; “It’s such a tangible link and it isn’t there” ([Mariner 2019a, 191](#)). Broadly, the birth parent paperwork is crucial to the adop-

tion process because it starts the exchange, "gets all the engines going," in Stella's words. Stella described this paperwork as "the vehicle" that put the process in motion and moved it in a particular direction. The delivery of the future hinged on these documents. Although the expectant/birth mother may not be physically present or always visible (from the vantage point of the adoption agency), as a documented subject she becomes tangible, material, readable, and archivable for future reference and action. Captured, and in some ways produced, by the file, she becomes a mother to someone else's future child. A future she is instrumental in choosing, one highly mediated by documents.

ADOPTIVE FAMILY PROFILES

"We ask you to prepare a presentation about yourself, a paper presentation," Dotty, the founder of First Steps, told a roomful of prospective adopters in 2013. The presentation to which she referred was more commonly called a "profile" around the office. In the case of domestic adoption, adoptive family profiles provided the representation of the family on which the expectant mother often based her placement decision—they made possible the imagining of certain futures that may or may not include the creation of new kinship ties. Because of the demographic reality of Chicago and the raced and classed dynamics of adoption (Mariner 2019a), these profiles also portrayed a sort of ideal white middle-class family life into which an imagined child could be inserted.

At First Steps, these profiles were documents, in book form, assembled by prospective adoptive parents that told an autobiographical story. Profiles are usually colorful, with many photographs, and contain information about the individual's or couple's home, existing children and pets (if applicable), careers, extended family, and most important, hopes for a child. These are completed in addition to copious amounts of more official and agency- or state-mandated paperwork (like the required FBI clearances) similar to what expectant parents complete (though exceedingly more thorough), but no equivalent to the family profile exists in the birth parent file. Taken as a group, First Steps profiles constituted a visual catalogue of waiting prospective adoptive families. Social workers showed them to expectant mothers to assist them in selecting a family for their future child. They dictated the creation and dissolution of kinship ties by folding the future into the present. The guidelines given by the agency referred to the creation of a profile as a "creative journey," and the completion of these profiles often proved a joyful and artistic (yet also anxiety-ridden) affair. The stakes were high: as one social worker

told a prospective adoptive couple, they could not be “shown” to expectant mothers “unless there’s a book.”

Two other documents preceded adoptive family profiles: guidelines for the profile’s completion, and a form collecting consent to share the profile with expectant parents. The guidelines, evidence of a particular “graphic ideology” (Hull 2012b, 14), offered suggestive statements such as “Catch the essence of WHO you really are” and “Depict yourself and your family doing things you ENJOY.” While birth parent paperwork asked primarily about the past, with gestures toward the future, adoptive family profiles were to depict a timeless present that could be projected into the future by the potential birth parents who would read them. Within certain administrative guidelines, the social workers at First Steps generally encouraged creativity as opposed to conformity, believing that the chosen mode of profile creation communicated something profound about the individuals doing the creating, and that the act of creating the book, the labor, the paperwork, constituted a process both transformative and informative. As a result, profiles displayed a great deal of aesthetic diversity, while remaining recognizable as examples of a particular genre, something akin to a scrapbook. The profiles were a sort of rudimentary form of social media, producing a particular self or selves for social worker and expectant mother consumption. They illustrated clearly what [Johanna Gonçalves Martín \(2016, 440\)](#) has referred to as “the ability of documents to connect worlds.”

The absence of certain kinds of imagery in the profile could be as powerful as presence, particularly in conveying a message about the future. In speaking with one prospective adoptive couple, Barbara, a social worker, used an example of another family’s creative use of empty space: “The one that I thought was really unique was how they [said]—‘This is our story’—and then there was a blank page at the end.” She continued, “But, I mean, she [the expectant mother] will allude to the fact that your story will be complete when a child comes into your life.” The blank page symbolized an unknown future family arrangement to be completed by the addition of the child. It charged the expectant mother with filling in the picture.

One prospective adoptive mother I encountered during my fieldwork, Jeanine, hired a graphic designer. “I think it’s worth investing in something that looks really sharp,” she said when I inquired about the practice. She pointed me to the website of a designer that a friend had used. The going rate for full profile design was \$900, serving as a stark marker of class inequality within a context in which expectant mothers were primarily placing their children out of economic

necessity. These services have since proliferated. The company Forever Family Designs states, "Your adoption journey begins with a book," and the competitor service Our Chosen Child Adoption Profile Design claims to help prospective adopters "stand out from the multitude" by representing them with "beauty, honesty, and creativity."¹⁰

Photographs proved essential to any successful profile. Mary Bouquet (2000, 9) has argued that "as a form of folk art, family photography was and remains deeply involved in constituting kinship through the coherent looking images it produces, which are simultaneously material artefacts that occupy space and demand classification." Knowing that I was adopted, Jeanine emailed me asking for a photo: "So Mark & I have been working on our adoption profile & created a section on people who we know who were adopted. Would you be open to having your photo or maybe you and your parents together? Whatever you feel most comfortable with. What do you think?" Jeanine needed photographs of families that visually resembled what she hoped would be her own future family. In a context in which domestic adoption was often transracial (white parents and a nonwhite child), it was important that my own parents be pictured to capture our racial incongruence. As Barbara told another adoptive couple, "If you have family that have interracial children, you want to include them." After some initial hesitation, I decided to send Jeanine a photograph. About a week later, she sent me a PDF of the entire finished profile. There I was on page 10 (titled "Adoption is in Our Family"—the line between friends and family became blurred within the pages of the profile), smiling out at the reader, standing between my white mother and father, one of those ubiquitous images of transracial intimacy. Underneath, Jeanine had added the caption: "Wedding day for an adopted friend." My photo was one among many, including a group photo of several families Jeanine had helped create during her time as an adoption social worker, and a photo of Jeanine's aunt and adopted cousins. Not only did these photographs serve as proof of the racial diversity already present in Jeanine's "family"; the people of color in them also served as imagined embodiments of the expectant mother's, and thus Jeanine's, future child.

In June of 2014, I received a vague email from Jeanine with the subject "Maternity Leave," asking if I could lead her infertility support group for about three months while she was away.¹¹ "I'm preparing for hopefully one day becoming a mama. Still waiting, but I thought I'd check in first," she wrote. "I figure it will happen sometime this year. I realize that's a large chunk of time to be open to, but perhaps you know you're [sic] availability for the year so far?" I let her know that I would be happy to step in if needed. She called me later that day to tell me

that she and Mark had been “picked” and that the mother was in labor. The birth mother had looked at their profile and decided that they would be the future parents of her child. Jeanine was no longer paper pregnant; her “shadowy future” had arrived. Within this context, Bouquet’s (2000, 16) contention—that “photography does not simply find ready made families, but has an active hand in making them appear”—rings doubly true.

Jeanine’s reference to maternity leave further reflects how prospective adoptive families are often imagined as expectant parents (Howell 2006, 69), experiencing a period of waiting mediated by the profile. Profiles overflow with language of futurity and waiting, and the text is often directed, dialogically, at the expectant mother. Many of the profiles began with a letter addressed “Dear Birth Mother,” indexing the role of the profiles as an initial correspondence, the initiation of a potential kinship, and the interpellation of an already-mothering (and already-relinquished) subject. Deftly combining present and future tenses, one First Steps couple wrote, “We eagerly await the day when we will be blessed by being selected by someone such as you.” This particular profile continued: “None of us can know for certain what awaits us in the future,” but went on to promise the future exchange of paper and knowledge: “Should you wish to be connected to your child in the future through the exchange of letters and pictures, I will be happy to accommodate your wishes.” The prospective mother concluded with, “I look into the future with hope, optimism, and excitement, and I hope that you will share your life journey with me.” This kind of language evokes a sense of intimacy and connectedness absent from paperwork in the birth parent file. Indeed, no correspondence exists there. Another profile read, “We want you to know that we would provide a very loving and secure home for the baby and we are so excited about what the future will hold for us as a family.” The prospective adopters speak, and the expectant mother listens, reproducing raced and classed dynamics of voice and silence.

These profiles attempted to fill the expectant mother’s imagination with an array of potential futures for a child she had yet to birth, at the same time that they posed an implicit argument for her unsuitability as a parenting subject. The letters often situated the expectant mother in the paradoxical role of “selfless” unfit mother by implying a particular kind of “better” future offered by the prospective adoptive parents. One letter read, “You are performing a completely selfless act by choosing what is best for your child’s future by providing him or her security, health, and happiness.” Another letter-writer commented, “We cannot imagine how hard it must be to decide that the best future for your child may not

be with you." In striving to create kinship on the eve of its dissolution, profiles recruited the expectant mother to the role of mother not only of her biological child but also of the child of the adoptive parents (almost in the role of surrogate)—the role of birth mother—and begged for her response: a granting of the request for kinship. In this way the profiles aided in the construction of a dual motherhood, while simultaneously transforming the prospective parents into the parents of this specific—and at the same time, universal—mother's future child. In certain ways, the "Dear Birth Mother" letters resemble other epistolary genres—love letters, for example, which "shape and reflect [the writers'] changing conceptions of their own personhood" (Ahearn 2000, 206), or the letters written by Americans to consular offices and the International Social Service in the 1950s hoping for Korean children to adopt (Kim 2010, 64)—but they also differ markedly, most notably in that they are not directed to a specific individual, but rather must be written to appeal to a range of mothers. There is no written response, just selection, filtered through the social worker. The mother's response is thus limited to surrender/dispossession or no response at all. The profile renders possible the process of adoptive kinning, at the same time that it hopes for legal de-kinning between expectant mother and child. Before the child arrives or the surrenders are signed, these profiles begin the work of *(p)re*-kinning.

While the profiles purported to represent parental fitness (and fit), the imagined future they portrayed was never certain—indeed, adoptive parents constructed these profiles in the face of overwhelming risk of failure. At any given time, there were many more prospective adopters in the pipeline than expectant mothers, and the wait time for a match could top one or even two years. One profile ended the first page with, "We hope you'll keep reading to find out more," alluding to the future of the expectant mother's reading experience, while acknowledging the possibility of a future in which she does not keep reading, which betrayed an anxiety about not being chosen. This dystopic future of the unchosen was very real, and its fruition was rooted not only in the qualities of those hoping to adopt but also in the materiality, the style, the content, and the aesthetics of the profile itself. Stella told me about the occasional profile that missed the mark:

But every once in a while, we get a profile that resonates with nobody. And, when you look at it, sometimes it looks very stilted, it, the pictures are—it doesn't reveal much. And so, people, especially after looking at the others, go, "Well I don't know anything about them." And so, and you think to yourself, "Yeah, and what I know I don't particularly like." So those profiles are

problematic. They don't fly as well, even though they can be very pretty. In a very pretty cover, you know, with everything nice. But it's sometimes, it's just like an empty house.

Stella continued, "I have a Canadian family as well, two women and an older daughter. And their profile just never went. And now they've changed it, and it goes. It's much better. It's more alive." Here she observes that successful profiles, those with "life," are characterized by movement. In his work on anticipatory action, Ben Anderson (2010, 785) observes, "Making the future present becomes a question of creating affectively imbued representations that move and mobilize." As animate and affective objects, successful profiles set adoption processes in motion; they ease and facilitate circulations and exchanges.

This metaphor of life and living paper stands in stark contrast to Stella's comparison of the birth parent paperwork to a machine component. What would it take for a birth parent file to come alive? Or was this a structural impossibility given the ways in which the agency constructed these two very different sets of client subjects? The birth parent paperwork differed categorically from the family profiles, in that the former only contained text (and perhaps an ultrasound). Indeed the birth parent paperwork did not have a "look," or at least not a representational one. You could read the birth mother through it, but you still could not see her. Her forms were not characterized by life, but instead had a ghostly quality, as if she were always already vanishing. Adoptive family profiles, conversely, allowed social workers and expectant mothers to really *see* prospective adoptive families, in living color. At least that was the claim made of successful ones. In a sense, through documents, expectant/birth mothers become rendered as types, while adoptive families are represented by portraits, a process that, as Brian Wallis (1995, 54) has argued in the context of the slave daguerreotypes commissioned by Louis Agassiz, constitutes "representational colonialism." Leshkovich (2014) examines a similar contrast between two forms of autobiographical documents in Vietnam. One (*lý lịch*, or autobiographical statements) parallels the adoptive family profile, while the other (the case file) parallels the birth parent file:

Lý lịch were self-produced, with the implication that the process of examining one's life through this form was itself a means of becoming through the internalization of particular socialist norms and values. The case file, in contrast, locates the creative agency with the social worker, for it is the expert who narrates and assesses the depicted self. (Leshkovich 2014, 152)

In adoption, these two modes of production are always imbricated because of the high level of social worker mediation. Indeed, even when profiles are self-produced, they still pass through the social worker and are shaped and curated by social worker expectations.

Though I was not able to interview expectant mothers about their reasoning for choosing particular profiles (and thus, prospective adopters), my observations and the accounts of social workers suggest a great deal of both idiosyncrasy and intuition in the selection process. Stella and I met with a twenty-two-year-old expectant mother named Lucy in September of 2009. Stella had chosen three profiles to present before we left the agency, based on wait time and various restrictions set by Lucy (single women, no existing children). This was Lucy's third pregnancy and first adoptive placement. She was very quiet, and signed the preliminary papers quickly. She gave each profile a cursory glance, and reported that she did not like any of them. Stella frowned, but Lucy did not elaborate. At an information session in 2014, Dotty told prospective adopters, "They know right away if you're the family, believe me, they know." When one applicant asked Dotty how to predict what an expectant mother would or would not like, she responded, collapsing the applicants into their profiles, "You never know, but it's a mystical thing—when they see you, they know." She mentioned that one mother loved a family's name. Another was taken by the lake near a family's home. "They fall in love with a particular family in the end," she insisted, "and it just happens. They just feel it."

Stella told me that selection was about resonance, but also about a particular imaginary of the future:

Because the essence of these, to me, is that you get the essence of who you are in these pieces of paper. And that people resonate with that, if you can capture it. They get that. And it doesn't matter if they have the prettiest house, and the most furnishings. It doesn't matter if you're single, gay, or whatever. They get that there's something real here, that they—"I could put my child in your world, and that child would thrive."

This is a narration both from present to future and from poverty to middle class (and often, from Black to white). In her information session, Dotty mentioned twice that it would be helpful for families to include information about a college fund and photos of a nursery, indexing both class status (adopters could all afford the adoption fees, which rose to \$27,000 during the course of my fieldwork) and preparation for kinship to come. Thus adoptive parent profiles were charged with

conveying certain realities that in turn predicted an array of possible futures. Such futures are based on the profile's ability not only to ease the applicants' movement through the adoption process and through time in the present but also literally to *move* the expectant mother by prompting a specific negotiation of future kinship based on autobiographical narrative, all under social worker supervision.

CONCLUSION: PAPER HURDLES

Adoption affords an underutilized lens through which to view the multiply fraught interplay between documents, subjects, and futures, and uncovering these intimate temporal dynamics elucidates issues of much wider anthropological concern. For example, [Abarca and Coutin \(2018, 8\)](#) recently examined immigrants' "anticipatory" record-keeping practices in Southern California, where they found that noncitizens' intimate relationship with the state was transformatively "mediated by documents." "The act of collecting papers," they argue, "is a response to uncertainty and an attempt to document deservingness [of eventual citizenship]" ([Abarca and Coutin 2018, 10](#)); in other words, immigrants' archival practices constitute a mode of acting on the future in the present. "By collecting documents," the authors continue, "immigrants who have to contend with invisibility and lack of recognition can aspire to a future when they will have status" ([Abarca and Coutin 2018, 15](#)). By turning back to adoption, we confirm that documents mediate intimate relations, not just between individuals and the state but also between individuals and real and imagined others, and between individuals and pasts and futures. Taken together, American birth parent files and adoptive family profiles demonstrate how adoption paperwork functions across a range of contexts to produce, transform, and dissolve kinned subjectivity and sociality through the documentation of imagined futures and troubled pasts. One day, Dotty said to me:

I won't name the adoption agency, but there's a large one in this area, that demands a great deal from birth mothers and adoptive families, many, many, many paper hurdles to jump . . . and they've lost some business because of it. Because it just seems so, "C'mon, let's get to the real thing here."

Here Dotty notes the ability of paperwork—often considered a defining artifact of social service agencies (the word *bureaucracy* itself deriving from the French for "writing desk")—to distort time by slowing down the process, thereby threatening an agency's future. What the ethnographic examples above have shown is that paper in fact constitutes *part of the real thing*. Indeed, it was only through paper-

work, facilitated by a series of social encounters, that the possibility of adoptive kinship—the basis for the agency's existence—was produced. These documents made the process, and the symbolic pregnancy, feel real for adoption's participants, at the same time that it functioned to delay arrival at the "real thing." They constituted a significant layer of a rich and active archive of adoption material. In pointing not only to the past but also to the future, these documents reveal adoption as a temporally fraught *process* rather than a status or outcome. Through this temporal and ontological origami, both kinship and those thought to mediate and produce it come into and out of being in modern American private agency adoption.

ABSTRACT

At First Steps, a small private adoption agency outside Chicago, social workers spent more time processing paperwork than interacting with clients. In addition to mediating the relationship between individuals and the bureaucratic adoption apparatus, these documents created anticipatory (pre-)kinned subjectivities. Based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out between 2009 and 2016, this article examines the completion and circulation of two different forms of auto/biographical documentation during the adoption process: the birth parent file and the adoptive family profile. These documents played a vital role in the adoption process by simultaneously enabling the creation and dissolution of kinship, through the folding of past, present, and future narratives and possibilities into adoption knowledge and decision making. Aided by the documentary termination of birth parental rights and the imagination of visual and narrative adoptive futures, domestic adoption legally split biological kinship from social kinship, rendering the former past and the latter present/future. [adoption; documents; kinship; temporality; future; social workers]

NOTES

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1. Posted by user fcsuper, April 8, 2007, <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Paper+Pregnant>, accessed February 4, 2015.
2. Chicago Now blog, February 1, 2010, <http://www.chicagonow.com/ay-mama/2010/02/the-stages-of-a-paper-pregnancy/>, accessed February 3, 2015.
3. Adopting Mamas blog, April 13, 2011, <http://www.adoptingmamas.com/2011/04/13/were-paper-pregnant/>, accessed February 3, 2015.
4. Sandelowki discusses this exclusion in gendered terms, describing how sonograms give men access to the world of biological reproduction. It is unclear the extent to which prospective adoptive fathers participate in the discourse of paper pregnancies, though on the other side of the adoption exchange, the terminology of *birth father* is a curious

- way to describe a man who will never give birth and is most often described by social workers in terms of “legal risk” (see Mariner 2019a).
5. <https://www.etsy.com/listing/221907399/paper-pregs-definition-shirt-adopting>, accessed July 18, 2018.
 6. <https://www.etsy.com/listing/590501313/paper-pregnant-adoption-announcement>, accessed July 23, 2019.
 7. The term *paperwork* emphasizes the materiality of the paper, distinguishing it from electronic documentation and communication, which certainly conform to different aesthetic and material standards, and perhaps warrant a different mode of analysis. In this article, I bracket electronic documentation because it was not a major mode of documentation during my fieldwork. Aside from email, the agency functioned primarily in hard copy.
 8. In Illinois, any individual adopting domestically must be licensed as a foster parent by the Department of Children and Family Services. This is a blanket process to assure that both those adopting privately as well as those caring for foster children are “fit to parent.”
 9. “Even before birth a baby has a bureaucratic existence,” argues Heimer (2006, 100). While this holds true for both adopted and non-adopted infants, I would argue that the subjectivities of adopted infants are more highly mediated through these and other similar forms of paperwork. In fact, a common refrain among some adoptive parents experiencing infertility is that they would *not* have had to fill out so much paperwork and jump through so many bureaucratic hoops had they been able to conceive a biological child.
 10. Forever Family Designs Home Page, <http://foreverfamilydesigns.com>, accessed February 28, 2015. Our Chosen Child Home Page, <http://www.ourchosenchild.com>, accessed February 28, 2015.
 11. I am trained as a clinical social worker.

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