Global Families, Inequality and Transnational Adoption

THE DE-KINNING OF FIRST MOTHERS

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For Cleopatra

Acknowledgements

This book has been a long time coming. I first thought it would be a small-scale study of adoptive families like mine. Little did I know then that it was to become much wider in scope, eventually placing women whose children are adopted transnationally centre stage.

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I dedicate this book to first mothers around the world who wonder about the whereabouts of their children.

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Introduction: The Global in the Family

We had been trying for so many years. […] Getting a child brought tears to my eyes. […] Attachment to these children, my husband says this as well, attachment comes within 24 hours. […] Very strong feelings of attachment. […] It's like getting a lapful of gold. […] [We want to give this child] optimal opportunities. […] everything that he could possibly need. (Anna, adoptive mother)

So I had to give up the baby. […] I couldn't bear thinking that I'm bringing this baby to life and then she's going to be miserable and I wasn't going to give her nothing but misery. But so but I could give her life and then give it to somebody who'll give her such a wonderful life, education, everything. […] It's still hurting so much. I don't know what time I'll ever forget it. I just wondered, will my baby one day ask, mom where were you when I started to walk, mom where were you when I started teething (cries). (Simphiwe, first mother)

These excerpts from interviews with a South African first mother and a Finnish adoptive mother I met during the course of my research illuminate the contradictions inherent in transnational adoption and some of the basic issues addressed in this book. Contrary to popular belief, most adopted children are not orphans but have living mothers (or other kin)

in the country of origin (Briggs and Marre 2009, 12; Cantwell 2014, 75; Fonseca 2004, 178; Hoelgaard 1998, 230; Johnson 2012). The emotional landscape of transnational adoption thus encompasses not only joy and happiness, but also sadness, grief and feelings of loss. Given the acknowledged importance of going beyond the principles of methodological nationalism that approach 'the study of social and historical processes as if they were contained within the borders of individual nation-states' (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013, 186), this book examines both ends of the adoption chain, with a special focus on the family of origin. In so doing it draws on and extends previous studies, which in addition to focusing on the adopting family (Brian 2012; Choy 2013; Gailey 2010; Jacobson 2008; Seligmann 2013; Stryker 2010; Wegar 2006) have started to consider the perspectives of the countries of origin at least to some extent, and lately also more comprehensively (Briggs 2012; Dorow 2006a; Dubinsky 2010; Gibbons and Rotabi 2012; Howell 2006; Johnson 2004; Leinaweaver 2008; Marre and Briggs 2009; Volkman 2005), as well as investigating adult adoptees' linkages to the country of origin (Hübinette 2006; Kim 2010) and their journeys back and reunions with kin (Prébin 2013; Yngvesson 2010). First mothers of transnationally adopted children have rarely occupied centre stage in the studies (but see Bos 2007). The book at hand is dedicated to giving space to first mothers, their struggles and concerns.

The interview excerpts also reveal the hidden inequalities between the two mothers, exemplified in the ability to give 'everything' as opposed to just 'misery'. One of the arguments put forward is that adoption is not only about family formation and kinship, it is also about global inequality and social suffering. As both Andrew Sayer (2005, 1) and Göran Therborn (2013, 1) point out, inequality is multidimensional: it is not just about a lack of money and material deprivation, it also influences the chances of living a fulfilling life and forming valued relationships. In the case of transnational adoption, at stake is the ability to be a mother. Furthermore, the receiving and giving of children are linked phenomena. The adoptive family only comes into existence because of the inability of another mother elsewhere to keep her child. Thus, the formation of one family is dependent on the disaggregation of another. As Michael Burawoy (2009, 49–52) suggests, one way of approaching this kind of

interdependence is through the method of connected comparison, which involves connecting the cases in point causally and explicating how both shape and are shaped by larger social structures. Gillian Hart's (2006, 996) concept of relational comparison likewise highlights the connections and mutual constitution of phenomena via the tracing of transnational connections that reveal the taken-for-granted nature of categories. This book, first of all, addresses questions related to the dynamics giving rise to both the adoption and the relinquishment of children, and their interrelations. Second, it juxtaposes the narratives of adoptive and first mothers to show both in a new light, formed in relation to each other. Finally, it illustrates how the practices of transnational adoption as exemplified in these narratives may not only reproduce but also change the structures that gave rise to them. Although firmly grounded in fieldwork among Finnish adoptive parents and South African first mothers, the arguments extend beyond these two countries and shed light on the relations between the Global North and the Global South more generally. In using transnational adoption as a window on the violence and injustice of the global order, and identifying forms of suffering and their causes, the book also makes a contribution to critical social science (Sayer 2011, 216–245).

My perspective could be broadly defined as postcolonial. It may at first sight appear odd to raise a postcolonial argument in the context of certain countries in the Global North, such as Finland that did not have an active role in colonialism. However, even these countries could be understood as having complied with the colonial order and participated in and benefited from the knowledge-construction processes that assigned them a higher place in such hierarchies (Loftsdóttir and Jensen 2012; Vuorela 2009). Postcolonial studies focus on the enduring legacies of colonialism and imperialism, recognising the differential power between the Global North and the Global South and the continuing domination of the South by the North. This includes revealing hidden ethnocentrisms and dominant values, norms and conceptualisations developed from the perspective of the Global North but presented as universal and superior, and imported into the Global South (Bhambra 2014; McEwan 2001; Nieuwenhuys 2013; Rodríguez et al. 2010). An important aspect of this approach is redirecting attention to those who were oppressed by colonial

rule and who are still presented as inferior and as having no agency. In the case of transnational adoption, as Perry (1998) and King (2008/2009) argue, this attitude is expressed in the notion of 'rescuing' children from 'inferior' others to live with 'superior' middle-class Western families. Current practices and legal clean-break procedures that erase families of origin (Yngvesson 2002) totally exclude first mothers from the global and multicultural new families formed via transnational adoption.

Working against such Global Northism, I hope to destabilise some of the received certainties and dominant understandings of transnational adoption in which Global North-centric definitions and evaluations are used uncritically. I aim to avoid using terms such as 'birth mother', which refers only to women whose children are adopted and not to all women who give birth (see Smolin 2012, 315). Emphasising birthing implies that it is others who will become the parents. This perspective is solely that of the Global North, which also tends to focus on children on their own simply waiting for 'better' families rather than being linked to kin networks in their countries of origin (King 2008/2009, 415). Such so-called rescue narratives fail to acknowledge the material contexts in which mothering takes place (Perry 1998, 107). Frequently used terms such as 'biological mother' are also problematic in that all mothering is arguably biological, in other words it involves physical and bodily processes (Hrdy 1999, 57). In using the perhaps contested and more unusual term 'first mother', I wish to change the reference point and to put these women who have so far been left out at the centre of the book. For similar reasons I prefer to use the term 'transnational' adoption instead of 'inter-country' or 'international' adoption. Transnationalism implies transnational engagements, such as interaction and continuous ties across nations (Vertovec 2007). Invoking the idea of interrelations and enduring contacts instead of clear-cut movement from one country to the next, transnational adoption better focuses attention on the fact that adopted children do not come out of nowhere, and that the two ends are connected. As Barbara Yngvesson (2010, 37) expresses it, one meaning of transnational is precisely the simultaneous 'making and unmaking not only the child who is adopted but the nations and families that are involved'. I also wish to avoid the trap of seeing and presenting the first mothers of adopted children in the Global South as a homogeneous group of passive victims,

against whom researchers and inhabitants of the Global North could be elevated as active agents and 'saviours' (see Mohanty 2002).

The concept of 'de-kinning' with reference to first mothers, which is used in the title of this book, extends Signe Howell's (2003, 2006) notion of 'kinning' (with reference to adopters). Kinning denotes 'the process by which a foetus or new-born child (or a previously unconnected person) is brought into a significant and permanent relationship with a group of people that is expressed in a kin idiom' (Howell 2003, 465), but leaves out the simultaneous twin process of undoing the relationship between the child and its previous parent(s). I am also inspired by Claudia Fonseca's (2011) article, which focuses on the multiple ways in which legal plenary (clean-break) adoption contributes to the removal of first mothers from the lives of their children in the Brazilian context. De-kinning in my book refers to the process whereby first mothers become disconnected from their children by law and adoption practice, by social circumstances and sometimes by choice. I pay close attention to black South African first mothers' own descriptions of their aims and reasons and what they reveal about the processes and circumstances that led to the separations. I also focus on the intertwining of kinning and de-kinning, examining the narratives of adoptive parents and adoption social workers in some detail.

In the rest of this introductory chapter I first present an overview of the changing geographies of transnational adoption, going on to explain how unequal global power relations created the phenomenon and how the multifaceted nature of inequality could best be captured. Next, I introduce some analytical tools to facilitate understanding of the interviewed mothers as active agents with personal concerns they are trying to resolve in circumstances not of their own making. After that I give a reflexive account of how the research interviews were produced. The chapter ends with an overview of the whole book.

Africa as a Rising Continent of Origin

Transnational adoption involves the one-way movement of children from the Global South (including post-communist Eastern Europe) to the Global North (Western Europe and Northern America). It first evolved in

the aftermath of the Second World War with a focus on war orphans and the illegitimate offspring of US soldiers in Europe and Asia (Briggs and Marre 2009, 5–8). Christine Ward Gailey (2000, 301) traces the origins to US 'engineered or fostered military juntas or destabilisations of the government' leading to transnational adoptions within five years of the operations, examples being the Korean war in the late 1950s, Brazil in the 1960s, Chile in the 1970s and Guatemala in the 1980s. Laura Briggs connects adoptions from Latin America to the 'Dirty Wars' in the continent and the disappearance of children (Briggs 2012, 160–196). Since the end of the Cold War the focus of transnational adoption has shifted towards 'rescuing' non-orphaned children from 'bad circumstances' and poverty, increasingly to parents with a history of infertility (Briggs and Marre 2009, 12–20).

The volumes of transnational adoptions and countries of origin have changed over the years. In the 1970s and 1980s most children came from South Korea, India, Colombia, Brazil and Chile, as well as Thailand, the Philippines and Sri Lanka (Selman 2012, 4–5). China and Russia both started adoption programmes in the 1990s and have been among the three biggest countries of origin ever since. Transnational adoption from Russia began after the (neoliberal) transition to capitalism, which created inequality and huge concentrations of wealth to a few (Harvey 2007, 28) and has led to millions of 'extra' deaths (Therborn 2013, 7–9). China's capitalist reforms have likewise produced unprecedented inequalities and exploitation of rural migrant labour, which together with the coercive population-control policies are behind the increase in foreign adoptions (Anagnost 2004, 143–144; Johnson 2004, 2012). It is also common for countries to become big sending nations momentarily, such as Romania in the early 1990s. Overall, the total number of adoptions increased: from less than 5000 per year in the 1960s to over 45,000 in 2004 (Selman 2015a).

Countries of destination have remained more stable over the years, with the exception of Spain and Italy that only started to adopt substantial numbers of children in the 1990s but have been among the top five destinations ever since. Numerically most children are adopted in the USA, but France, Canada, Sweden, Norway, Denmark and the Netherlands also receive a substantial number. As Table 1.1 shows, there has been a marked decrease in the number of transnational adoptions since 2004. Most of this downturn can be traced to the fact that the biggest countries

Table 1.1 The top ten countries of destination and Finland in selected years (ranked by number of adoptions, 2003–13)

	2004	2009	2013	2014
USA	22,884	12,753	7094	6,441
Italy	3402	3964	2825	2206
Spain	5541	3006	1191	824
France	4079	3017	1343	1069
Canada	1949	1695	1243	905
Netherlands	1307	682	401	354
Sweden	1109	912	341	345
Germany	749	606	289	227
Denmark	528	496	176	124
Norway	706	344	144	152
Finland	289	187	141	142
Total (adoptions to 24 states)	45,383	29,482	16,156	13,504

Source: Selman (2016a)

of origin, China and Russia, reduced the foreign adoption of children considered the most adoptable by adopters, in other words the youngest and healthiest. The decline has been dramatic from the point of view of all big adopting countries, and even more pronounced in countries with large adoption programmes with China and Russia, such as Spain. It seems that as the demand for small adoptable children remains high in the Global North, adopting countries are constantly trying to find new contacts leading to competition between them. Bigger, more powerful countries have more resources, which frustrates smaller adopting countries. This decrease in numbers has also had different repercussions for adoptive parents and first mothers, as I will show in later chapters. Finland, which has not been among the top receiving countries, is currently on a par with Norway and Denmark.

Table 1.2 presents the numbers of adoptions from the biggest countries of origin. China has reduced its transnational adoption of healthy infants since its ratification of The Hague Convention, which led to domestic adoption being allowed. Domestic adoptions increased as most of the families with a son also wanted to have a daughter (Johnson 2012). The children now being adopted from China are older and/or have special needs (Selman 2012, 7–9). Russia has considerably reduced its adoption programmes partly as a response to reports of cases of severe mishandling

Table 1.2 The top ten countries of origin in selected years (ranked by number of adoptions, 2003–13)

	2004	2009	2013	2014[a]
China	13,418	5012	3406	2774
Russia	9453	4058	1834	458
Ethiopia	1539	4553	2005	983
Guatemala	3425	784	26	32
Colombia	1751	1403	575	382
South Korea	2242	1395	227	499
Ukraine	2048	1505	642	561
Viet Nam	492	1500	295	289
Haiti	1170	1210	546	571
India	1067	710	351	253
Total (adoptions to 23–24 states)	45,383	29,482	16,156	11,298

Source: Selman (2016a)

The figures were calculated from statistics kept by the countries of destination

[a]Figures for Italy are not available, thus the total numbers and the number of adoptions from Russia and Ethiopia in particular are lower than in reality

of some Russian adoptees in the USA (Selman 2012, 10). Russia, in fact, banned all adoptions to the USA in 2013, and has discontinued adoptions to countries that allow gay marriage, such as Finland (Helsingin Sanomat 2015). The decrease in adoptions from China and Russia was partly compensated by an increase in adoptions from Ethiopia, Guatemala, Haiti and Viet Nam. Guatemala, Haiti and Viet Nam have since reduced or momentarily halted their adoption programmes on account of the many irregularities and outright fraud in adoption practices (Boéchat et al. 2009; Dambach and Baglietto 2010; Rotabi 2012), and there are severe doubts about the procedures in adoption from Ethiopia (Bunkers et al. 2012). There are currently more domestic than transnational adoptions in India and South Korea, and the children available for transnational adoption tend to be older and to have special needs (Selman 2012, 9).

As other sending countries have reduced their foreign adoptions, Africa has become the continent to which the Global North is going in search of adoptable children (African Child Policy Forum 2012; Mezmur 2009). Although Africa accounted for only six per cent of all international adoptions in 2003, by 2013 this had risen to 28 per cent (Selman 2015a). A big change in the order of countries of origin has been the rise of Ethiopia to second place in the course of the 21st century. As Table 1.3 shows,

Table 1.3 The top ten African countries of origin in selected years (ranked by number of adoptions, 2003–13)

	2004	2009	2013	2014[a]
Ethiopia	1539	4553	2005	983
South Africa	241	311	222	220
D. R. Congo	15	156	587	240
Nigeria	101	185	243	181
Madagascar	326	39	50	59
Liberia	90	38	15	19
Mali	85	223	13	36
Uganda	18	74	292	205
Ghana	38	121	190	129
Burkina Faso	97	60	73	49
Total (all of Africa)	3053	6511	4438	2694

Source: Selman (2016b)

The figures were calculated from statistics kept by the countries of destination

[a]Figures for Italy are not available, thus the total numbers and the number of adoptions from Ethiopia, Congo and Burkina Faso in particular are lower than in reality

several African countries expanded their adoption programmes in 2013. Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria and Ghana increased the numbers of foreign adoptions. In fact, the Democratic Republic of Congo jumped to fifth position worldwide in 2013 (with 587 adoptions), when for the first time ever there were two African countries within the world's top ten sending countries. After Ethiopia, South Africa sent the most children for foreign adoption during the first full decade of the 21st century (Selman 2015a, b). In addition, Kenya enlarged its adoption programme during the 21st century, and over a hundred adoptions were recorded in 2013 (Selman 2016b). Adoptions from many African countries decreased in 2014 and 2015 due to irregularities in the practices. Congo completely suspended transnational adoption (Selman 2015b), and many countries, Sweden for instance, decided to stop adopting from Ethiopia (Att adoptera 2016, 3). The numbers for 2014 are, however, not completely comparable as the figures for Italy are not available.

The reasons for the global downturn in the number of adoptions thus have something to do with the imbalance between the demand for healthy young children and the supply of such children. This discrepancy has negative repercussions for the practice of transnational adoption. As ethical and

just adoptions cannot always be secured, excessive demand has led to the complete halting of adoptions from some countries. Concerns have also been raised over the new interest in Africa as a source of adoptable children. The combination of widespread poverty and a growing demand for young and healthy children is potentially problematic. For instance, the African Child Policy Forum (2012, 20–21) states in its report, poignantly entitled 'Africa: the new frontier for intercountry adoption', that poverty should not be a sufficient reason for inter-country adoption, and that when it is the main reason families should first be offered support to keep their children. The book at hand will provide new information on some of the implications of this turn to Africa from the first mothers' perspective. Although Finland and South Africa are not among the biggest global players in the adoption field, Finland has been one of the biggest destination countries of South African adoptees since 2010 (and the biggest in 2014) (Selman 2016b), and South Africa has been one of the biggest countries of origin in Finland since 2010 (and the biggest in 2014) (Valvira 2015). Adoptions between Finland and South Africa thus offer an illuminating example of the dynamics between an African and a European country.

Inequality, Global Power Dynamics and Transnational Adoption

Transnational adoption constitutes a form of stratified reproduction (Briggs and Marre 2009), making it possible for some to engage in child-rearing while at the same time making it difficult or impossible for others (Colen 1995). Such stratification implies the existence of uneven power relations and global inequalities in which adopters and first mothers are differentially situated. Therborn (2013) conceptualises inequality as excluding some people from something. Inequality 'reduces our capabilities to function as human beings, our health, our self-respect, our sense of self, as well as our resources to act and participate in this world' (Therborn 2013, 1). He (2013, 49–54) further discerns three different kinds of inequality that interact but are not mutually reducible: vital, resource and existential inequality. Vital inequality refers to socially constructed unequal life-chances of human organisms. It is usually measured

on indicators such as mortality, life expectancy, child health, and hunger and malnutrition. It thus implies inequality that is literally about life and death. Resource inequality points to the uneven distribution of resources to act and includes dimensions such as parental wealth and knowledge, education, income, social relations and power. Existential inequality concerns the unequal allocation of autonomy, dignity and rights related to respect, recognition and self-development. At the heart of this form of inequality are various hierarchies formed on the basis of class, race and gender. As I will show, all three kinds of inequality feature prominently in the first mothers' accounts.

Inequalities are understood in this book to arise from two interlinking processes, both of which have a bearing on transnational adoption practices: the (postcolonial) dynamics between the Global North and South, and the current form of capitalism as predatory neoliberal globalisation. The concepts Global North and Global South have been used to depict the continuing dominance of former colonialist and imperialist nations, currently the affluent countries. This dominance is material in that the Global North benefits from exploitative economic relations with the Global South (Castles 2003, 18), or as Mary Louise Pratt (2002, 29) puts it: 'those "in front" are held up and pushed by those "behind"'. Examples include the extraction of natural resources, agricultural produce, cheap labour, and lately even intimate services such as implicated in the nanny trade from the Global South to the Global North (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003). The terms Global North and Global South as used here point to inherent inequalities in the global order that have generally left Southern hemispheric countries in Africa, Asia, South America and the Pacific poor and underdeveloped, while enabling the rich and developed nations of Europe and North America in the Northern hemisphere to further improve their position (cf. Jolly 2008, 79–80). The divide is, in other words, more relational than geographic, although its geographical scale should also be kept in mind. There is currently a privileged population of approximately 600 million in the North, as opposed to the vast number of 5400 million relatively and absolutely poor people in the South (Connell 2007, 212). In other words, the Global North comprises approximately ten per cent of the world's population.

The dominance of the Global North is also cultural, as postcolonial critics argue, building on colonial racial hierarchies that portray the metropolitan identity of 'the West' as universal and superior (Coronil 2000, 357–358; McEwan 2001). Even though colonialism may be in the past, a similar racial order and connected 'othering' process is still in evidence. 'Othering', as Edward Said (1979) suggests, occurs when the West defines the developing world as its 'other', for example, simultaneously raising itself higher in the hierarchy, which also morally legitimates the West's actions in 'guiding the lesser other' (cited in King 2008/2009, 426). The notion of being inferior may even be internalised by the dominated, creating colonial subjectivities (Fanon 2008/1952). Children in transnational adoption predominantly move from non-white into white families. The implication of such practices is the devaluation of black motherhood and black families in general. Black women are seen as capable of working as nannies of white children, whereas white women are seen as capable of raising and mothering both white and non-white children (Perry 1998, 104–105). Non-white first mothers are considered able to give birth to but not mother their children. Hence, the Global North and South are created in relation to each other, both materially and symbolically.

At the same time, predatory processes of neoliberal capitalism, the basic tenets of which are consumerism, private property rights, unhindered markets, free trade and cutbacks in social welfare, have become global (Harvey 2007, 22, 31–32). The current wave of neoliberalisation, or 'third-wave marketisation', has its origins in the crises of capitalism starting in the 1970s, which coincided with decolonisation, the collapse of communism and the decline of the social-democratic state (Burawoy 2008, 356), incidentally coinciding with the rise of transnational adoption. Neoliberal globalisation is bringing North–South-type relations into countries. There is now elitism in the South, and impoverishment in the North. According to Therborn (2013), it is precisely within-country inequality that has been on the increase recently, as neoliberal globalisation has opened up new opportunities for the elites in the South and the North while creating mass unemployment, worsening working conditions and poverty for the majorities. He also shows, however, that in addition to the extreme polarisation between the richest and the poorest within countries, there is polarisation between the poorest and the richest countries (Therborn 2013, 148–149).

This is in line with David Harvey's theory of neoliberal globalisation as a class mechanism that transfers wealth from the poor to the rich, and from poor to rich countries (Harvey 2006, 43). Harvey (2006, 91) concludes that crises in the accumulation of capital produced a specific mode of accumulation that occurs through dispossession, meaning 'the unceasing search to extend capitalist power to territories, sectors and domains in which surpluses (or favourable natural conditions for the production of surpluses) were not yet incorporated into the circulation of capital'. Dispossession operates through mechanisms such as the commodification of land and labour, increasing private property rights, neo-colonial and imperialist processes of appropriation of assets, and the monetization of exchange. The world is thus connected, but unequally so. Highly mobile capital exploits lower production costs. Consumer power is unevenly distributed, escalating regional inequalities. Instability in capitalist systems with their over-accumulation problems produces a constant need for a 'spatial fix', in other words searching for solutions in other territories, also producing global crises (Harvey 2006, 42–43, 95–108). As Fernando Coronil (2000, 361) points out, the outcomes of these processes, such as social tensions and the weakening of social bonds as capital becomes mobile and unencumbered, are felt in particular within Third World and ex-communist countries. Therborn (2013, 26–27) similarly writes about the social sundering of societies, whereby social webs are torn apart and general levels of trust are extremely low. This is very much the case in South Africa.

The cultural/symbolic side of neoliberal globalisation differs from Global North–South dynamics in that capital is in principle indifferent to race or 'othering', although in practice it tends to operate in conjunction with them. Neoliberal globalisation, however, produces its own system of attributing human value. As Aihwa Ong (2006, 11) points out, the individual internalisation of neoliberal traits assumed more significance in the second wave of neoliberalisation in the 1990s and after. Neoliberalism favours particular subjectivities. As a discourse enhancing individual solutions to social problems it endorses self-reliance, self-management and the optimisation of choices. Individuals are thought of as active agents, and as moulders of their destiny. They are totally responsible for their own lives and have an obligation to be competitive,

efficient and self-reliant in their pursuit of economic self-interest (Ong 2006, 2–6). Whether or not one can be moulded into a neoliberal subject affects the way one is viewed. Those who are judged to lack such neoliberal traits and potential may be considered less worthy, whereas mobile individuals with human capital or expertise are highly valued (Ong 2006, 7, 16). In short, neoliberal globalisation creates winners and losers, who are also treated as such.

The twin processes of Global North–South dynamics and neoliberal globalisation are simultaneously creating an affluent middle class and a demand for babies in order to have a family in the Global North, and families who are faced with multiple inequalities and cannot afford to raise their children in the Global South. Globalisation is also creating divisions and polarisation among inhabitants at both ends and thus among first mothers, too.

Researching Agency in the Global North and South

As Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2002, 264–265) points out, viewing all 'Third World women' as essentially similar with the same needs and reasons for their actions, and as passive victims devoid of agency, has the effect of elevating 'First World' researchers and women to the position of active free agents. Such projections hinder efforts to combat structural inequalities. My intention in the interviews with adopters, and in particular with first mothers, was to avoid such false dualisms and paternalistic attitudes, and at the same time not to fall into the trap of over-voluntarism that isolates women in difficult situations as 'choosers' even when they are 'choosing survival' (Wilson 2011, 317). To this end, I selectively applied Margaret Archer's (1995, 2000, 2003, 2007, 2012) critical realist theory of agency. In this context it is useful to understand agency as 'the ability to choose to do things' (Sayer 2011, 140). Researchers engaged in empirical work have long highlighted the need to conceptualise the role of human subjectivity. Írís Lopez (2008, 142–155) in her qualitative study on Puerto Rican women and sterilisation proposed an 'integral approach' that entails looking at the personal, cultural, social and historical factors

influencing such decisions. Archer's theory has the advantage of providing tools with which to empirically investigate agency while paying attention to the contexts of the action. Finally, as I will show, Archer's theory, based on material from the Global North only, can be used to explicate the differences between concepts developed in the Global North and South, as similar Global Northisms have been found in other 'Northern' theories (see Connell 2007).

Archer's theory hinges on the insight that structure and agency are mediated by the internal conversation or reflexivity of persons. Archer (2012, 1) defines reflexivity as 'the regular exercise of the mental activity, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) context and vice versa'. It derives from specific combinations of personal concerns and social contexts, which vary and hence there are many different modes of reflexivity leading to courses of action and finally to ways of life. A concern is something about which a person truly cares and without which they would experience 'a real loss', 'grief' and 'unworthiness'. Concerns differ from preferences, interests and desires in that they are ends in themselves and more permanent (Archer 2000, 238–240). Contexts refer to social and cultural structures that have already shaped the situations in which people act. People are differently positioned in relation to scarce resources influencing their life-chances. We are also confronted with cultural factors such as norms, values and beliefs. Structures can constrain or enable different actions and have the capacity to enhance or reduce people's motivations to act (Archer 1995, 200–231).

Significantly, Archer's theory does not endorse an individualistic neoliberal conception of agency as autonomous choice cut off from social and economic constraints and cultural environments. These exert their influence through personal deliberations, which tell us what to do and how to realise our concerns in particular contexts through evaluating 'our social context in the light of our concerns and adjusting these concerns in the light of our circumstances' (Archer 2012, 15). Paying close attention to such deliberations delineated from people's own descriptions reveals when there is more structural determinism or agential voluntarism at work (Archer 1995, 196). Investigation of the form that internal deliberations take reveals how people deal with structural constraints

and enablement (Archer 2003, 244). Reflexivity also serves to explain why people in similar objective situations nevertheless may choose different courses of action.

In her own empirical studies, all undertaken in the context of the Global North involving rather privileged interviewees, Archer (2012) distinguishes four modes of reflexivity: communicative, autonomous, meta- and fractured. These modes are flexible although enduring responses to situations rather than fixed qualities of particular individuals. Communicative reflexivity is characterised by a form of internal conversation that needs confirmation with 'similar and familiar others' before action is taken. The ultimate concern of people engaging in communicative reflexivity is in the realm of social relations and family well-being. In their occupational trajectories they 'pay the price' of turning down mobility in favour of friends and domesticity. Autonomous reflexives arrive at decisions in a self-contained manner. They are driven by calculative rationality with ultimate concerns in the realm of work and practical interests. Meta-reflexives are critical of their own deliberations and of the existing social order, and have concerns about values or various causes. If there is conflict between working life and their values they 'pay the price' of leaving, even if this involves downward mobility (Archer 2012, 318, 327). The three corresponding forms these deliberations take vis-à-vis structures are evasion, circumvention and subversion. Reflexivity can also become fractured, in which case the person turns into a passive agent to whom 'things merely happen' (Archer 2003, 299). The fractured are portrayed as being incapable of clarifying what they want or care about, and as not able to design projects or actions that would improve their situation (Archer 2003, 304; Archer 2012, 251).

Archer also links the occurrence of these modes of reflexivity to social orders and their change. Communicative reflexivity is on the decrease, as contextual continuity is giving way to contextual discontinuity and even incongruity. Contextual continuity, or 'traditional' society, entails low levels of change ensuring that practices can easily be transmitted to new generations. Contextual discontinuity, in turn, could be described as a condition of modernity in which processes of change and stasis, continuity and discontinuity, occur simultaneously. It is characterised by geographical mobility and instrumental rationality with means-ends

calculations, and it fosters autonomous reflexivity. Archer maintains that this is now transforming into contextual incongruity in which change is endemic (Archer 2012, 18–46, 58–67).

The question then arises as to how well this theory, which is based on the analysis of a very small number of interviewees in one locality in the Global North, applies to the situation in the Global South. Critics have noted how North-centric views lead to the downplaying of systemic violence and structural constraints in theories (Connell 2007, 63). It is striking how Archer's interviewees constantly appear to be 'paying the price' of 'seeing their projects through in the face of structural hindrances' (Archer 2007, 12). For instance, communicative reflexives are turning down good jobs in order to remain with their families, and meta-reflexives are turning down good jobs if they do not like the values implied. On the basis of these empirical results Archer makes the following abstractions that overemphasise voluntarism: 'As active agents we can determine how much importance we attach to the social within our lives' (Archer 2003, 351–352) and 'The efficacy of any social property is at the mercy of the subject's reflexive activity' (Archer 2007, 12). These abstractions, like the ability to pay the price, only hold in conditions of economic security and general affluence, or perhaps in a welfare state. The majorities in the South cannot afford to pay such prices. It is likely that among the majorities in the Global South (and among the dominated in the North) the strategies of 'evasion, circumvention and subversion' (Archer 2003, 75) will be replaced by being crushed, overwhelmed or overpowered by structures. Becoming fractured may also be very different in the context of the Global South where people are often placed in impossible positions in-between oppressive structural constraints that allow very little or no autonomy of action.

Archer also takes an integrationist stance. She writes about 'the one global society' (Archer 2007, 25), 'the one world' (Archer 2012, 315) and 'the single global society now coming into being' (Archer 2012, 17). The changes leading to increased reflexivity are happening in the Global North whereas in the 'vast tracts of the Southern world' this is not yet the case (Archer 2012, 17). This puts the Global North ahead and the Global South behind but catching up, and portrays them as if independent of each other, thus downplaying their relationality and the effects of

unequal global power relations. As postcolonial critics have pointed out, the relation between the two (or between 'centre' and 'periphery') forms 'a structure of inequality that is constitutive of the centre' (Pratt 2002, 31). Raewyn Connell (2007, 52–53, 60) criticises the idea of the single global society as abstract linkages between all regions, which hides the coercive relations between them and does not see power on a world scale as worldwide domination. The ability of the new meta-reflexives of the Global North (and possibly the elites of the South) 'to experiment, to migrate, to innovate and to elaborate' (Archer 2012, 41–42) is contingent on and backed up by such inequalities. People from the South also migrate, but as unwelcome, enforced migrants.

One consequence of the integrationist approach is Archer's view that structural influences work through shaping the situations in which people find themselves, but do not influence subjectivity (reflexivity) in itself. Internal conversation cannot be 'colonised' by the social (Archer 2012, 67). That would render us passive. However, Archer seems to equate socialisation (and habitus) to socialisation within the natal family, and mainly to the transmission of parental values and expectations (Archer 2012, 81). If we instead understand the term more broadly in the context of unequal power, inequality and systemic violence, the influence of structures through embodiment and pre-reflexive action dispositions becomes understandable. Helena Flam (2010) and Andrew Sayer (2005, 2009, 2010, 2011) developed these ideas further. Flam (2010) explores how the power matrix of society with its inequalities influences people's subjectivity and hence their reflexivity. Following Bourdieu, Flam (2010, 188–189, 198) argues that when the dominated internalise contempt and other negative views of them held by the powerful their self-esteem is affected, leading to 'distorted' or 'blocked' reflexivity. Sayer (2010, 109, 111) aims to combine the analysis of reflexivity and habitus which, interpreting Bourdieu, he defines as 'dispositions, inclinations, expectations and skills which are acquired, especially in early life, through repeated experience of the particular social relations, material circumstances and practices that prevail in that part of the social field in which the individual is located'. Our internal deliberations also reveal such pre-reflexive attitudes and inclinations, as Sayer's examples show. Living and being brought up in material affluence brings with it 'a sense of security, ease and entitlement—a

sense that positions of influence and pro-activity are theirs for the taking' (Sayer 2009, 120). This is in stark contrast to those living in a 'Hobbesian ghetto', who develop 'dispositions attuned to dealing with scarcity, racism, domination and intimidation' (Sayer 2011, 130).

I do not embrace Archer's theory as a whole in this book, but rather apply the basic insight that people's deliberations mediate the influences of agency and structure. Archer's theoretical ideas are used as methodological tools to guide the empirical analyses of the first-person narratives. They tell me what to look for in interview materials and how to look at them. I will thus delineate the concerns and deliberations of adopters and first mothers. In contrast to the integrationist approach, the unequal power relations between the Global North (and adopters) and the Global South (and first mothers) constitute the core of the analytical process. Investigating and comparing the mothers' aims and reasons, and paying close attention to the form such deliberations take, will reveal the influences of these structural factors on their decision-making processes.

A White Adoptive Mother Interviewing Black First Mothers

As a Northern adoptive mother of a South African child I am in many ways implicated in my research. This shaped the research questions from the start, as well as the data sought and acquired. What started as a small-scale study of adoptive families soon changed into one incorporating families of origin. As I knew from personal experience, these children did not come out of nowhere. Later, as the South African part of the research by lucky coincidence led to the establishing of contact with my child's first mother and other kin, I once more enlarged the study and looked for other adopters with experience of making contact with families of origin. By and large my own intimate involvement in the field of adoption was an asset enabling access to data that may otherwise have remained hidden, as well as furthering understanding and interpretation of the materials. At the same time my position as a white middle-class adopter influenced the research in ways that need to be explored. Turning the research lens on the researcher is taken here to mean investigating and revealing the effects

of the researcher's social, political and personal interests and assumptions, as well as her position in relation to those under research (Gillies and Alldred 2002; Mauthner and Doucet 2003). Closely tied to researcher reflexivity is an emphasis on power relations in the research process and issues related to ethical research practices (Guillemin and Gillam 2004).

Finding and interviewing other adoptive parents was relatively easy. I seemed to be bumping into them everywhere. I found interviewees from my child's kindergarten group and the park, via the channels of the adoption service providers, through approaching parents at various meetings of adopters, and going through the list of addresses of families that had adopted from South Africa and asking for interviews. All in all, 30 adoptive families participated in this research. Thematic interviews with the parents were conducted in two phases: half of them in 2006 and the other half during 2010–2011. For the later phase I mainly interviewed families that had adopted from South Africa, and made a special effort to find those that had made some contact with the family of origin. Thus, about half of the families had adopted from South Africa, and the other half from another ten countries. I conducted 21 interviews with adoptive mothers (six of them single), two with adoptive fathers and seven with both parents together. I obtained data on one interview, with the permission of the interviewee, from a student who had conducted it for her thesis, and I interviewed two mothers via email, sending them the questions and themes beforehand and also asking for clarification afterwards. I also met up with one of them later. A few of the families were interviewed several times over the years. All the interviewees were asked to tell their 'adoption story': in other words, I asked them why, from where and how they had adopted their child, how it went and what their life was like afterwards.

The adoptive parents I interviewed were aged between 33 and 55, were fairly highly educated and could be characterised as lower-to-upper middle-class. Most had adopted during the previous five years, but a few had done so in the 1970s or 1980s. The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were conducted at my home, the interviewee's home, my office at the university, or in a cafeteria. The majority of the interviewees were from around the Helsinki metropolitan area or towns in Western Finland, although some lived in the countryside. I also interviewed two leading social workers specialised in adoption. All the interviews were

recorded and later transcribed in full. The adopters either knew about my own position as an adoptive parent, or then I told them. This generally facilitated the interviews as I was seen as 'one of us' who would understand. Several interviewees mentioned that it was easier to talk to me about these issues than to people who were not familiar with adoption. Talking to a fellow adoptive parent is also likely to reduce the effect of the idealisation of family life that may occur when people are asked to give accounts of their parenting. Such idealisations in themselves reveal certain norms of adoptive parenthood. At times I wondered whether some parents might have said more than they realised. I therefore took extra care not to reveal any information that might compromise their or their children's anonymity. In general, the adoptive-parent interviewees and the adoptive-parent researcher were very similar in position.

The opposite was the case in the interviews with South African first mothers, which is why I go into more detail in explicating the production of these data. The first reaction to my plans in Finland and in South Africa was disbelief: 'You won't find them', and 'even if you did, why would they talk about such sensitive issues to a white woman from the other side of the globe?' Luckily, the reality turned out to be different. I came across first mothers through adoption social workers and by visiting homes for pregnant women. I carefully explained the background, the nature and the purpose of the interview beforehand. I told the interviewees that I was a university researcher and was going to write a book on transnational adoption and the experiences of first mothers. I also informed them that I had no official connections with the adoption agencies. The first mothers therefore had no expectations of receiving news about their children, and none of them asked me. The majority of the first mothers I contacted (with the exception of two who refused) talked, and in one of the homes there was even a queue at my door. Even though we discussed difficult and sensitive issues, it seemed that for many it was good to be able to talk to someone. Many said so, and many had not previously told anyone about the adoption or the adoption plan. Two women asked to interrupt the interview, however, because of the painful memories such recollections invoked: I offered all the interviewees this option. They all received a gift of Finnish chocolates as a small token of appreciation for their time.

The interviews were conducted during 2006–2009 at four different locations in South Africa (Durban, Johannesburg, Pretoria and Cape Town). The mothers were from all over South Africa, including some from Zimbabwe. I interviewed a total of 35 'black' or 'coloured'[1] women whose children form the bulk of transnational adoptions: eight pregnant women who had made adoption plans, 24 women who had already relinquished a child and three who had decided to keep their child. I conducted all but three of them in English; those three were conducted in Afrikaans with the help of a social worker. One interview was conducted jointly with the first mother and her social worker/friend, who made an equal contribution. Most of the children were transnational adoptees, although some of the adoptions were domestic. It was often a matter of chance whether the child was adopted locally or internationally. About half of those who had placed a child for adoption had done so at least a year previously (some more than ten years earlier), whereas for the other half the relinquishment was more recent. The ages of the women varied between 14 and 43, the majority being between 19 and 25. The age variation thus resembled the statistics of one of the organisations, according to which the majority of mothers entering their system were within the 19–25 age group. Of all the first mothers staying in this agency's two maternity homes in 2004–2006 (443 women altogether), about 20 per cent were under 18 (but very rarely under 15), 60 per cent were aged 19–25 and 20 per cent between the ages of 26 and 35 (rarely over 35). The vast majority were black women (65 per cent), 15 per cent were coloured or Indian and 20 per cent were white. The other agencies had very few white or Indian women in their systems. The majority of the women had other children apart from the one relinquished for adoption.

The shortest interview lasted 20 minutes, although the majority lasted 30–60 minutes. As with the adopters, all the interviews were recorded and transcribed. They took place at the premises of homes for pregnant women or at the offices of the adoption organisation in separate rooms.

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[1] South Africans themselves still distinguish between 'blacks', 'whites', 'coloureds' and 'Indians' (see Alexander 2006, 24). My interviewees also tended to self-identify with these categories. I am therefore using these terms here, but without any derogatory meaning. I am excluding white and Indian first mothers because their children are not allowed to leave the country for transnational adoption given the many families queuing for such a child within South Africa.

I also conducted some interviews near the first mother's workplace during her lunch break, such as in a cafeteria, or at my home. One first mother brought her other child with her and our children played together in the other room during the interview. I asked the interviewees about their experiences and the circumstances of placing a child for adoption, and about their life more generally. I also interviewed ten adoption social workers (some more than once) employed by the three biggest organisations arranging transnational adoptions, and some independent social workers. All apart from two were white. These interviews were conducted between 2006 and 2009. I have since remained in contact with some of the social workers. The names of all interviewees have been changed.

I was in many ways dependent on the adoption social workers, as 'gatekeepers', in gaining access to the first mothers, and this influenced, to some extent, the kind of first mothers I was able to interview. I found some after visiting four homes for pregnant women in crisis. To my astonishment my first two interviewees were both extremely well educated and relatively well-off university graduates. The social worker in this town thought it best that, for the purpose of interview, she chose and brought the first mothers from the home for pregnant women to where I was staying. As she explained: 'We chose these two girls for you, as the others were from really poor backgrounds. We didn't think they would be useful for you.' Luckily, I was able to visit the other three homes personally and to interview more or less anyone who was there at the time irrespective of their background. Only two women did not wish to be interviewed.

First mothers whose children had been adopted several years earlier were generally very mobile on account of a difficult job or housing situation. The social workers were able to contact the first mothers for three main reasons: first, some had recently relinquished a child and had not yet changed address; second, some were involved in skills-development programmes at the adoption organisation where they could earn at least some income; and third, some had updated their contact information because they hoped for or were receiving information about their child post-adoption. Of the 35 black or coloured mothers, 13 (seven of whom were pregnant) were contacted through the homes, two because they had recently relinquished a child and could still be contacted, six were members of the aftercare skills-development group or a support group for first

mothers, nine were still in contact with the social workers because they were getting or hoping to get photographs and/or letters from the adopters, and two women had placed a child for adoption more than five years previously, and at the time had not wanted any information but had recently come back wanting to know. In addition, three women I met through the homes (two still pregnant and one recently having given birth) had decided to keep their child. I interviewed the four minors who were under 18 at the time at the homes for pregnant women, with the permission of their social worker and mostly in her presence.

It is likely that I ended up interviewing proportionately more women who were still in contact with the social workers because they wanted information about their child, whereas other first mothers may have been more difficult to track down. One social worker, for example, said that she contacted 'the ones that had kept regular contact with me', 'the ones that weren't so mobile' or who had the need 'to continue coming to me'. Moreover, even though English is widely used among black people in South Africa, not everyone understands or is able to speak the language. Because of me the social workers obviously contacted those who could speak English. It is also possible that non-English speakers have fewer material resources at their disposal than those who have had access to more varied language environments, thus the mothers contacted by the social workers were probably not in the worst situations. Nevertheless, these potential biases are balanced to a certain extent by the randomness of the women I met in the maternity homes. Although 35 interviews can never be statistically representative in any sense, it is important to clarify who was interviewed in order to evaluate the range of experiences covered.

Just as in the interviews with the adoptive parents, I did not think I should disguise my position as an adoptive mother from the first mothers. Many had already seen me with my South African daughter. In any case, I openly revealed my position to those who were not aware of it at the end of the interview, and then said: 'I have asked you many difficult and personal questions, now it is your turn to ask me anything you want.' Of the 35 interviewees, 26 asked me at least one question, and about half of those raised several. Giving them the possibility to question me enabled them to focus on someone else's life at the end of a stressful interview

rather than dwelling on their own difficult emotions (see also Edwards 1993, 193–194). They were also able to obtain information from the other side. For many I was the first overseas adopter they had met, and they asked many questions regarding the welfare of the children. Many asked me how I and other adoptive parents handled it. They wondered, for example, whether in situations in which the child misbehaved I felt that she was 'not even my blood'. Likewise, there were questions about the children's feelings. Questions they asked included, 'How do you find the attitude of the children you've adopted, they don't feel like, oh, she is not my mother or?' In other words, they wondered about the durability of ties that are not based on blood or genetics or common ancestors among kin.

Role reversal also shook the power balance of the interview exchange somewhat. Although early feminist beliefs about achieving 'good, honest and reciprocal relationships between the researcher and researched' (Birch and Miller 2002, 92) in this manner were too optimistic, in a small way the first mothers and I as an adoptive mother were able to come together as mothers. Many of the first mothers hugged me or patted me on the shoulder as they asked about my feelings at becoming a mother through adoption. Frequent comments included, 'Yo. It was a good feeling, I think, when you heard that you can adopt' or 'You know, how does it feel when you for the first time you, you're holding your kid?'

Nevertheless, I do not claim that such reversals overcame the power issues. The relationship between adoptive and first mothers is one of highly asymmetrical power emanating from positions of inequality in global relations. Divisions of labour and power between the Global North and South had already positioned us differently (see Ahmed 2000b, 167–171). The fact that I as a researcher (and an adoptive parent) could so easily travel to the other side of the globe is an indication of this hidden relationship. We remained divided and unequal and no amount of role reversal or good will could change the structural features of our positions. The unequal power relations between the first mothers and me may have affected the interview and the data obtained in many ways, influencing the replies in ways that are difficult to estimate. A case in point was when, having interviewed a first mother I was able later on to interview the social worker who had prepared

that particular adoption and had been present at the brief meeting between the first mother and the adoptive parents when they came to fetch the child. The effect of unequal power in this example could be conceptualised as the need of those with less power to censor what they say about the more powerful (Sayer 2011, 162). In this particular interview the first mother described the adoptive parents to me as 'nice', saying 'I could see they were good people'. I learned during the interview with the social worker that this meeting had, in fact, gone very badly from the point of view of the first mother. The adoptive mother interfered in a condescending manner when the first mother tried to hold the baby. The social worker described the meeting as very hurtful to the first mother, who was 'sick, hurt and crying'. She also told me that the first mother never asked about them, she just wanted to have photographs of the child. This incident shows how unequal power may distort the interaction and answers in an interview situation. It may have been impossible to say to an adoptive parent that such parents are terrible and bad people.

Some of the first mothers also took me to constitute a 'nice family' and wished their child could have a family like mine. I felt embarrassed at this, which is connected to the general belief that transnational adoption helps children and that adoptive parents are extra special parents, when the adopters themselves know that they just want to have a family. This contradiction creates feelings of embarrassment and even guilt among adoptive parents more generally. One adoptive mother I interviewed, who had actually met the family of origin, told me she felt guilty every time she raised her voice to the child and had an imaginary discussion with the first mother saying, 'sorry, biological mother'. I, too, realised I was not any better or more able as a parent than most of the first mothers I interviewed. I received comments such as the following.

– Maybe she can be fortunate and find parents like you. You see. Are you married? (Margaret)

– Where are you coming from?

Riitta Högbacka (RH): Finland. And my daughter is here visiting her other country.

– That's nice, that's what I'm also wishing for my baby. […] I wish my baby can also get maybe a nice family, you know. (Simphiwe)

A topic the first mothers raised most frequently was the role of the family of origin. They wanted to know whether we adopters tell the children that they are adopted and at what age. The first mother herself is almost a taboo subject among newly formed adoptive families, and as an adoptive mother I interviewed told me, it would be considered almost an insult to the motherhood of adoptive mothers to ask direct questions about the original kin of the child. The first mothers themselves, however, firmly put this side of adoption on the agenda. Their first questions to me as an adoptive mother concerned the first mother of my child, as exemplified in the following comments by four first mothers. They wondered whether adopters were at all interested in the first mother's side of the story. It is also obvious from their comments that the adopted child is not freestanding, but immediately evokes the question of its parents.

– Do you know her parents? (Bontle)

– Where is the birth mother of your child? (Cindy)

– Okay. But I will like to know, if, do you know the whole story of the mother for the child? (Lerato)

– Okay, so would you be willing to say she had a birth mom and just like find out what's happened? (Lucille)

From my own reaction to one first mother's direct question of whether I had consulted my child about her possible memories of her family of origin, I realised that asking the child may not be a priority of adoptive parents. Hearing this question made me feel very uncomfortable, as I had not raised this with my child. Like most new adoptive parents, I had been advised to start talking to the child about her origins as early as possible. I still remember the first time I tried to explain to her that she had another mother in South Africa. The word 'mother' somehow stuck in my throat and would not come out. I only managed it the second time. After all, I had just been appointed her mother.

– How old your baby?

RH: She is five now, she was two when I got her.

– Okay. She remembers nothing?

RH: Maybe not. […]

– Did you ask her, do you remember your mommy? (Lily)

The first mothers also raised the number one fear of adopters: that the first mother might change her mind and would want to take back her child. This issue was, however, handled half-jokingly. Adoptive parents, on the other hand, often have such thoughts and worries, as will be shown in the chapters to come. Like them, I found myself becoming slightly unsettled at the thought of losing my child.

– Okay, one more thing that I want to know, what if one day you just found out that she is there, right there looking and she wants her child back. What will you do? (Lerato)

– But if now she comes back and says she wants her baby back.

RH: (gasps) Ooooh.

– What are you going to do?

RH: I don't know.

– Because you've bonded so much with her. (Margaret)

The other big cluster of questions concerned race. The South African first mothers wondered about other societies and their racial relations, especially in situations of cross-racial adoption in which a black child would live with white parents. Most of them were concerned about the racism their children would possibly encounter. This, again, is in conflict with the 'official adoption ideology' of 'colour-blind' parenting (Hübinette 2012) to which many adoptive parents adhere. One ingredient of this ideology is that 'a child is a child' and colour does not matter. Hence, many adoptive parents may not be aware of the everyday racism their children encounter outside the home (Koskinen 2015; Rastas 2007; Ruohio 2009), or of their own racial privilege (Brian 2012; Bashi Treitler 2014). The first mothers I interviewed seemed worried about this, which is understandable in the light of South Africa's troubled apartheid past. Almost all of them were surprised that I had not adopted a white child, as they had first assumed. In fact, white children are forbidden under the law to leave the country because so many families within South Africa are queuing for them.

– And how did like your friends, your parents react when you said I'm going to adopt a black? (Sibongele)

– So how is it to raise a black child? From the community don't, uh, hear some different [...] ignorant question or what? (Elsie)

– So, in your country they don't surprise when you adopt, you adopt a black? (Miriam)

My questions to the interviewees about having other children apart from the one placed for adoption and about who raised them were guided by the beliefs and norms of the Global North within the context of small exclusive families with one or two children living at home. The first mothers were shocked to be asked about other children, the most common answer being 'of course' accompanied with a perplexed look. My assumption of difficulties experienced if not all children lived with their parents all the time is evident in the following interview excerpt. The first mother told me that she herself stayed with her mother until the age of three. After that live-in domestic workers like her mother could not keep their children with them and her parents also felt that she ought to go back to the rural area to learn her (African) language and traditions. Consequently, she went to live with her extended family, which is very common in South Africa, as I will show in Chap. 2. I, on the other hand, repeatedly voice my disbelief regarding the functioning of parent–child relations involving separation. The first mother really has to spell it out for me.

RH: And you went, went back with your, uh, sister?

– Yes. I went back with my sister, stay with my sister, and my mom stayed here. She only came home every month end.

RH: Every month?

– Yes.

RH: Once a month? Was it difficult?

– No.

RH: No?

– It wasn't. Every month, it's not difficult. (Sibongele)

The first mothers were equally shocked to learn that I did not have any other children apart from my adopted daughter. For them, within the system of 'the unique African desire for children' (Therborn 2006, 21) it was incomprehensible that a woman my age had only one child. These examples show how hidden assumptions based on the experiences and values of our own society influence our thinking. As I will show in subsequent chapters, ethnocentric understandings also colour the practices of transnational adoption.

Chapters to Come

Before embarking on the empirical analyses, it is necessary to contextualise the experience of adopting and relinquishing a child. Chapter 2 describes the social and cultural structures that influence family life in the Global North and the Global South, and more specifically in Finland and South Africa. It begins with an investigation of the wider adoption system and its legislative basis, and goes on to explicate the socioeconomic contexts of parenting. I also investigate the meanings of 'family' and 'parental care' in the two societies: in order to understand the mothers (and fathers) who were interviewed it is necessary to explore the cultural norms in the wider society.

Chapter 3 investigates the formation of the Northern adoptive family, the focus being on the aims, hopes and manoeuvres of adoptive parents as they navigate the adoption system. My aim is to explore the process through which the adoptive family came into existence. The chapter thus concentrates on the early trajectory of becoming an adoptive family demonstrating the unintended consequences of the laws of demand (for adoptable children) and supply (of such children) for the dynamics of family formation. In order to fulfil their family dreams adopters are required to become rational and purposeful actors in a competitive market. The connections between kinning (of adopters) and de-kinning (of first mothers) are also explicated.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 examine the process whereby the family of origin is disaggregated, starting with the role of adoption social workers as representatives of the wider adoption system. Chapter 4 thus considers how

adoptions are facilitated and investigates the interactions between (white) social workers and (black) first mothers in the context of lacking resources. It also pays attention to the notions of family applied in the adoption process. Chapters 5 and 6 focus on first mothers. Their concerns and deliberations are presented in greater detail and more extensively given the wealth of research on adoptive families and the much lower visibility of families of origin. Chapter 5 addresses the concerns of first mothers and their attempts to realise their hopes in difficult circumstances. It examines the complexities of agency in contexts of vital inequality, revealing the challenges faced by the women. The more nuanced analysis reveals a continuum of positions available to first mothers ranging from the most severe to the slightly less severe. Chapter 6 zooms in on inequalities among first mothers and examines the decision-making processes of those with more resources. A comparison of these two groups reveals the rising inequality within South Africa and the consequent polarisation of families into a small relatively privileged section and the majority facing major livelihood-related problems.

Chapters 7 and 8 investigate encounters between adopters and families of origin, and the potential of such meetings for reconceptualising family and relations between the Global North and the Global South more widely. I consider the nature of such comings together in the context of uneven power. Chapter 7 juxtaposes the perspectives of adoptive parents, adoption social workers and first mothers on meeting and coming into contact with each other, revealing fundamentally different understandings of adoption. Chapter 8 focuses on the influence of time, changing priorities and unequal positions in an analysis of ongoing contacts between adopters and first mothers, and further investigates whether such arrangements facilitate the inclusion of first mothers, and if so, how. The concluding Chapter 9 sketches the contours of a more just adoption system, which would address the distortions caused by uneven power and vital inequality. The findings from previous chapters are interpreted within the frameworks of reproductive justice and transnationalism. Instead of portraying transnational adoption as a privileged individualised choice, proponents of these approaches focus on increasing the range of options for all women. Such a frame thus reveals the connectivity between giving and receiving children via adoption.

2

Adoption and Family in the Global North and South

This chapter contextualises the upcoming empirical chapters with regard to three areas: the institution of adoption, socioeconomic contexts and family systems. The adoption system with its legal regulatory frameworks and its intertwining with local childcare practices sets the parameters for the way adoptions are carried out, which have repercussions for adopters and first mothers. Family making involving any concrete individual always takes place under particular material and societal circumstances, constrained or facilitated depending on the resources those concerned have at their disposal. Furthermore, prevailing cultural ideals and family models shape the situations of these individuals. What is considered good parenting or proper parental care differs across cultures. Even though the cultures of the Global North and South are not monolithic, certain substantially different broad patterns and values are discernible. These are rooted in two very different ways of arranging and thinking about childcare and parent-child relations. They shape adoption practices and the family-making efforts of adoptive parents and first mothers, and by implication affect how encounters between them are managed.

The Institution of Adoption

Transnational adoptions are regulated by a wider adoption system involving the two frequently opposing groups of receiving and sending countries, those at the receiving end having more economic power. More specifically, the system comprises the participating nations and their policies, laws and practices, international treaties, as well as intermediaries such as adoption agencies and social workers implementing the adoptions in practice. Those whose lives are touched by transnational adoption, in other words adopters, first mothers and adoptees, are positioned within this system of regulations and practices.

The major international treaty concerning transnational adoption is the Hague Convention on the Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption (HCCH 1993). The national legislations of many countries such as Finland and South Africa that have acceded to the Hague Convention follow its principles. The main objective is to prevent illegalities and child trafficking and to safeguard the child's best interests. As has been noted (Cantwell 2014), the concept of the best interests of the child is vague, lacks clear criteria and is easily infused with dominant normative values. There is no agreement as to who decides what these interests are. Moreover, they may differ in different life stages. Nigel Cantwell proposes that the best interests of the child be considered within the wider framework of children's rights, the right to be cared for by their own parents in particular (see Cantwell 2014). Although it is stated in the preamble of the Hague Convention that states should take 'appropriate measures to enable the child to remain in the care of his or her family of origin', there are no further references to this in the document. The fact that many countries of origin lack the resources to enable poor families to keep their children has, in practice, led to the tacit acceptance of financial and material poverty as a justifiable reason for inter-country adoption (see Smolin 2007).

The Convention also portrays a certain view of the family. The preamble outlines the family environment in which a child should grow up in 'a permanent family' if 'a suitable family cannot be found' in the country of origin. This in effect evokes the image of a typically Global

North financially well-off and stable nuclear family, leaving out of the picture alternative ways of caring for children such as temporary foster care or care by kin, which could lead to the reunification of the child with the family of origin (see Yngvesson 2010; King 2008/2009, 444–450). Similar preferences for permanence are expressed in the national legislation of Finland and South Africa. The Finnish adoption law defines a 'good' family as permanent (Finlex 2012, 2§). In fact, the text is even more restrictive, defining the suitable family as suitable adopters, thus completely ignoring the widespread practice of informal fostering in the Global South. The Finnish adoption law maintains that international adoption comes into question for a child 'who needs adoptive parents and for whom suitable adoptive parents cannot be found in the country of origin' (Finlex 2012, 33§). The South African Children's Act 2005, which came into force in 2010, likewise strongly promotes 'permanency planning' (South African Children's Act 38 of 2005: Section 229b).

The adoption system currently favours adopters' interests over those of first mothers. Very little attention is given to first parents, who are in effect cut out of the picture. A first mother bringing her child to social workers today is no longer part of the scene tomorrow: what is presented to adopters is solely an adoptable child in the children's home. The Hague Convention and national legislation stipulate the termination of all legal ties between the child and its previous parents, and the establishment of new ones exclusively and irrevocably with the adoptive parents: in other words the child ceases to be the child of its first parents (HCCH 1993, articles 26 and 27; Finlex 2012, 18§). This further prevents contact between the two sets of parents, and the first mother may well receive no information about her child afterwards. First mothers are told that after the adoption it is 'like the child is dead to her' (Yngvesson 2003, 20). Fonseca (2011) and Yngvesson (2002, 2004, 212–216) criticise such exclusivity, pointing out the impossibility of completely severing past ties, and the adverse effects on first parents and adoptees. Such finality influences perceptions of adoption and family relations, and thus has wider effects beyond the legal context: it carves out the contours of (proper) families as having clear-cut boundaries and one set of parental bonds.

The idea of complete exclusivity in the child's family relations is not without tensions, however, and is slowly being contested at least to some

extent. The new adoption law in Finland introduces the idea of openness in the form of post-adoption contact between the child and his or her previous parents, which can be legally enforced if the two sets of parents have agreed (Finlex 2012, 58§). It is nevertheless recommended that contact be restricted to 'such foster family adoptions in which the child has even before adoption maintained contact with his or her biological parents (Adoptiolainsäädännön uudistaminen 2010, 51). Contact is not recommended in 'all or even the majority of adoptions' (ibid. 41). According to Save the Children, which arranges the majority of domestic adoptions, only ten adoptions out of a hundred in the previous ten years were open (Mattinen 2009). This is slowly changing, however, in that there is now more openness (Partanen et al. 2013). South Africa's new Children's Act likewise contains a section on post-adoption agreements, which stipulates that the child's guardian or parent and prospective adoptive parent may enter into such an agreement in order to decide about communication and visitation between child and parent, and about providing information concerning the child (South African Children's Act 38 of 2005, Charter 15, Section 234). Much like the section concerning contact after adoption in the Finnish adoption law, this is thought to apply primarily to domestic adoptions.

Adoption is, furthermore, construed as an individualised, freely made choice. Western liberal law is based on the idea of self-owned, self-authored and agency-exercising subjects whose active choices are guided by their wants, and consent to adoption is an essential part of this legitimating narrative (see the discussion in Coutin et al. 2002, 824–835). The Hague Convention and South African national legislation (South African Children's Act 38 of 2005) both put a lot of emphasis on the voluntary consent of first mothers or parents. According to the Hague Convention (Article 4), such consent must be 'freely given' with no pressure and with no inducements in the form of 'payment or compensation of any kind' and it must be 'informed' as to the effects of such consent. The South African Children's Act (Section 249b) instructs that no 'consideration, in cash or in kind' may be given or received for adoptions, and that 'no person may induce a person to give up a child for adoption'. The focus is individualised: both texts imply that it is other persons who must be prevented from exerting pressure or inducement in trying to influence someone's decision.

The more impersonal structural pressure or force of circumstances is left out. No consideration is given to the 'inducement' or pressure exerted when someone does not have the basic means of survival to raise a child.

Adoption in Finland

In general, Finland represents the Nordic model of adoption. A strong principle within this model is the protection of the parent-child relationship (Dickens 2012, 33–35). Finland thus emphasises family support and strengthening as well as the child's right to his/her family of origin more than the prompt termination of parental rights (Garrett and Sinkkonen 2003, 21). Curiously enough, this policy holds only in domestic adoptions and is not applied in the case of transnational adoption. The number of domestic infant adoptions in 2011 was as low as 35 (Pasanen and Tervonen-Arnkill 2013, 60–61) as opposed to 163 transnational adoptions (Valvira 2015). Temporary foster care is the preferred solution for children who cannot live in the family of origin. The number of children in out-of-home care increased from about 8000 in 1992 to over 18,000 in 2013, with approximately a third in foster families (Lastensuojelu 2013). There is currently a serious shortage of foster families (Hiilamo 2009, 179). An over-supply of parents wishing to adopt thus co-exists with an under-supply of foster parents.

The Nordic model of adoption differs notably from systems in countries such as the UK and the USA, which promote adoption from the domestic foster-care system. It is assumed in the UK that adoption into private families is better than state-subsidised fostering. Domestic adoption has increased in recent years, but at the same time its nature has changed: adopted children are older, are adopted from care and maintain contact with their birth and/or foster parents (Pringle 2004). For instance, in 2013 there were 124 inter-country adoptions in the UK, but over 5000 domestic adoptions from care (Selman 2016a; BAAF 2015). Both foreign and domestic adoption is extensive in the USA: in 2013 over 50,000 children were adopted through the public foster-care system (U.S. Children's Bureau 2013) and there were roughly 7000 inter-country adoptions (over 20,000 in the peak year) (Selman 2016a). Apparently there are African-

American children (who are over-represented) waiting for placement through the foster-care system (Roberts 2006), at the same time as transnational adoptions are being pursued.

The legal and institutional contexts of adopting also differ in Finland and in countries representing a more neoliberal model, such as the USA (Dickens 2012). Whereas there are sizeable numbers of private-agency and independent adoptions in the USA (Gailey 2010, 1–9), independent adoptions that are privately arranged through lawyers or other facilitators are prohibited in the new Finnish adoption law (Finlex 2012). All adopters have to use one of the three accredited service providers. Adoption counselling is compulsory, involving 8–10 regular meetings (with on-site home visits) with adoption social workers, who at the end of the process compile a home study report. Adopters may then apply for a licence to adopt issued by the Finnish Adoption Board, which is subordinate to the National Supervisory Authority for Welfare and Health. After that the adopter's file may be sent to one of the countries of origin in which the service provider has contacts. In the current context of declining numbers of inter-country adoptions, the process can take between three and six years. There are currently queues for adoption, and given the very low numbers of domestic adoptions, most aspiring parents hope to adopt transnationally.

Transnational adoptions in Finland started considerably later than in the other Nordic countries, and the numbers have been smaller. When Sweden and Norway began foreign adoptions in the 1960s, Finland was still sending children abroad for adoption. According to a United Nations survey, as late as in 1971 Finland was (after South Korea and South Viet Nam) the third biggest sending country in the world, most of the adoptions being to Denmark and Sweden (Rautanen 1975, cited in Parviainen 2003, 32). Finland gradually changed from a sending to a receiving country during the 1970s, but the number of adoptions remained small. Transnational adoptions started to increase in the 1990s, gaining popularity as it became more and more difficult to adopt infants domestically (Parviainen 2003, 43–44). The peak of foreign adoptions was reached in 2005 (Table 2.1). After that the number of transnational adoptions to Finland as well as to other receiving states started to diminish. Whereas the total number of transnational adoptees in Finland is

Table 2.1 Transnational adoptions to Finland in selected years

Year	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2014
Number	11	54	102	198	308	160	142

Source: Valvira (2015)

about 4500 (Valvira 2015; Parviainen 2003, 33), the corresponding figure for Sweden is over 50,000 (MIA 2015) and for Norway over 10,000 (Statistics Norway: Adoptions 2014).

Each receiving state has its own blend of countries of origin, for historical and political reasons and sometimes because of personal contacts. Finland holds reliable statistics going back to 1985. The countries of origin sending the biggest numbers of children to Finland in 1985–1999 were Russia, Colombia, Thailand and Ethiopia, whereas in 2000–2013 they were China, Russia, Thailand and South Africa (Valvira 2015). In addition, India and the Philippines were among the countries sending more than 100 children to Finland. The number of adoptees from China decreased after peaking at 140 in 2005, slightly levelling up in the past few years but still only about a third of the 2005 figure (33 in 2014). Russia has also been steadily decreasing the numbers, and in 2014 sent only 10 children to be adopted. South Africa remains one of the few countries sending increasing numbers of adoptees to Finland, and has been the biggest country of origin in this respect during the past few years (37 adoptees in 2013 and 2014) (Valvira 2015). The African turn in adoptions is thus visible in Finland, but involves South Africa rather than Ethiopia. That Finland was able to strike such a good 'deal' with South Africa is apparently attributable to the efforts of a particularly determined Finnish woman who was employed by one of the accredited adoption agencies at the time. According to the South African agency head I interviewed, this lady contacted them before the law change in 2000 and guided them through the process. Consequently, Finland was one of the first contacts to start receiving South African children.

Adoption in South Africa

Given the cultural context of widespread informal fostering and communal parental practices, adoption (as defined by the Global North) is

largely unknown among black South Africans and does not fit easily with local understanding. As I found in my interviews with first mothers and social workers, adoption is widely held to be a 'white thing' in black communities, and is stigmatised as 'selling the child' or 'throwing the child in the dustbin'. Exclusivist adoption differs from the informal fosterage system in significant ways. Within the informal system the mother knows where the child is and can maintain contact with it, and the child usually returns to the family of origin at some stage. None of this normally holds in transnational adoption, and the mother loses all her rights to the child. Transnational adoption is also relatively new in South Africa, starting after the law change in 2000/2001. According to the social workers I interviewed, a change occurred towards the end of apartheid. Whereas almost all adoptions in the 1980s and early 1990s were of white children, and most involved young unmarried women, towards the end of the 1990s black women replaced white women in homes for pregnant women, and there were abandoned black babies in hospitals but hardly any black adopters.

Figures on national adoption within South Africa should be treated with care in that they include step-parent adoptions, which constitute the largest group, followed by foster adoptions (see Mokomane et al. 2012, 351). Unrelated adoptions are subsumed under foster adoptions. According to these figures, the majority of domestic adoptees are white, whereas over 90 per cent of transnational adoptions involve black children (Mokomane and Rochat 2010, 29). As Table 2.2 shows, the number of domestic adoptions has fluctuated, increasing to 2605 in the financial year 2009 only to decrease again to 1240 in 2013: the figure for 2014 shows a slight increase to 1401 (National Adoptions Register 2016). The number of transnational adoptions has remained at around 200 a year, even slightly increasing to 250 in the financial year 2014. During 2004–2009, most South African children adopted abroad went to Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, Denmark and Finland (Mokomane and Rochat 2010, 32), and during 2010–2013 there was also a slight proportional increase in the numbers going to Belgium, Norway and Canada (Selman 2015b). In 2013 most children went to Denmark and Finland, and Finland was the receiver of the highest number of South African children in 2014 (Selman 2016b).

Table 2.2 National and international adoptions in South Africa

Financial year[a]	International adoptions	National adoptions[b]
2004	239	2601
2005	248	2520
2006	256	2560
2007	231	1682
2008	218	1150
2009	293	2605
2010	200	2234
2011	194	1426
2012	177	1522
2013	212	1240
2014	250	1401

The total number of transnational adoptions from South Africa (2000–2014)[a]: 2992

Sources: Mokomane et al. (2012, 348), National Adoptions Register (2016)
[a]The financial year begins 1 April and ends 31 March the following year
[b]Includes step-parent adoptions

It is known that not many black parents wish to adopt, thus a cross-racial breakdown of national adoptions will give some idea of developments in domestic unrelated adoptions of black children. National cross-racial adoptions decreased from around 500 in 2005/06 to around 200 in 2008/09, the lowest recorded number (Figure 1 in Mokomane et al. 2012, 350), and have remained at about 200 per year. In 2014/15 there were 212 cross-racial domestic adoptions, and in 2013/14 as many as 475 (National Adoptions Register 2016). Some of these may involve adoptions that started off as foster-care placements. It could thus be estimated that there are at least 400 adoptions (transnational plus domestic) of black children annually. A comparison with statistics from the Register of Adoptable Children and Prospective Adoptive Parents (RACAP) will allow a rough estimation of how these numbers meet the need for adoption. A total of 472 available children and 323 unmatched parents were listed in RACAP at the end of March 2015; 431 of the children were black (and 37 were coloured), whereas nine parents were black and 194 were white, of which 126 stated a preference for a white child (RACAP 2016). Given that only national adopters are registered in RACAP, it is clear that the majority of the remaining black children would be adopted transnationally.

The number of orphans has increased in South Africa on account of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. According to researchers, of particular significance is the number of maternal orphans, which in 2012 was recorded as 611,000 (Hall et al. 2014, 92). The majority of these children are cared for informally in their extended families, however (Hall et al. 2014, 92). Grandparents also constitute the biggest group of receivers of formal foster-care grants: the number of grant receivers rose from 195,454 in 2005 (Mokomane et al. 2012, 349) to 512,055 in 2014 (Hall and Sambu 2014, 97). The extended families caring for these children have very little incentive to apply for formal adoption, which would, among other things, mean losing the foster-care grant (R830 per month in 2014, equalling USD 70). The grant has helped many black households, and especially grandparents to cope (Seekings and Moore 2013, 10). However, some courts have placed new restrictions on the eligibility of grandparents for such grants, aiming to limit them to cases of abuse and neglect (Seekings and Moore 2013, 9–10).

According to a Child Welfare South Africa estimate, there were 2600 abandoned children in South Africa in 2011 (Gerrand and Nathane-Taulela 2015, 56). Moreover, there were 22,000 children in institutions in 2012 (Department of Women, Children and People with Disabilities 2013, 98). In the light of these figures and of the numbers of maternal orphans and fostered children, the number of roughly 500 children waiting to be adopted in RACAP is very small. The reasons for the discrepancy include the widespread extended family care and the difference in characteristics between vulnerable children and those considered adoptable. Most orphaned, vulnerable and abandoned children are over the age of five, and the majority are in the age group 10–14 (Africa's Orphaned Generations 2003, 13) and may have severe health problems. As such they are not considered adoptable given that the majority of adopters seek very young and healthy children. Two officials employed by UNICEF and International Social Services, respectively, and in charge of monitoring child welfare and inter-country adoption on a global level, have been very clear about this. Both state that most institutionalised children are not healthy young infants of the type that are in demand by adoptive parents. There is, in fact, evidence that there are far fewer wanted children available than there are people willing to adopt them (Cantwell 2003, 72; Saclier 2000, 59). It is likely that RACAP reflects such expectations with regard to adoptability.

Nevertheless, in 2013, 25 per cent of the children registered in RACAP were classified as having special needs (physical or mental disabilities or HIV), whereas less than 20 per cent of the prospective parents expressed a willingness to consider adopting a child with special needs (Blackie 2014, 8–9). As I show in Chap. 3, Finnish parents wishing to adopt from South Africa predominantly hope to adopt young and healthy children.

Although some adoption agencies whose representatives I interviewed primarily arranged adoptions with the consent of the first mothers, over half of the children in RACAP in 2013 were registered as abandoned, as opposed to 40 per cent involving first-parental consent (Blackie 2014, 8–9). It is not always clear what is meant by abandonment, however. The Children's Act stipulates that a child is considered abandoned and available for adoption if the first parent(s) have not been in contact with it for three months (South African Children's Act 38 of 2005, Section 1b). Some of these abandonment cases may thus involve first mothers who have left their children temporarily in the care of others, in hospitals or children's homes, and have not come back within the three months. Other cases involve the more unusual but spectacular abandonment of newly born children in unsafe places, some of which look like late abortions (see Blackie 2014, 47). As discussed later, the 'abandonment' category needs to be broken down. At the moment it seems to subsume attempted or late abortions, leaving one's child with the intention of making a permanent break with it, and leaving one's child temporarily in the care of others with the intention of reclaiming it later (see also Panter-Brick 2000, 21). These have different repercussions for first mothers and for how the issue should be tackled.

The Socio-Economic Context of Adoption

Families in a Nordic Welfare State: Affluent but Desperate to Have Children

On the demand side of transnational adoption, a picture emerges of quite a number of people who are financially secure and live in relative affluence. Finland is a player in the global economy and global capital

markets. As shown in Table 2.3, it enjoys the high living standards and other privileges of Global North countries. Its citizens live longer and with greater material abundance compared to the Global South (GNP per capita of over USD 46,000 in 2012) combined with a relatively equal income distribution (Gini coefficient of 0.26 in 2010) (Table 2.3).

Yet, as part of wider processes of change in the intimate sphere and the decline in fertility there are parents who have the financial means but who, contrary to their wishes, do not have children. The reasons given by Finnish women for postponing child bearing include the lack of a suitable partner, wanting to finish their studies and wishing to establish themselves career-wise first (Miettinen and Rotkirch

Table 2.3 South Africa and Finland compared in terms of development indicators

	Finland	South Africa
Unemployment rate 2012[a], %		
Women	7.1	27.8
Men	8.3	22.9
Expanded unemployment rate 2011*[b], %		
Black women	n/a	52.9
Black men	n/a	39.8
Employment rate 2011[a], %		
Women	68.2	34.9
Men	70.9	47.5
Gini coefficient 2010[a]	0.26	0.70
Rank in Human Development Index 2013[c]	24	118
Gross National Product per capita 2012[d], USD	46,490	7460
Total Fertility Rate 2013[e, f]	1.75	2.3
Life Expectancy 2014[g], 2013[h], years		
Women	83.8	63.1
Men	77.8	59.1
Stunted children due to malnutrition, %[i]	n/a	25

*The expanded unemployment rate includes those who may have wanted to work but did not actively seek employment during the previous month.
Sources: [a]OECD Factbook (2014), [b]Statistics South Africa: Population Census (2011), [c]United Nations: Human Development Report (2014), [d]Statistics Finland: Finland in Figures (2014), [e]Statistics Finland: Births (2013), [f]Population Reference Bureau: World Population Data Sheet (2014), [g]Statistics South Africa: Mid-Year Population Estimates (2014), [h]Statistics Finland: Life Expectancy (2014), [i]Therborn (2013, 15)

2008, 90–91). There are currently queues for both fertility treatment and adoption. Many developments have contributed to the diminishing numbers of adoptable domestic infants, such as the increased incidence and availability of abortion in the 1970s (Parviainen 2003, 46) and the growing acceptance of single motherhood (Pulma and Turpeinen 1987, 229). An important factor is the development of welfare services. The period from the 1960s to the end of the 1980s has been called the period of welfare policy in that it coincided with the development of family-support measures such as income transfers and other services (Harrikari and Satka 2006, 210). As the leading social workers I interviewed told me, poverty or inadequate living conditions are never acceptable reasons for placing a child for adoption in Finland: in such cases social benefits and assistance from the state have to be activated and offered.

The Nordic welfare model places strong emphasis on the values of equality and universalism. The state is responsible for ensuring the welfare and social security of its citizens. This entails guaranteeing a minimum standard of living to everyone. Thus, child rearing is supported by policy and related universal social services and benefits (Eydal and Kröger 2010). Adoptive parents are entitled to more or less the same benefits as other parents. Instead of paid maternity leave, parents adopting a child under the age of seven are entitled to extended parental allowance for between eight and nine months, which they can share. The father is also entitled to nine weeks of paid paternity leave. As in the other Nordic countries, all those adopting from abroad receive a one-off tax-free grant, which in Finland ranges from 3000 to 4500 Euros (equalling USD 3400–5000) depending on the country chosen (Kela 2015). The costs (with travel expenses) of international adoption generally range between 8000 and 18,000 Euros (equalling USD 9000–20,000).

Northern societies are also ageing rapidly, causing alarm over the economic costs and consequences (Chavkin 2010). In subsidising both fertility treatment and transnational adoption, the state in effect supports the family-making efforts of some of its citizens. Adopters, for example, are pre-screened for economic stability and domesticity. Official guidelines for adoption professionals stress that in addition to being 'suitable' as

parents, potential adopters should have a certain material standing. It is stated that 'financial problems should not hinder the child's development' and that 'the family's debts and general economic situation should be estimated in terms of, among other things, whether it is possible for one of the parents to stay at home to care for the child after the subsidised period of family leave' (Opas adoptioneuvonnan antajille 2013, 43). The process of counselling (and selecting) adoptive parents also reinforces middle-class values. The 'good family' in the official guidelines is 'financially stable, has two parents of the opposite sex who are in good health, of suitable ages and have jobs' (Mäkipää 2006, 192).

As noted above, the number of prospective adoptive parents exceeds the number of 'adoptable' children (Cantwell 2003, 72; Saclier 2000, 56–57). This imbalance has widened since 2004/2005. The number of young and healthy children available for transnational adoption has decreased whereas the factors driving the demand for such children have intensified (see also Raleigh and Katz Rothman 2014). Finnish adoption organisations fully share the worries of other countries. Both leading adoption professionals I interviewed were unanimous concerning the imbalance in the numbers of available children and adopters, although they attributed it to improved conditions rather than the other more worrying factors mentioned above. As one of them remarked, there is not much they can do, as 'big resourceful countries' have already exhausted all possibilities and conditions in many countries of origin have improved, leading to fewer adoptions. The implication is that improved situations in the countries of origin constitute an obstacle to the continuation of adoption as usual. Both experts deplored the new difficulties in obtaining adoptable children. One of them also reveals the competitive nature of arranging adoptions.

> It is very difficult to establish new contacts. If you send 20 letters maybe one will be successful. Inter-country adoption has become so popular and countries that have big volumes like the USA and Denmark have already established contacts with all possible sources, and it is so difficult to find new sources. And some old sending contacts have managed to start domestic adoptions and foster-care programmes so that there is no longer a need.

They have dropped out, like Poland and Estonia. (Leading Finnish adoption professional)

The sending countries, too, are aware of this imbalance. The head of a South African agency told me that she had just received a call from one of the Nordic countries saying they 'were desperate to work with South Africa'. The social worker continued: 'She said they are now working with China and China's cut down and now they want Africa.' This summarises the state of affairs: we need adoptable infants and can afford them, and Africa now features as a promising new 'source'.

The Polarisation of Families in Post-Apartheid South Africa

South Africa is a special case of the Global South. It has the characteristics of a developing country with widespread poverty, high unemployment and persistent inequality. Despite its democratic transformation after the apartheid government was abolished in 1994, these patterns are still racially divided. At the same time it is a middle-income country with a steady stream of migrants from elsewhere in Africa, mainly Zimbabwe and other neighbouring countries (IOM 2013, 13). Furthermore, the proportion of female migrants has been increasing, and they currently comprise over 40 per cent of migrants to South Africa (IOM 2013, 14). A comparison between South Africa and Finland on development indicators exemplifies the huge gap between sending countries and receiving countries. Various forms of inequality differentiate the two states: vital, resource and existential. Vital inequality induced by a lack of resources plays a huge role, as evidenced by the differences in income, employment, human development, life expectancy and malnourishment (Table 2.3).

South Africa is also unequal and internally divided, as the high Gini coefficient indicates. According to many researchers, the implementation of neoliberal economic policies after 1994 has perpetuated inequities stemming from the legacies of apartheid and colonialism (Bond 2006; Hart 2008). For instance, the total number of unemployed persons rose by 93 per cent between 1996 and 2005 (SAIRR 2006, 153).

As some researchers have pointed out, the question asked was 'not what capital can do for South Africa, but what South Africa can do for capital' (Saul 2002, quoted in Alexander 2006, 28). These policies have resulted in the severe loss of formal employment (Hart 2002, 688; Seekings and Nattrass 2006). As Table 2.3 shows, unemployment has continued to be extremely high. Moreover, unemployment and poverty patterns are gendered and racialised. In 2012, 63 per cent of black children and one per cent of white children lived below the poverty line (living on less than R635 per month, equalling USD 44) (Hall and Sambu 2014, 94), and in 2014, 86 per cent of the unemployed were black (Statistics South Africa: Quarterly Labour Force Survey 2014, xiv). Unemployment is far worse among black women in particular, with an expanded unemployment rate of over 50 per cent in 2011. Expanded unemployment also includes those who would have liked to work but were discouraged by the total lack of jobs and did not actively seek employment during the previous month. In the view of some researchers it better reflects the actual situation in South Africa: analyses of new extensive data indicate that those who are 'searching' for work according to the official definition are no more likely to find jobs than those who are 'non-searching', and that in many cases jobs are found via social networks, and not through official channels (Posel et al. 2013).

Both unequal geographical development and the sharpening of class-based divisions within countries have accelerated during the current era of neoliberal global capitalism (Harvey 2006; Therborn 2013). Jeremy Seekings and Nicoli Nattrass (2006, 314) suggest that the two most striking features of post-apartheid South Africa are the twin processes of massive, increasing unemployment and the creation of a multiracial elite. Growth in unemployment has deepened inequality within black South Africans. As they show, there is an increasing division between those with good permanent jobs and education and those with no skills and no employment. The deracialization of welfare and labour-market policies by means of affirmative action and economic advancement among the black population, for example, has resulted in a new and rapidly expanding multiracial elite. Affirmative action, which was designed to fast-track black people into higher-paid occupations, contributed to the growth in higher-earning occupations as economic empowerment advanced the

expansion of black entrepreneurship and business ownership. Although these policies opened up new economic opportunities for some black people (including women to a certain extent) they increased inequality within the black population (Seekings and Nattrass 2006, 300–375) and are thus not very efficient in fighting poverty and inequality. The problem is the shortage of skills and of good-quality education, on account of which only a few people compete for upper-level jobs, while there is an over-supply of low-skilled individuals competing for the scarce low-skilled jobs (van deer Berg 2014). These developments have resulted in the polarisation of families, and in particular have aggravated the plight of black women who struggle to support their children.

Although there is no unemployment allowance, South Africa's social grant system is exceptional in the African context (Lund 2006; Seekings and Moore 2013). The child-support grant, which although low in monetary value (R320 equalling about 27 USD per month in 2014), is extensive in its reach. From the perspective of families and child rearing the state old-age grant (R1350 equalling 113 USD per month in 2014) is of particular importance (South African government info 2014): it is available to women from the age of 60, and the age at which men become eligible has recently been lowered from 65 to 60 (Seekings and Moore 2013, 12). It could be concluded from these figures that given the lack of any general unemployment benefits and the inadequacy of the child-support grant, finding employment and/or support from wider kin networks is vital for survival. The figures also, by implication, highlight the role of the relatively generous old-age grant in parenting and family life: grandmothers are not dependents or a burden, but with their grants they ensure the survival of families (Seekings 2008, 24).

In addition to race and, increasingly, class, oppressive gender systems that have tended to disadvantage women also affect black women (Bower 2014; Walker 1995, 424). Sexual violence is widespread in South Africa, stemming from the violence and dislocation that characterised apartheid (Therborn 2006, 36). The incidence of rape is the highest in the world. According to estimates (which include estimates of unreported cases), between one and two million women and children were raped in South Africa in 2013 (Bower 2014, 111), in a population of about 52 million. The number of reported sexual offences in 2010 was 66,000, of which 56,000 were rape;

furthermore, 42 per cent of reported sexual offences were against children and young people under the age of 18 (SAPS 2010/2011, 5, 10, 12).

South Africa's HIV/AIDS pandemic is the most extensive in the world: in 2014, an estimated 10.2 per cent of the total population was HIV-positive, in other words 5.5 million people (Statistics South Africa: Mid-Year Population Estimates 2014, 7). However, access to antiretroviral therapies has been extended (Richey 2011): in 2012 there was 80-per-cent coverage of antiretroviral therapy in South Africa, as opposed to 63 per cent for the African region as a whole (WHO: World Health Statistics 2014, 113). Life expectancy in 2014 was estimated at 63.1 years for South African women and 59.1 for men, compared to 83.8 for Finnish women and 77.8 for Finnish men in 2013 (Table 2.3). In other words, people in the Global North live 20 years longer, on average, than people in the Global South. Nevertheless, life expectancy in South Africa has risen in recent years as antiretroviral treatment has become increasingly available and infant-mortality rates have fallen.

Abortion was legalised in South Africa in 1997, and is widely practised, although the ratio is not as high as in Finland, for example: in 2012 the proportion of abortions per 1000 women aged 15–44 was 10.3 in Finland and 6.5 in South Africa (United Nations: Abortion Policies and Reproductive Health around the World 2014, 42, 38). Although contraceptives are available from public clinics in South Africa, teenage pregnancies are more frequent than in Finland, albeit much lower than in other African countries. In 2006–2011 the adolescent fertility rate (births per 1000 girls aged 15–19) was eight in Finland and 54 in South Africa, as opposed to 114 in the whole African region (WHO: World Health Statistics 2014, 169, 173).

Family Systems in the Global North and South

The Exclusive Family of the Global North: A Child Belongs to One Set of Parents

Therborn (2004, 11) describes world family systems as geocultures, meaning 'institutions or structures taking their colouring from the customs and

traditions, from the history of a particular area, a cultural wrapping which may remain after structural, institutional change, leaving imprints on the new institution'. The Euro-American family system that is prevalent in the Global North exhibits certain features that distinguish it from other global family systems, such as the (Sub-Saharan) African system based on descent (Therborn 2004, 11). The Euro-American system is based on the centrality of the conjugal couple and the recognition of kinship relations on both the mother's and the father's side. Within this system the household coincides with the family in the form of small autonomous nuclear units comprising a monogamous heterosexual parental couple and their children. Other kin such as grandparents, uncles and aunts are not part of the household but live elsewhere. The bilateral nature of kinship meant that there were no lineages or descent groups (Goldthorpe 1987). Although there are other parallel family arrangements, such as the agrarian extended family, they have not been the predominant form in Western Europe. Small nuclear-family households have prevailed in these parts of the world since the 16th century, at least, in both rural and urban areas, thus preceding industrialisation (see Laslett 1972), and are possibly even pre-Christian in origin (Goldthorpe 1987, 10).

The mid-20th century was the 'high period' of the nuclear family with increased marriage rates and a prominent housewife institution (Therborn 2004, 163–166), but this pattern has started to crumble. Cohabitation and childbirth outside of marriage as well as divorce rates have increased. Family relationships have become more varied, and now include relationships 'without a formal marriage or without children; single parenting, conjugal succession, or same-sex partnerships; part-time relationships and companionships lasting for some period in life; living between more than one home or between different towns' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, 98). There has also been an increase in different types of reconstituted families, including step-parent families (Castrén 2009), now comprising nine per cent of families with children (Statistics Finland: Families 2014). These families look very different from the nuclear families of the past, yet certain cultural values and norms stemming from this historical family system continue to be influential.

As Margo Russell (2003) shows, conjugality ascertained the centrality of the couple in the Euro-American family system and neolocality

emphasised the nature of the nuclear family as a self-contained and bounded unit. This effectively localised family and parenting in a closed domestic unit with firm boundaries. Family came to mean a co-resident household in which child rearing took place, leaving no room for other carers. The tie between spouses as well as between parent and child was exclusive (Russell 2003, 11–13). Exclusivity in this context has been identified as an important underlying value, and has even been called the 'handmaiden' of the nuclear family, protecting it from outside interference (Young 1998, 510). As Alison Harvison Young (1998) points out, it has several dimensions. Basically, parental-type relationships outside the nuclear family are not recognised. Hence, one family can only have one set of parents, usually a mother and a father: any 'extra' parents are experienced as threats to one's own parenthood. Closely related to this is the fact that each new unit or parent cancels or substitutes pre-existing units, as well as legally annihilates them. Parenthood is 'all-or-nothing': one either is a parent or one is not, and there can be no partial parenthood. It is not possible, for instance, to be a mother to some extent. Thus, parents have the full decision-making power regarding their children, involving exclusive parental rights and responsibilities (Young 1998). Domesticity is also implied by and connected to exclusivity: the parental home has fixed boundaries, ideally keeping parents and children together permanently. Mothers in particular are assumed (and prescribed) to live with their children. A mother living apart from them is strongly disapproved of and stigmatised (Gustafson 2005).

The basic child-rearing unit is still considered to be exclusively the parental home. Children generally live at home with their parent(s). In fact, over 80 per cent of Finnish children live in two-parent families, and 17 per cent with a single mother (Statistics Finland 2011). Step-parent families may comprise 'my', 'your' and 'our' children, some of them maintaining links with their other biogenetic parent and their new family, thus blurring the family boundaries (Allan et al. 2011; Castrén 2009). Such family constellations share child rearing across households, which is atypical of the conjugal family model. Studies confirm that these and other unconventionally formed families such as adoptive families experience ambiguities and tensions, there being no culturally accepted rules for the management of relationships and situations involving many

mothers or fathers within one family (Castrén and Högbacka 2014). One-set-of-parents exclusivity also operates outside the nuclear family. It was found in one study that 50 per cent of same-sex couples parenting children thought of themselves as the only parents of the child, whereas a minority (5 per cent) were involved in 'voluntary' multiple-parenting arrangements (that did not involve separation or re-partnering) (Power et al. 2010, 76–77). It would appear that while the 'nuclear' Global North family, meaning heterosexual two-parent married couples, is changing, core values such as exclusivity and domesticity linger on.

The changing meaning of children has further escalated the norms of domesticity and exclusivity. According to Viviana Zelizer (1985), the 20th century saw the economic value of children diminish whereas their emotional value increased, turning them into sentimentalised 'emotional assets'. At the same time, the family started to be understood as an emotional refuge separate from the realm of work and market forces. Child rearing came to be regarded almost as 'private indulgency' (Craig 2007, cited in Penn 2009, 180), giving meaning to life. Family is increasingly conflated with a certain kind of parenting, which as Hays (1996) and Penn (2009) suggest could be called intensive or attachment parenting. Such parenting ideologies, which are prevalent in the North, underline the exclusive and intense parental focus on the child within the context of material affluence. According to the ideology of intensive mothering, the needs of children should always come before parental needs. It is assumed that the child requires and needs the love, care and attention of an exclusive caretaker. Key concepts include the intensity of feeling and the time, effort and money that go or should go into child rearing. Experts are consulted about what is best for the child (Hays 1996). Similarly, Helen Penn (2009) characterises parenting in the Global North as based on intense caretaker-child interaction that is influenced by attachment theory and overemphasises parental influence on children's lives. Parenting is preoccupied with the child's individuality and emotionality. Individuality is further understood as choice over material possessions. It follows from this that white middle-class parents are assumed to have the best parenting skills, while poverty is a sign of irresponsible parenting (Penn 2009, 180–183). Significantly, it has been shown that this family model is not

universal, but is specific to middle-class parenting in the Global North (Keller 2007; Lancy 2012; LeVine 2004; Penn 1999, 2009).

Adoptive parents are even more susceptible to intensive attachment parenting (De Graeve 2012; Pylypa 2011). With the child originally born to other (foreign) parents, adopting is generally thought to pose extra challenges such as attachment issues, questions regarding the origins of the child and racism. This pushes adoptive parents to rely even more heavily on expert advice, which is abundant on the subject of adoption, and leads them to pursue the principles of 'good parenting' in exaggerated forms. Exclusivity, or assigning the child to only one set of parents, appears to be the organising principle. The sentimentalised child that is an emotional asset (Zelizer 1985) is intertwined with exclusivity. Rachael Stryker (2010, 2013) explains the link between attachment and exclusivity in her ethnography of a US clinic offering certain types of attachment therapy to adoptive parents and their children: attachment means, in effect, forging an exclusive bond between adopter and child and symbolically dispensing with the family of origin.

Norms and values hold even though social practices challenge them. Exclusive parenting is parent-focused and family-household-centred. It emphasises domesticity, individuality and materialism. What is important in this kind of parenting ideal and practice is independence from necessity: it is more or less devoid of economic considerations and subsistence worries. Physical survival is taken for granted and is not even mentioned (Penn 2009, 182). Affluence forms the invisible frame in which parenting in the Global North takes place.

The Inclusive Family of the Global South: The Child Belongs to Its Kin

The organising principle of the African family differs markedly from that of the Euro-American system, being based on consanguinity and descent rather than conjugality. Kin and parenthood are more important than marriage ties. As Russell (2003) points out, families are organised vertically and generationally rather than horizontally through the cohabiting or married couple. This non-nuclear family system places greater weight

on kin obligations, the extended multigenerational family being the typical household. Relations between kin are governed by age, gender and descent. Genealogy and inheritance in South Africa are organised along patrilineal lines, through the father's side, although the women's kin provide alternative resources (see Russell 2003). Children and fertility are valued very highly. The origins of this focus on offspring lie in the precolonial society's emphasis on the production of people (Therborn 2006, 21). The system of bride wealth paid by the groom to the bride's family has played a significant role (Posel et al. 2011). It is still widely practiced in South Africa, especially among isiZulu speakers, although many African men cannot afford the payment these days. It is noteworthy that, according to the tradition, the father only gains rights to the children after paying bride wealth (Posel et al. 2011, 105–106).

South Africa's colonial and apartheid past have moulded the family system in ways that still exert their influence. Colonialism and apartheid resulted in major upheavals in kinship patterns. Black people were dislocated and families were dispersed. The system of migrant labour, according to which only men were allowed to enter cities as workers in the mines and in the service of whites while families (women and children) were forced to remain in the countryside, strained family life (Ramphele and Richter 2006; Thomas and Mabusela 1991), resulting in the current pattern of disruption in couple relationships and the withdrawal of many African men from family responsibility (Therborn 2006, 44). The fragmentation of families across urban and rural areas led to major upheavals in household-formation patterns. It is likely that kinship care of children evolved in part as a response to these patterns of migratory and seasonal labour, and was strengthened during the 1970s and 1980s (Grant and Yeatman 2012, 280). Families in rural areas were dependent on remittances sent by men in urban areas, which rising unemployment made increasingly difficult or impossible. Women's migration to urban areas increased towards the end of apartheid because they had to find ways of earning a living to support their families. Children were often left in the care of grandmothers (see Seekings 2009). The apartheid system's welfare provisions only applied to white people, whereas black South Africans were dependent on kin support and the extended family: the state was thus, in effect, undermining parental care for black children (Seekings and Moore 2013, 4).

During the post-apartheid period multigenerational households were further supported by the state old-age pension that more elderly black women than men received (Seekings 2009, 429). Unemployment continued to grow, becoming chronic and widespread, and in practice without financial support for those affected (Seekings and Moore 2013, 15). Urbanisation and migration expanded as women also increasingly migrated in search of a job (Seekings 2008, 6–7). In addition to rural-urban migration, there has been an increasing trend to move between urban locations, leading to the further fragmentation of households. Kinship and family ties have been sundered, but also reworked as people have found new ways of creating social links (Ross 2010, 92–93). Powerful processes such as urbanisation and uneven economic development have thus supported the continuation of the extended-family system in both rural and urban areas, and the practice of child-raising by grandmothers with the mothers living elsewhere.

As several researchers have pointed out, black South African households are not neat, discrete and stable units (Seekings 2009, 423–424). Family does not coincide with household: it is larger than the people who are currently living in the household, the boundaries of which are fluid and porous. Fluidity in this context refers to the frequent movement of individuals (especially women and children) between households. Porosity, in turn, refers to the simultaneous membership of more than one household, and thus involves sharing resources such as meals, shelter, care and money (see Seekings 2009, 430). Households are able to change their composition in times of economic or other difficulties, thus porosity is both a resource and a survival strategy. There are also child-rearing implications. South African children live in much more varied constellations than the narrowly fixed household of the Western family system (Russell 2003, 38). Fiona Ross (2010, 91) refers to the same phenomenon as 'diffused domesticity', denoting the constant movement of people and the circulation of children across kin circles. She describes the community she observed over a number of years: 'In conditions of extreme poverty and uncertainty, the functions usually associated with households were separated and spread over a variety of social configurations' (Ross 1995, cited in Ross 2010, 91). People could thus be sleeping in one household, having their meals in another and sending remittances to a third (Ross 2010, 87).

Marriage rates for black South African women declined during the post-apartheid period: in 2008, only 24 per cent of black women aged 20-45 were married, whereas the corresponding figure for white women was 67 per cent. Cohabiting was also rare: only 14 per cent of black women were living with a man (Posel et al. 2011, 102–104). Moreover, relationships are unstable: there is a high rate of marriage breakup (Therborn 2006, 41–42), and frequent absences among fathers and men. According to the statistics, 65 per cent of birth registrations in South Africa in 2013 did not contain information about paternity (Statistics South Africa: Recorded live births 2013, 6). The father is reported as totally missing in more than 50 per cent of black families in some areas in South Africa (Lund 2006, 166–167). Nevertheless, motherhood is almost universal (Swartz 2003, 15–16). Social identity as a mother is still the most important form of female identity in Africa (Oyewumi 2000, 1097), including South Africa (Walker 1995, 430–431): it is an affirmation of womanhood. As Oyeronke Oyewumi (2000, 1097) points out, the strongest ties within a family in all African household arrangements flow from the mother, and the ties uniting a mother and all her children are conceived of as natural and unbreakable. There is no social stigma attached to single motherhood in South Africa (Moore 2013), and children born to single women are traditionally absorbed into the woman's extended family. Marriage and motherhood, and I would add couple relationships and motherhood, are thus being decoupled (Moore 2013; Walker 1995, 431–432). In 2011, 37.5 per cent of all households were female-headed (Statistics South Africa: Social Profile of Vulnerable Groups in South Africa 2002–2011, 64). These are not single mothers in the Global North sense, however; the unit usually consists of a woman, her children and her mother and/or other kin (aunts, uncles, grandparents) (Hall et al. 2014, 91).

The consequences are that men and paternal kin may be losing responsibility for children who live with their maternal kin. This is also likely to affect inheritance patterns, which may now be increasingly shifting towards maternal descent (Seekings 2009; Seekings and Moore 2013). Therborn sees similarities in the South African situation and the former slave and plantation economies of the Caribbean, in which men likewise dominated the socio-sexual order with strong patriarchal informal

sexuality patterns, and in which mass poverty was the driving force. Such conditions foster matrifocal households with absent men (Therborn 2004, 298–299). Indeed, matriarchal multigenerational households have become common in urban South Africa (Lee 2009, 61).

These patterns are reflected in the living arrangements of South African children. In 2012, a 29-per-cent minority of black children lived with both parents, 42 per cent lived with their mother and 26 per cent lived with neither parent (Hall et al. 2014, 91). The majority of those living with neither parent are cared for by relatives, very often grandmothers, and in over 80 per cent of cases the mother is alive but lives elsewhere (Hall et al. 2014, 91). All in all, 68 per cent of black South African children live in extended households (Statistics South Africa: Social Profile of Vulnerable Groups in South Africa 2002–2011, 9). The extended-family system also absorbs children who have lost one or both parents, although the poorest households take in most of these children: in 2012, about half of them lived in the poorest fifth of households (Hall et al. 2014, 92).

It has been suggested that the strong obligations of kin solidarity and the prominent place of the extended family in the African family system indicate a 'collectivistic familism' (Therborn 2006, 19) or 'a collective mode of existence' (Mkhize 2006). As Nhlanhla Mkhize (2006) points out, African collective child rearing gives rise to a different understanding of what it means to be a parent. The extended family as a whole, not only the parents, is responsible for raising children. A child is born into a wider kin community including members of the extended family, both the living and the dead. Consequently, what constitutes parental care in the two models differs markedly: proper care is premised on the localised parental home and the staying together of mother and child in the exclusive model, whereas home in the inclusive model means various locations, and periodic separations between mother and child are common and accepted, even necessary.

Esther Goody (1982) further exemplifies these differences. She concluded from the research she conducted in Western Africa that the delegation of child rearing did not affect the child's birth-status identity, which is descent-based, hence there was no adoption in the Western sense (Goody 1982, 278). These cultural notions were behind the misunderstanding in cases in which West African immigrants in England saw the

fosterage of their children in English families as a wonderful way of securing educational opportunities for them, and expected them to return. The English families thought that the arrangement would lead to permanent adoption of these 'unwanted' children (Goody 1982, 217–233). As she says: 'We [Westerners] see nurturance and socialization as necessary elements of 'true parenthood' and thus […] parents who do not fill these rearing roles 'cannot really deserve their children'—for us they cease to *be* parents' (Goody 1982, 279). People socialised into the Global North family model thus easily interpret a lack of bounded domesticity, which in the exclusive family mode is the prerequisite for proper child rearing, as abandonment (see also Panter-Brick 2000, 10).

3

The Making of the Adoptive Family: Choosing Family

> If I think about my children, what would have been the option for them if they had stayed there looked after by a grandmother. Where would they be? Would they be out without any adults all day long and then be exposed to all kinds of abuse or whatever. (Susanna, adoptive mother)

There are a number of studies on the process of becoming a parent through transnational adoption and the contradictions inherent in it (e.g., Brian 2012; De Graeve 2012; Dorow 2006a; Jacobson 2008; Howell 2006; Seligmann 2013). The contours of 'kinning' (Howell 2006), the process whereby the previously unacquainted child is made to belong in the adoptive family, and the tensions of adoptive kinship appear to be very similar across adopters and across the Global North (see Howell and Marre 2006). Amongst other things, these studies document the struggles of adopters to form a family that the dominant ideologies view as less real than genealogically based kinship. Central themes include the significance given to nature (biology) and nurture (culture) in creating adoptive kinship and the 'as if begotten' (Modell 1994, 2002) adoptive family. As scholars pointed out in the early days of adoption research

(Kirk 1964), adoptive family making is pulled in opposite directions by the need simultaneously to create unity and similarity (the child as one's own) and to acknowledge the child's difference or origins (the child as originating from other parents). In the case of transnational adoption this increasingly takes the form of 'culture keeping' (Jacobson 2008), meaning engagement with the culture of the country of origin. These studies explored this tension as well as the connections between the birth culture, racism and the racialization of adoptees.

My aim in this chapter is, first, to explore how the adoptive family is brought into being. Paying close attention to the adopters' own descriptions I investigate the constellation of their concerns (what it is they want) and the form of their deliberations (how they go about realising their aims in current contexts). Second, I consider potential linkages between kinning (of adopters) and de-kinning (of first mothers). Do current processes of forming an adoptive family lead to the exclusion of first mothers, and if so, how? According to Howell (2003, 481), for instance, in successful kinning 'the biological parents emerge only as minor characters in the adoptees' personal trajectory.' This implies that making the child part of one's own family and kin group is premised on the child's coming to have only one set of parents. Such a view is backed up in adoption legislation stipulating the termination of the child's previous ties and the elevation of adoptive parents as the only parents. Studies have also shown that adopters tend to engage in 'culture work' in such a way that their exclusive parental ties are not jeopardised; in other words, they generally do not seek to establish connections with first parents (Jacobson 2008, 93; Seligmann 2013, 48).

Wanted: An Exclusive Family of One's Own

From the adopters' perspective adoption is a way of forming a family. As in most other countries (Willing and Fronek 2014; Jacobson 2008, 27), involuntarily childless couples form the vast majority of adopters in Finland. About ten per cent are single adopters, almost exclusively women (Valvira 2015). According to my data, there is also a minority of

adopters without a history of infertility who wish to enlarge their families through adoption.

A major theme in the interviews was the sorrow of childlessness. There were sad stories of failed reproduction, disappointment, disillusionment, grief and devastating experiences of serious illness and loss. Many adopters had had several miscarriages or stillborn babies. Anna, for instance, felt as if she had been trying to have children all her life. She had two from an earlier marriage, but had also had a stillborn baby. She remarried later in life and, with her husband, underwent fertility treatment to no avail. They then started the process of transnational adoption but their situation and their chances 'looked bad' given the queues and possible age limits. They decided to resort to in-vitro fertilisation (IVF) one last time, which led to pregnancy. They had to interrupt the adoption process, as required by Finnish agencies, although Anna 'would of course have taken both of them'. The pregnancy ended in another stillborn child, however, after which they re-started the adoption process. The whole topic of family and children was delicate and emotional for most adopters. Noora and her husband had been trying to have a child for a long time, and she describes the process:

> Only very few people knew about this or knew about the [planned] adoption, and for a long time it was a very difficult issue, such that you didn't want to talk about it, or you couldn't talk about it without bursting into tears.

Single adopters faced the problem of not having a partner (of the opposite sex) with whom to have children, meanwhile their 'biological clock was ticking away'. Sometimes there turned out to be some kind of illness behind it. Tiina always thought she would have her children at 40, until which time she wanted to study, travel and pursue her own interests. This dream was shattered when she had a serious illness that made it impossible for her to bear children. Veera thought of 'fetching Danish semen' when it was discovered that she had all kinds of problems and in order to conceive would need IVF. As she explained: 'The idea of first injecting hormones in order to collect egg-cells and then Danish semen in a jar was tedious; it was far from anything real, so artificial.' Of the

three couples who did not have a history of infertility, two already had biological children. The third (Elina and her husband) opted to adopt straightaway, but did not rule out biological pregnancy and, in fact, after having adopted they had two biological children. They all shared an early interest in transnational adoption. 'I decided in upper-secondary school that my kids would come from elsewhere in the world', said Elina.

As is evident from these examples, the adopters' primary goal was to have a child, so much so that without it they would experience 'real loss' (feelings of grief, failure, unworthiness), which in the opinion of Archer (2000, 26–28) reveals the ultimate concern. It is children above all else that make a family (Paajanen 2007, 26–28). Other parents echoed the words of Miko, an adoptive father, who explained that they 'wanted to have at least one child' because they wanted to experience 'at least childhood and being a parent'. This quotation shows the tight connections between family and the formation of parental identity. It is the child that turns them into parents. Many couples stated that it was of no importance that their family came about through a different route, as exemplified in statements such as, 'the outcome is the same: we have children, we have a family' (Julia), and 'it doesn't matter how we got our children. [...] We are now a real family' (Johanna). Some single adopters came to prioritise parenthood over a couple relationship. Aila left her partner with whom she had tried unsuccessfully to have a child because he was 'still not willing to consider adoption'. Before even starting adoption proceedings, Tiina gave an ultimatum on her first date with the man she later married: 'Just for your information, I can't have biological children, so this package comes with a small Chinese girl, so if that's a problem for you, there is no point in continuing this walk.' This indicates that family, meaning parenthood, is extremely highly valued and becomes the most important thing in the world.

The 'real' family the adopters had in mind had the characteristics of the Global North family model presented in Chap. 2. Its main features include the family as a fixed and stable entity with one set of parents, the valuing of affluence and a parenting style featuring child-centredness. It was striking how forcibly the adopters highlighted these ideas (see also De Graeve 2012; Pylypa 2011). In particular, having an exclusive bond with the child was the core of what family meant. Given that the

adoptive parents aimed to form 'real' families based on this principle, it is not surprising that this was of great importance to them. As Liisa, an adoptive mother, succinctly put it: 'We want the same as other families.' She meant an exclusive tie, as the families also generally wanted their own child. Without the full legal transfer of parental rights the adopters felt that such a family would not fully materialise. They feared that their position would be too tenuous, including the possible loss of the child. As Young (1998) explains, Euro-American parenting is substitutive, not additive (see also Bowie 2004, 9). Hence foster parenting, which would have provided a quicker route to having children, was rejected. Julia, for instance, remarked: 'I wanted a child of my own. Really my own.' Selma and Max 'absolutely wanted to adopt' so that the child would be 'our own child and that nobody could take him away from us'. The grief associated with the possible loss of the child, which would turn an emotional asset into an emotional liability, was heightened by the long wait and previously experienced losses.

Further juxtaposing adoption and foster parenting, the adopters feared interference from possible other carers. Parental actions and freedom of agency towards the child, as well as parental authority must be intact and are considered part of the parenting role, which would be less influential if undermined by other carers. As Jenni and Paul explained, they decided early on 'that the children must be ours so that no outsider could have any say in the matter'. Daniel said they wanted to be the ones deciding over matters to do with their children's well-being: 'We are too strongminded to just stand-by and watch the child being pushed to and fro.' His wife Tanja went on to say that they wanted their parenting 'on a firmer basis' as they wanted to act on the basis of their own judgement on 'what was best for the child.' It thus appeared that without legal exclusive parenthood, parenting could not be experienced to the full. Pete, one of the adoptive fathers, remarked that adoption and foster parenting were like 'day and night': in foster parenting 'you are in the position of a mere caretaker'. Parenting thus means total involvement and total identity as parents. It is contrasted with 'merely' looking after the child, which is partial and could be temporary. Permanency, which is strongly advocated in adoption policies and legislation, is premised on having exclusive irrevocable rights to the child.

Means-ends Rationality and 'Market Talk'

The context of transnational adoption as explicated in Chap. 1 is characterised by a widening gap between the demand for and supply of adoptable children. Adopters from the Global North thus face a shortage of (small and healthy) infants. Receiving countries and adoption agencies compete with each other, and individual adoptive parents are in competition with other prospective adopters. As the adoption context resembles a zero-sum game in terms of outcomes, one family's getting a child diminishes the chances of another family. Such situational logic of competition advances instrumental rationality, which leads to means-ends calculations, goal-seeking and risk-discounting (Archer 2012, 34–35). The situational logic of competition also makes it necessary for people to make choices (Archer 2012, 41).

Adoptive parents are required to make a number of choices. They must choose the country, which in essence also means choosing the attributes of the child, and in some cases they are required to choose from a long list of medical conditions and special needs the ones they would find acceptable. Prospective adoptive parents are put in the position of strategists, seeking the path leading to the sought-after result and considering the pros and cons of each choice. The wrong choice of country could, for instance, lead to a delay of several years in getting a child, or to the disruption of the whole adoption project. The need to choose and act in a context of scarcity, and to calculate means and ends is also part and parcel of neoliberal traits that emphasise the responsibility of individuals to influence their own lives and see people as 'free individuals who are induced to self-manage according to market principles of discipline, efficiency and competitiveness' (Ong 2006, 4). Adopters are placed in this position and are required to become choosers.

Exercising Agency

The decision of adoptive parents to adopt is driven by a powerful need to have family. They strive to achieve this goal in the context of scarcity and uncertainty. What was striking in the interviews was the devotion

and hard work on their part. They were determined and persistent; they planned and tried out various alternatives, were actively involved and relied on their own initiative. Some embarked on the project of gaining a child as if they were athletes with long-term ends. In the interview with Jenni and Paul, for instance, Paul describes their actions and feelings as resembling those of an athlete training for the Olympic Games (finally, in their case, winning a gold medal), their only goal being 'to get a child, to obtain a child'. This is also about being as disciplined and focused as an athlete, as well as being willing to make sacrifices in pursuit of the goal, and essentially relying on oneself. Jenni continues:

> People always said [...] that it's okay to want to have a child. [...] But then at some point I just thought that nobody's psyche can take it to want something like mad from one year to another. So I just stopped wanting it and I just decided to stubbornly do everything I possibly can in order to achieve it.

The adopters emphasised that they were the type of people who actively tried to make things happen. Tanja and Daniel told me that they were both people who, when faced with a situation that did not seem to be working, tried another route. They decided that the route of fertility treatment had been tried and as it obviously had not produced the desired outcome, a child, they rationally decided to 'stop this and try something else.' Benjamin likewise admitted that 'we as a couple are not people who stay put. If things don't seem to be happening, we start to do something about it.' Anniina told me that they 'pushed the [adoption] process forward in the manner of a religious awakening' and that their goal was very clear from the start. About their second adoption she said that, knowing the process was lengthy they did all they could to 'find a short-cut' to speed it up. So, if some means towards the end did not work, they changed them.

   After enduring so much personal suffering, loss and continuous longing for a child, and in many cases failed medical interventions, many parents found it liberating to turn to adoption. They found pleasure in being able to exercise their agency and do something. Whereas the role of parents in fertility treatment remains that of passive recipients, pursuing the

adoption alternative was considered active. They felt they were actively taking steps instead of passively accepting childlessness. It is empowering to take matters into one's own hands. Setting out strategies fosters dynamism and hope. As adoptive parents interviewed by journalists have stated: 'Childlessness is a destiny, but one that you can change, luckily' (Haataja 2014, 38). This orientation was most obvious among those who had experienced infertility but it was also present in the talk of the others. Eeva's comment, for example, reveals the joy and feeling of elevation of exercising agency and choice: 'When I made the decision that I want to adopt, I got a huge sense of empowerment, power, that I'm able to influence my life.'

Competing

Transnational adoption is not a quick and easy route to parenthood, however. Although starting the process may be experienced as choice, many despair during the long waiting period, and feel their agency slipping away. Constraints include the different criteria the countries of origin impose on adoptive parents, in particular their age and family composition (whether or not they accepted older or single adopters, for example). It was not uncommon among the parents I interviewed to feel uncertain until the very end as to whether they would be assigned a child. Those who did not meet the criteria of an ideal family, in other words single and older adopters, were most worried, although others also felt the consequences of the declining numbers of adoptees. Many had been told outright that there was no point in applying to the countries they had in mind because they were not young enough (for Colombia and Russia, for instance), or in one case the adopters were too young (for China). Single adopter Mia confessed that after three years of adoption counselling and bureaucracy during which she changed country because the original one had just closed its boarders: 'I was certain that I would never get a child through that either. [...] I did not dare to tell anyone that I'm expecting [an adopted child], except close family.' Another single adopter similarly had a hard time waiting. Tiina's adoption process was unusually long and difficult, and lasted six years. What seemed to be particularly difficult was

her feeling of lacking agency. She felt she was at the mercy of capricious, faceless forces (see also Eriksson 2009). As she explained:

> My nerves were completely ruined in the process. [...] One just floats on a vast sea where you might bump into a child or you might just as well not. [...] I was suspicious all the time and I said to everyone that I won't believe this is happening until we have gone through the customs at the [major airport in Finland].

Harsh competition under conditions of scarcity had adverse consequences for the adopters, fostering feelings of envy, anger and resentment. They frequently used the Internet and carefully monitored who was allocated a child and where they were in the queue in that country. Many of the parents I interviewed felt that they had set the record for waiting. Monika and her husband waited for their daughter 'longer than anyone had ever waited from that country'. In their case, according to Monika, one reason for the long wait was her husband's unwillingness to consider a boy. Monika would have accepted a boy, as 'it could have quickened the process.' The following excerpt implies that uncertainty and other people's comments made the long wait even worse (see Eriksson 2009), and the fact that they knew others were passing them in the queue. Monika:

> We were actually glad that we had not told many people, well, we told some, but not everyone. I think people knew we were planning [to adopt]. But really it took almost four years. [...] Otherwise we would have had to explain endlessly to others why she hadn't arrived. [...] We just observed that that couple sent their application a year after us and that one two years later. [...] Why are they receiving [a child] and why are we not. [...] We thought that probably we were not going to get a child at all.

Competition appears to be particularly harsh for children deemed to be 'emotional assets', in other words the young and the 'cute' (Zelizer 1985, 192–195). Rebekka, who already had biological children, managed to adopt very young babies. She told me that they had put in the applications that they wished to adopt a healthy baby under the age of one, and this was also the explicit wish of her husband. After the adoption

had been completed another prospective adopter approached her saying that she could not understand 'why they give [the youngest children] to those who have already had babies and have experienced the baby period'. Facing the resentment of other adopters could thus lead to feelings of guilt.

Another consequence of competition and prolonged waiting vis-à-vis others was lowered self-worth. There were many examples of adopters wondering, for instance, why 'our papers were lying there' while 'some other families received theirs suddenly within five months', as Noora told me. This resulted in the internalisation of doubt. Many started to think that there was something wrong with them and that this was the reason for not being allocated a child. The uncertainty of the whole process added to the burden of would-be parents. This is illustrated in Helena's account. She described her and her husband's adoption process as very difficult. That particular agency was known for its generally short waiting periods, although the exact date was uncertain. They therefore had to be constantly prepared. As time went on and they still did not receive a child referral, they felt it must be because they lacked the qualities of good parents or even of good human beings. As Helena said:

> It was so hard, so extremely hard, that we waited longer than any other family that year. [...] We got to know other families on the Internet and they all received children and we did not. We just waited and waited and it was truly hard. You felt you were the lowest of the low, that we were not as good as other people.

Then the child referral arrived and Helena explained that they were under the impression that more boys arrived than girls and she had been thinking that it would probably be a toddler: 'But we got a two-and-a-half-month-old, a baby girl. That was so unreal, quite incomprehensible. And it washed away all the bitterness.' Finally getting the sentimentalised child everybody would have wanted, an infant and a girl, was ample compensation.

Given the inherent competition in the process, the adopters tried to get ahead of other prospective adopters. Successful practice required constant vigilant monitoring and finding out about the situation in various

contact countries, their changing regulations and the queuing. At the same time, they tried to anticipate what other prospective adoptive parents were planning. They had to be prepared to change countries rapidly if necessary. They had to try to overtake others, because if a contact was 'running smoothly', then other adopters were likely to send their applications there, resulting once again in queues and longer waiting periods. This fostered strategic thinking. A tactic used by the parents was to consider countries on the basis of which would be the quickest and the most certain. Martta recalled that she and her husband looked at the options in terms of where it would be possible for them to get a child. South Africa became their first choice because 'the whole process would be over in six months', meaning within that time they would have a child in their arms. However, it was delayed just as it was their turn. Veera, in an attempt to jump the potential queue, decided to register at one of the adoption service providers before she received the licence to adopt from the Finnish Adoption Board. She was told that if she were not granted a licence she would lose the registration fee. This did not deter her. As she said: 'But that was of no importance, I just wanted to get my foot in the door. [...] I just thought: can you send some child here, please.'

Another family similarly used the tactic of changing their registration and the country and not minding about the lost money. Tanja and Daniel had always been determined to 'choose what works.' Tanja told me that the country was not their priority. It was more important that the process of adopting was smooth. As she said: 'We always looked at what functioned well and where the queue was moving fast.' She also criticised some other adopters' fixation on specific countries: 'Some of our acquaintances have committed themselves really strictly to a certain country, for instance China at the moment, but I would never send my application to such a desperate queue.' Her husband Daniel continued, highlighting the significance of their own agency: 'Your own choices make all the difference here. If you are stubborn and think that because you have at some stage chosen a country, you should then stick to it till the end of the world.' So the tactic is to closely monitor the situation and be flexible, work on oneself and one's preferences and long-term goals. To find the right country, one that worked at the time, Tanja and Daniel had to persevere and to do some research. As China was no longer 'functioning

well' and the situation in other source countries did not look good either, they considered Ethiopia. However: 'And then Ethiopia closed altogether. Social workers told us that childless couples would be going before us. And then I said that well, there's a never-ending stream of childless couples in Finland, we will never get a child.' Tanja then enquired about another contact from another service provider: 'I phoned [this service provider] but I couldn't get anything out of that woman. She never even sent me the information.' She persevered and kept phoning and there was another person in charge who told them about the changed situation and the non-existent queue in South Africa. This service provider had a long list of families almost ready to apply to South Africa, but they were still waiting for their licence to adopt. Tanja and Daniel, who were due to receive their licence ahead of these families, quickly changed countries. They lost the registration fee they had paid to the other service provider in the process, but they 'couldn't care less'. As Tanja said:

> We jumped the queue. [...] And I had been really depressed as I thought everything is closing down and nothing works. And then I almost had my head in the clouds, we are barging ahead of the whole queue, never mind the cost, this is it.

The adopters also tried to improve their competitive advantage by adding to their credentials. Liisa's husband studied Spanish and 'acquired a really good knowledge of it' because they first thought they would like to adopt from Colombia, although this changed. Tiina described how she tried to obtain extra points by studying the language of the source country, joining or resigning from Church membership depending on the particular country's criteria, and joining various friendship associations for the countries of origin. She had been in the adoption process for six long years. During this period she changed country six times because of changing policies in the countries in general or because they no longer accepted single adopters. She originally wanted a girl from Asia but in the end accepted a boy from Africa, because she felt she 'couldn't take it any more psychologically'. In each case she had tried to advance her case:

> I joined the Finnish-Polish society and later the China Association. [...] And I registered as a member of the Evangelic-Lutheran Church, and I can't even remember all. [...] I studied Polish and everything.

It seems that prospective adopters are willing to go to great lengths to improve their chances of obtaining a child. To succeed they have to become shrewd strategists. At this stage their thoughts and energy are solely directed at the child, while the child's potential first family or kin are bracketed out.

Optimising Choices

Choosing a country means in effect also choosing many of the attributes of the child. Different countries and agencies are known to have different types of children available. The most desirable attributes generally include a young age, being female, good health and looking similar to (white) adopters (Dorow 2002, 167; Kirk 1964, 133–138; Marre 2007, 80–83; Melosh 2002, 54, 67–68; Yngvesson 2000, 193–194). Countries are placed in an ethnic hierarchy ranging from white (as the most highly valued) via Asian (constructed as not white but not black either) to black (at the bottom of the hierarchy) (Gailey 2010, 84; Jacobson 2008; Seligmann 2013). Although there are certain similarities in such hierarchies across the Global North, there are also country- and context-specific differences (Dorow 2006b; Yngvesson 2000). In general, the most preferred countries of origin among my interviewees were in Asia, Eastern Europe and Latin America, although these first preferences did not always materialise, for one reason or another. A country-specific peculiarity of Finland is a general ethnic hierarchy with both (black) Africans and (white) Russians at the bottom (Jaakkola 2005, 72). Russians are constructed as 'Russkies', which is a derogatory name for Russian people used in Finland dating back to Finland's troubled history and warfare with Russia (Jerman 2009). Many of my interviewees talked about the impossibility of adopting from Russia, because grandparents and other elderly kin who had personal experience of the Winter War and the Continuation War against the Soviet Union in the aftermath of the Second World War would never

accept a 'Russkie's child'. Adoptable children from Russia and Eastern Europe were also constructed as 'older' and 'not healthy' (see also Marre 2007; Raleigh and Rothman 2014), whereas China, at least previously, had the reputation of providing healthy female babies (Dorow 2006a).

In conditions of declining numbers and strict criteria for adoptive parents, it is unlikely that all attributes of the sentimentalised child will be combined. Some attributes were thus traded for others (see also Raleigh and Rothman 2014). The end result is a complex system encompassing the race and ethnicity, age, health and gender of the children intersecting with parental imaginaries of the family. In many cases a (high-ranking) racial and ethnic position diluted the effects of (imperfect) health, (older) age and in the case of Russia the 'Russkie' stigma. In the context of transnational adoption Russian and Eastern European children were constructed as 'looking similar to us', being 'lighter' in skin colour and being 'Western-looking'. In these cases minor health issues lost their meaning. Monika and her husband first wanted to adopt from Eastern Europe even though the children coming from there were not always completely healthy. Monika explained that 'similar' looks were important to her husband in particular: 'My husband felt that children from there would look similar to us, so that there would not be these racist issues. [...] We would have taken the risk of the child not being in perfect health. [...] But we wouldn't have taken a very sick child.' They were not able to adopt from this European country, however, because fearing potential medical costs, the municipality refused to provide the report they needed unless they changed country. Likewise, Julia pointed out that perfect health was not their requirement. However, the health issue should be 'correctable', in other words minor (see also Raleigh and Rothman 2014). As Julia explained:

> At first we considered the Philippines. But the more we thought about it, the more important it seemed to us, as we live in an old traditional rural area where people are very old-fashioned, we started to feel that it might be best if the child looked as Western as possible. It might easily be a problem here. […] And then we thought that in Russia the scenery looks very alike. […] what if we looked into Russia. [...] We put in the application that we would accept an illness which was correctable in Finland.

If the child was 'white', not being an infant was sometimes considered an asset. Julia mentioned that they did not mind if the child was no longer a baby. They would accept a slightly older one. She said, in fact, that a child who was no longer an infant might be better for them. Monika and her husband would have taken a slightly older child, up to the age of four, but had a strong preference for a girl. They finally chose an Asian country and adopted a slightly older child, who although Asian seemed to be 'really light-skinned'. Hence, skin colour and similarity, as well as gender compensate for an older age. Older children thus have a better chance of being adopted by white parents if they are constructed as 'white' (see also Goldberg 2006).

If, on the other hand, young age and health were ranked higher than similar looks, Russia and Eastern Europe were coded as 'dangerous', the children from there being construed as 'not healthy' and 'older'. Many parents echoed these sentiments and fears. As Anna said: 'We ruled out Russia because the children coming from there tend to be not very healthy and are somewhat older.' This is further captured in Linda's account. She reflected on how she would feel if she were adopting her first child now and was assigned a four-year-old boy from a Russian children's home. Here the sentimentalised child that is only in need of love and is capable of loving back and thus carries the promise of family is placed vis-à-vis the child that looks like a serious emotional liability (see also Stryker 2010).

> If this had been presented to me 20 years ago, I would be really excited; I would be overwhelmed by happiness. I would think that there is some sweet four-year-old boy longing for a mother and I would go to fetch this child, and become his mother and it would be wonderful. If I were presented with this now, I would be scared stiff, I would be afraid. I have seen Russian children's homes that have 125 children and in Russia, has the mother been using alcohol and how long has he been in the institution, and help, what will become of this.

When a young age, good health and the female gender were prioritised over whiteness, China in particular drew parents. Before 2005, according to social workers, there were even situations in which families were queuing

for children from China while toddlers from Russia were available. Parents generally believed and had observed that pre-2005 China sent primarily healthy female infants. Adopting from China was therefore popular, as it combined several attributes of the sentimentalised child and allowed older parents to adopt (see also Dorow 2006a). Although 'Asianness' was considered a more manageable difference than 'blackness', it still signalled different ethnicity. The young age of the child and the female gender diluted the effects of race and ethnicity here, too. Jenni's account is revealing. She and Paul were in the process of adopting from China, when Jenni had an encounter with an Asian lady in the train. She appeared shocked at the thought of her child resembling this elderly lady. Several adoptive mothers remarked that all healthy infants looked similar in a way—plump with big eyes—but as they grow they start to look more like their first parents. Human beings are also wired to react to such attributes (plumpness, big eyes, a big round head) in babies (Hrdy 1999). As Jenni said:

> I was looking at other people and then I saw an elderly Asian-looking lady. And I thought that the child could even start to look like that. Then I thought that when the child looks like that, I'll be long dead.

The general ethnic order and the position of blackness in Finland are best captured in the following account given by one adopting couple, Ursula and Hans. They joined an adoption-orientation group of about ten prospective adoptive families. Practically everyone in the group was keen to adopt an Asian child, while Africa was placed at the very bottom of their list. Even though some, like Ursula and Hans, clearly wished to go against such rankings, this story testifies to the existence of the hierarchy. It also shows the importance of short waiting periods in the country of origin. As Ursula said:

> When one listened to the discussion there, it became really obvious that China was the absolute number one. Everyone wanted children from China. Then there was SARS and all other problems and people became really desperate. [...] And Africa was like the last option. And then we decided rather soon that we want Africa, absolutely. We want [to adopt] from there. We felt bad about the general order of priority. [...] Plus at the time the queue and waiting times for South Africa were a lot shorter than elsewhere.

Given the decreasing numbers of young and healthy children from China and Russia, Africa is becoming the new source of what are construed as healthy infants. A young age appears to be the most important attribute if the child is constructed as black. The prevalence of age as a motive for adopting from South Africa was overwhelming. There was a lot of emphasis on the possibility of adopting very young children from there, as well as on their being reasonably healthy and the process being reliable and fast. Parents adopting from South Africa gave the following comments.

> It sounded perfect for us. [...] We wanted as young a child as possible and they send babies, so that was important. The waiting times were reasonable. (Noora)
>   That's it: a well-functioning process and the fact that you could get really young babies. (Selma and Max)
>   We were interested in the idea that the child could be a tiny baby. (Helena)

Elina gave as her and her husband's reasons for changing adoption agency and contacts that '[This South African agency] send little, tiny ones and fast'. She also said that a further reason for choosing the country was that it 'was more reliable' and 'safe' as they had 'birth mother programmes' and hence more information about the health of the child. Piia recalls that she and her husband saw a video of this South African contact agency and the infants appeared to be well cared for and healthy looking: 'Plump babies that were allowed to crawl around freely, and lots of caretakers.' The plumpness and number of caretakers indicate that these children may be better looked after and hence in better physical and mental shape, pointing to the possibility of immediately becoming emotional assets. The promise of family based on age and health overcomes differences in skin colour, race and ethnicity. But while whiteness has the power to weaken the effects of less wanted attributes, blackness needs to be compensated by other, valued characteristics.

The parents had to try to combine the requirements of the sending countries and their own preferences and find a country in which the queue was moving quickly. These factors led to a market-oriented way

of talking. There was a lot of talk about which countries were 'running smoothly' and 'functioning well', which agencies were 'arranging' which kind of children and which countries 'sent' the desired children. The language of the market was used frequently. Tanja and Daniel talked about China 'functioning well' at the time, saying that 'you could somehow get children easily and at short notice' or that it 'guaranteed prompt delivery'. Passive structures were used: children were being sent from somewhere. Eeva remarked: 'I was stuck in this queue. [...] And then I decided that I want to change the country. And they told me that [country] was now running smoothly.' From the point of view of the adopters that was what the situation looked like. Parents came from their personal positions of wanting a child for a long time to a zero-sum system into which they needed to plunge using their agency. They carefully monitored and chose countries that promised to deliver children who could be turned into emotional assets. The long market-driven waiting times that reflected the discrepancy between the demand for and supply of children for adoption led to further commodification of the process, as this 'market talk' suggests.

Domesticity and 'Family Talk'

Having finally become parents, the adopters described family life in overwhelmingly positive terms. What comes across again and again is the sentimentalised child who creates a family feeling and is an emotional asset (Zelizer 1985; also Stryker 2013, 37–43). Monika, for instance, told me that the biggest joys in her everyday life were connected to having 'a girl who is very happy and does a lot all the time.' She continued and emphasised how the child brings happiness to the parents: 'We got a really, really happy and positive and sociable girl, who is a source of great happiness to everyone.' The child in the accounts of adopters is happy and lovable, fostering the enjoyment of parenthood. Parenting was described as fulfilling and as 'an incredible experience', as Johanna expressed it. Julia even used the word resource: 'That we have children, it is an incredible resource. [...] It is difficult to put into words, the feeling when your own child climbs into your lap'. Some used almost religious language when describing their

feelings of having a child, thus 'sacralising' the child (Zelizer 1985, 11). It is also evident that this is a certain kind of child, one that evokes affect. As Tiina told me: 'I'm at peace now. It's a religious term, but I achieved peace when at last I got a child that is healthy and all'.

The adopters wanted to escape from the market society and market rationality to the family as an emotional refuge of unselfish love and affection. Their constellation of concerns prioritised family and relegated work and leisure to a secondary place. In accordance with ideas about family in the Global North (Hays 1996), children were expected to give meaning to life, something that could not be found in the realm of work and the market. When the child arrives, 'market talk' changes to 'family talk'.

Staying at Home

Family as an emotional haven had the potential to change the parent. The close parent-child relationship allowed the parents to enjoy and develop new sides of their personalities. Several adopters explained how having a child and thus a family had made them better human beings (see also Younes and Klein 2014, 75). As Eeva, a single adopter, remarked: 'I have received challenges and joy. [...] Children make you grow. I think I would be a lot more selfish if I weren't a mother.' They also became less consumerist by virtue of their family. This is well explicated in Monika's account. She described how her life had been 'consumer-oriented' before the child but had completely changed after she became a parent. She also made it clear that home and being a parent came before work:

> I have been able to prioritise things differently. The child is so much more important than other areas of life, work-related evening events take second place. [...] Without the child life would probably have continued as it was, it would have been more work-oriented and I would have consumed more and used the time for work.

The family realm was underlined fervently. Not only did the adopters talk about the importance of domesticity, they had also taken action and had opted to take leave from work and stay at home for prolonged

periods. They were willing to make sacrifices in other realms of life, and had done so. Working life was described as clearly less important than parenthood and family, which were idealised. Liisa stayed at home until the adopted child reached the age of three, in other words for 18 months. She described this as 'such wonderful time, that I will be thinking about in the old-people's home. [...] I had time and life was peaceful and conflict-free.' Elina stayed at home for three years. She said it did not even occur to her to go to work. Child-centredness has a prominent place in her narrative thus evoking the basic tenets of intensive mothering. Her last sentence about giving the child (adoptive) parents suggests that adoptive parenting may be even more pleasurable than genetically-based parenting because it carries with it the idea of 'doing good'. Nevertheless, it was clear that it was love and not pity on which the families were and should have been built.

> I just wanted to be at home all the time. I did not go anywhere in the evenings. I just wanted to stay at home. […] I enjoyed it to the fullest, I thought it was so wonderful. […] Nothing in this world could be better than being a mother. I am first a mother and after that come everything else. And always first in my thoughts and in my doings is the child, the child is number one. […] And I think it is extra great that I have been able to provide someone with parents.

It was obvious in many accounts that both spouses adhered to this ideology. Martta described how she and her husband were both able to stop working for a while: 'We spent one year so that the whole family was together 24 hours a day. We took a sabbatical year and we were just together.' Julia and her husband arranged for them both to stay at home when their adopted children came: 'We had arranged it so as we both wanted to be at home. […] So we were both completely at home for three months.' Adoptive fathers, along with the mothers, actively participated in the development of attachment, as Benjamin exemplifies in the following excerpt. As was the case with the mothers, Benjamin also wished to have a break from work, and family and home were the tools for achieving this. He presented a rosy picture of parenting, underlining the importance of attachment as stipulated in the advice given to adopters. He explicitly

and strongly urged men to take a more prominent role in child rearing, thus testifying to the importance of intensive and attachment parenting ideals for adoptive fathers, too:

> I was a bit fed up with being at work. I waited eagerly to be able to take parental leave, so that I could just close the door and get as far from computers as possible. I had rosy pictures in my mind as I imagined what a good time we will have, birds singing and the sun shining. […] Work has lost its meaning and home and family have become more important than I thought. I grew into the responsibility when I had to, as we had the children. […] And [your own] hobbies or long working days hinder the building of attachment, as you are the one who is absent. The building material is time, and that's why I would like it written in the law that when a family has a child, men would be at home and for a long time, months, because only then can you truly get to know the child and the child gets to know you.

Benjamin strongly disapproved of the 'current societal situation, in which parenthood consists of taking children to the kindergarten as early as possible and coming home after five.' He pointed out that this diminished both the development of attachment and the fathers' enjoyment of parenting: 'It's impossible to create a relationship in a few hours, but it takes time, you can see it and it's rewarding.' Benjamin had taken parental leave three times during the five years they had had the two children, each time for about six months. He specifically emphasised the creation of an exclusive bond between father and child, as well as between mother and child, which points towards the intertwining of exclusivity and attachment. It also means giving intensive dyadic attention to the child, very much according to the Global North style of intensive attachment parenting, which was evident in the narratives of other fathers, too. Paula and Timo, for instance, talked in a similar manner about how they were currently falling short of their goal to give more time, energy and attention to their children. Timo remarked that the situation was not to his liking and that work took too much out of him. It was clear that parenting is and should be prioritised. As he said: 'I would rather be tired and half-efficient at work and fully energetic and rested at home. […] Work can wait'.

Miko, another adoptive father, critically evaluated his roles as a father and a husband and how adoption had changed both: 'I'm quite a typical man in not noticing things and just leaving them. But I have developed a lot. I know more, that there's a lot needing to be done and I can take care of [the adopted child].' He went on to say that he and his wife 'split everything half and half.' As these excerpts show, in the view of some adopters the adoption changes gender relations and the role of men. The adoptive fathers were very home-centred. As Benjamin said: 'We are always at home, we don't do anything. We just spend time with the children. But this is what we want.' The coming out of the adoptive fathers in praise of family life took place within the broader context of a heightened awareness of and attention to the role of fathers in general in Finland (Mykkänen and Aalto 2010), as well as the rise of familism at the turn of the twenty-first century (Jallinoja 2006, 96–180).

The adoptive parents also focused on and fostered the child's individuality and self-primacy (Penn 2009). Aila, who is single, made the decision to leave her job and stay at home for several years looking after her adopted children, and worked from home as a child-minder. This meant a significant drop in her earned income. She explained the reason for her decision: 'I got back from work tired. […] It did not make any sense.' Work takes up all one's energy, which is needed at home because of the time-consuming nature of (intensive attachment) parenting. Aila adhered to the tenet of intensively focusing on the child, which is not only time-consuming but also demands total involvement and the giving of 'quality time'. She continued:

> What is most difficult is how to keep going, as for them [the children] you have to be present 100 per cent. Quite concretely, you have to get the laundry done, the dishes, making dinner so that we can eat on time and you have to have time to read to them and spend quality time with them.

Attachment as an exclusive parent-child relationship is clearly emphasised in the advice from professionals and during adoption counselling. Adopters are often advised not to allow other carers into the life of the child until later because it is detrimental to the development of attachment. The belief is that secure attachment can and should only form

between one mother and one father and child within the nuclear family (see also De Graeve 2012, 153–157). The adopters I interviewed had applied this principle in their parenting. In the quest for attachment (to one set of parents) they excluded other carers from the circle of domesticity during the first few years, sometimes longer. Potential carers, including grandparents, were discarded. Tiina's example is illuminating. The grandmother only stepped in for a few hours after the child had gone to sleep and would not even know she was there. During the year I interviewed her Tiina had been separated from her child for about two hours. On both of the occasions in question she first put the child to bed, and when it was asleep her mother came to babysit as Tiina popped out to see her friends off.

Similar examples of not letting other carers look after the child until much later abounded. Liisa told me that her own mother was 'the only one with whom the child has stayed overnight one night at a time.' And when this happened the child had been with them for 'two years', 'before we let her go'. Elina recalled that her child was 'quite big when she stayed with my parents. Normally one of us [Elina or her husband] was always present. We never left her alone.' Now, years later this practice seems a little strange even to her. It is justified, however, by referring to the short duration of childhood, which is one of the basic tenets of intensive mothering (Hays 1996; see also Martiskainen de Koenigswarter 2006). As she said: 'Now it feels a bit odd to think that we really did not go anywhere. But somehow we thought that the period when she is young is so short'. Jenni and Paul, who had had their child for several years, were still homebound. As Jenni said:

> We have had as a guiding principle that there cannot be anything so important that we have to have the child looked after [outside the home]. Although many would be eager to look after her. But we haven't let them yet.

These examples portray adopters as super-committed parents. They conscientiously follow current ideals and advice in order to help their children at the same time as recreating themselves as parents. The power of this ideology is evidenced in the strong disapproval directed at adopters who do not 'stay at home' for prolonged periods (see Haataja 2014).

An unintended consequence of these ideals and practices is the enforcement of exclusive belonging.

Freedom from Necessity

Adoptive parents are pre-screened for financial stability, hence these families were judged to have the means to support a child. The adoptive parents I interviewed had a wide range of educational backgrounds and occupations. Most had a university degree, and all of them at least vocational training at the upper-secondary level. They could all be placed within the broad categories of upper-working class and middle class. Adopting appears to be largely a middle-class project across the Global North (Dorow 2002, 150; Greiff 2004, 15; Jacobson 2008, 7; Modell 1994, 93; Parviainen 2003, 42; Telfer 2000, 334).

Both of the leading adoption social workers I interviewed, as well as some parents, drew parallels between the money used for adoption and alternative uses to which it could have been put. The thinking was that if people prioritised transnational adoption they used their money for that instead of buying a new car, for example. As one of the social workers explained: 'Some families undoubtedly struggle to cover the costs, but I think it is clear that even these families have prioritised thinking that this will simply cost money and we want to adopt nevertheless.' She went on and compared adoption and other costly consumer purchases: 'Some people use the money to buy a car, others to buy a summer cottage or to travel.' Some adoptive parents I interviewed, such as Anna, said the same. In these accounts a child is almost depicted as something that can be acquired. As Anna remarked: 'My husband said that it's just a medium-sized car. It depends on what you want. Someone buys a car and someone acquires a child. It's about values.' After a while she continued: 'Of course, there are people who could not even afford the car. So, of course it takes money, but it also takes courage.' These comments reflect the privileged position of the middle-classes in the Global North. Costs are measured in relation to expensive commodities, and being able to cover basic living costs is taken for granted. Even though some interviewees described themselves as 'not very rich', they managed to circumvent their financial

constraints. They used inheritance funds, for example, obtained financial support from kin or took out bank loans, and there was the adoption grant from the state. The adoptive parents did not generally like talking about the costs. Many insisted that they did not know the exact sum and did not even want to know, indicating the relative insignificance of the cost. They also pointed out that it was impossible to put a monetary value on a person's life, evoking the notion of the sentimentalised, priceless child (Zelizer 1985). For many people in the Global North adopting is just a matter of prioritising, a choice they can make.

The prioritisation of domesticity is likewise premised on a certain level of affluence. Staying at home for prolonged periods requires a certain level of financial security. It depends on the adopter and/or the spouse having a good job or a good economic background, and the existence of a welfare state with services and benefits. These adopters could afford to radically subordinate the realm of work precisely because they or their partners had achieved a stable economic situation. Their position was privileged; they could leave survival issues out of the discussion and focus on family making. They could afford to turn down work offers and opportunities. Tiina, a single adopter who led a very career- and consumption-oriented life before she had a child, was offered a very good permanent position at the time she was completing the adoption process. She did not take the job. Instead, she said she was planning to stay at home with the child until it was three years old, until which time she was entitled to state-subsidised maternity benefits. Her narrative emphasises the primacy of child rearing over monetary values and work. Although she said she only had a little money, it was obviously in relative terms, possibly compared to her previous earnings as a single woman. Towards the end of the excerpt it becomes clear that in fact she had a considerable sum in her bank account. Adopters, in other words, have options. In Tiina's words:

> I did think, however, do I want the child or the career. Because I can't have both right now. At the moment I'm just floating in this feeling of happiness and I have very little money, but I have old savings in the bank, so that in case of urgent medical needs I can use them, otherwise I won't touch them. Daily food and other expenses I cover with the child home care allowance.

> [...] At first I thought I would go back to work after a year. Now I think maybe after Christmas, and probably at Christmas I'll think that maybe in the spring. It could be that I'll be at home until [the child] is three years old. If I find an interesting job or at least a permanent job I intend to spend the money [in the bank account] and buy a car. And if I don't [find a job], then I can use the savings [for living expenses]. So, I don't feel that financially I have to get a job [at the moment].

The middle-class world of most adopters is obvious in the narratives. Paula and Timo were at their 'summer cottage in France' when they received the referral for the child. Many others travelled widely. Part of being a good parent was being able to pay for expensive hobbies and material objects. The children played the piano or violin, or soccer, and went to English-language schools or special international kindergartens. The middle-class goal to cultivate children's skills, talents and individual expression was clear (see also Butler-Sweet 2014). This appears to be taken to extremes in adoptive families. Johanna, for instance, spoke at length about adoptive parents' responsibility to provide extra material and social advantages to the children:

> We should be prepared to give them more opportunities in life than to biological children. They should have the opportunity to study and everything. If they are left behind, they would sink really deep, our children. They should have opportunities. They don't need to become doctors or lawyers. But just to have a profession, so they can cope in life. If they have to rely on social benefits alone, they will never get back on their feet. And hobbies bring friends. They don't have to be expensive, but usually they always cost. Have people realised that they have to be able to offer this to these children?

The adopters' stable financial positions coupled with welfare-state benefits allowed them to stay at home, to focus on their children's needs, to provide them with hobbies and to cultivate connections with their birth cultures in terms of eating in ethnic restaurants, buying clothes and travelling. They frequently mentioned that 'of course' they would be visiting the country of origin, and many had travelled there or were planning to live there for some time. Adopters seem to belong to the privileged

minority that live in a world of wealth and power. Such a world appears to have virtually no borders (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013).

Entitlement and the 'Superior' Family of the Global North

The adopters were influenced by the family ideals that are prevalent in the Global North. They were also dependent on the practices of the adoption system that rendered first mothers invisible and the children free-standing. They therefore tended to compare the adoptive home to life in a children's home and not to life within the original family, thereby making the adoptive family appear to be the only solution. Tanja and Daniel felt strongly that 'a family is always better for a child than a children's home.' They asked: '[W]hich is better, that the child in [that country] could with good luck get to live until 25, a black boy, with luck, can reach that age, provided things don't go wrong on the streets.' Tanja added: 'I firmly believe that my children will live a happy life, why not.' The couple further pointed out, referring to their other adopted child, that a child 'who is very intelligent would in [that country] not have been able to develop her potential, but in Finland the sky is the limit, in other words we can offer her everything she is capable of or wants.' The ability to offer 'everything' was a recurring theme among the adoptive parents. As Anna said: 'We will give him a good life and everything you can think of that he might need.' They were convinced that they would give their children a good life, that the children would be happy, and that this would be achieved through material abundance and committed intensive attachment parenting.

When the adopters considered the option that the child would stay in his or her original family they viewed this family as inadequate: if a child is not firmly placed within the exclusive materially wealthy nuclear family that provides a stable and predictable home environment its life will automatically be worse. This is exemplified in the account given by Susanna with which I opened this chapter: the different family system of the Global South in which the child might be cared for by other kin members is not recognised as a proper family. Susanna implicitly contrasts the extended family and the bounded nuclear family. The extended family signals

neglect, whereas the family over here evokes security. Hence, an extended family headed by a grandmother implies that the children would be 'without the supervision of any adults'. Other family forms are thus seen as risks.

The adopters distinguished 'us' and 'them', and 'here' and 'there'. 'Here' and 'us' were by definition 'better' than 'there' and 'them'. The parents argued that the child's life in the country of origin would not have been 'a bed of roses'. The child would have had to live 'in terrible conditions', 'in a slum', in 'a matchbox-house', or in 'absolute poverty'. Martta thought it was such a good thing that the adoption was quick so that '[the child] did not have to live there in miserable conditions'. Mia has also explained to her child that life in the country of origin in cramped housing conditions and poverty would not have been good. Even though many parents had thought about the potential racism and other hardships their adopted children might experience over 'here', it was still considered superior than 'there'. As Tiina said: 'Nowadays I think that no matter what happens to [the child], what racism, it is nevertheless better than what [his life] would have been over there.'

The image of the sacred, innocent child whose value is immeasurable clearly clashed with what the adoptive parents observed and interpreted to be the case in the countries of origin. According to this ideology, it is wrong to see the innocent child as a labourer: children should not be put to work so that parents can profit (Hays 1996, 124). Such child dependency is also only possible in the Global North; in the Global South it is necessary for children to participate in generating income for the family (Panter-Brick 2000, 7–8). Anna mentioned the child labour they encountered in the country of origin and used this to support her argument for a 'better' childhood here: 'We saw eight-year-old boys packing things in shops.' Paula and Timo encountered the phenomenon of child labour when they fetched their adopted child. This 'shocking' incidence triggered Timo to compare the child's potential life in the country of origin and in the adoptive home. The adoptive home came out as by far the superior option. As Timo recalled:

> [Our older child] was completely shocked when we saw children coming to sell various things behind our window. They lived on the street and so. I have often wondered what kind of a future would [the adopted child] have had

otherwise. And I'm really happy that he is sitting there on a cushion watching [a children's video]. […] I know that he has a better future in this life here.

Countries and families of origin were also 'othered': in some narratives the others over there were portrayed as completely different: they did not share the same values or emotions. Poverty and the harshness of everyday life were seen to result in a differential valuing of human life. The implication was that not only were they materially poor, there were also too many of them, and they were considered indistinguishable from each other and replaceable. Hence, losing a life was not thought to be such a tragedy there as it is over here. Tiina and Susanna believed that the biological mothers did not see their children as precious and valuable. As Tiina said: 'That woman's way of thinking could be different from mine and also the child is valued differently in Western societies. [...] I felt that there they don't value a child as highly as we do. They are precious here but there, there's plenty of them, an overflow.' Susanna similarly thought that in the country of origin 'the value of human life, or that of a child, is not as high as it is here'. Anna, talking about another country of origin, suggested that without money and food mothers would not bond with their children. In other words, vital inequality was seen to automatically lead to bad mothering. Taken together these narratives suggest that without the internalised idea of the sentimentalised, precious child and the material position that goes with it the first mothers would experience no sorrow (or not much).

> Maybe this is just defensive, but [...] the culture over there is different. [...] Life's realities are different than here and life is bare and nasty. You live where you live and you hardly have money for food. I don't think they think the way we do, like we would think about the child daily. But life [there] is a constant fight and then there may come another pregnancy and again you have to fight. So life's realities and cultures are different. [...] They don't think like us. If we in our situation had to give a child away, we would think about it all the time. We would probably think it was awful and we would feel guilt, but I think it's not the same for them. (Anna)

However, some of those who had had contact with first parent(s) brought to light the assumptions behind adoption and questioned our assumed

superiority. These adopters pointed out the preposterousness of automatically assuming that our lives here would be longer, happier and better. Piia, who met the first mother of her second adopted daughter, noted: 'How could I ever promise that the children will have a life that is so much better. You can't promise that.' Mia, who met both first parents, doubted prevailing notions that life over there was less valuable and necessarily shorter. She questioned the basis of our knowledge formation ('we pretend to know') and the general assumption of life over there as simply worse in every way. Mia was doubtful, but she still believed that it was better for her son to be here than there, as she indicated earlier. The seeds of criticism were sown, albeit buried within the adoption discourse and family talk.

> [Had the adopted child stayed in the country of origin] I think he would mainly hang out on the street, would eat what he could find. I'm sure he would find a place for the night at his aunties'. But I can't say that it would be a worse life. And that makes you think, how would it be worse and could I say to his [biological] sister: 'listen, your life is worse', when for sure this is not the case per se. It's her life and as important to her as our life here. In a way we interfere. [...] We pretend to know it all. And what right do I have to think I would live any longer than they? I think this is a misconception.

The privileged position of the Global North citizen thus produced a strong sense of entitlement. The ability to provide opportunities, itself the outcome of global inequality, justified the transferring of children from poor to more affluent families. Moreover, material and moral superiority were conflated leading to the placing of the family and culture of the Global North above all others.

Kinning and De-kinning as Connected

In pointing out the characteristics of adoption as a market I do not claim that adoptive families conduct their family lives or think about their children in terms of commodities. They do the exact opposite, in fact.

My intention is to draw attention to the paradox that adoptive families striving for family feeling, love and affection have to apply market rationality to be able to form a family at all. Scarcity and competitiveness have repercussions in terms of how first mothers are conceptualised, however. This leads to 'market talk' and seeing the child as kinless, as not having any previous ties; as completely separate from its family of origin and its first mother, as something that can be sent or delivered anonymously from somewhere. Such a view decentres first mothers, renders them invisible and non-existent. The image of the free-standing child who is completely cut off from past relations in order to be given away to a new 'owner' is also prevalent in adoption discourse, and is backed up by legislation (Yngvesson 2002).

A narrow focus on the 'prompt delivery' of children hides the bigger picture and the fact that sending children quickly creates a need for more first mothers to relinquish their children more rapidly. First mothers are thus disconnected from the operations involved in the prompt delivery of their children. It follows that every act that potentially interferes with or reduces the supply could be seen as hindering the adopters' family-formation process. This is exemplified in the following excerpt in which an adoptive mother expressed her frustration at the current reality of adopting and the uncertain position of adopters in it. Linda dryly remarked: 'From time to time a quota is introduced. Then the quota is abolished. And then they support biological mothers. And then adoptions more or less stop. And you don't know whether to change countries or what.' Hence, improved domestic conditions in sending countries can sometimes be experienced as a threat when considered from the perspective of prospective adopters (or adoption agencies) in the Global North. Market talk obliterates the fact that there are real women at the other end who lack alternatives. It detaches and de-humanises first mothers, turning them into resources. It obscures the fundamental connectedness at the heart of transnational adoption between the two ends: there is no adoptive family without a mother relinquishing a child somewhere else. Adopters are in a situation in which they simultaneously hope for a family for themselves (and by extension for others around the world, including first mothers) and for the breaking of the other family without which their own family would not materialise.

Kinning and de-kinning are two sides of the same coin. The value of domesticity in the form of intense attachment parenting and the creation of 'ideal' childhoods was felt to be so important as to verge on the obsessive. The intensive staying at home of adoptive parents and the banning of other carers, even grandparents, from the child's life during the first years work like the attachment therapies described in Stryker (2010, 2013) to make the children love just one set of parents. The worry that the child is only capable of forming relations with one set of carers increases the symbolic distance of first mothers from the life of the adoptive family. If secure attachment only allows for one set of parents, such that even adoptive grandparents are excluded, then first parents definitely signal danger and would in this context be seen as a threat to the wellbeing of the child. Implicit in this is the notion that the appearance of other parents would make the adopters compete for the child's love and would undermine the parental mission and its emotional potential. The highlighting of the material and moral superiority of adopters leads to dismissing life in the country of origin and with first mothers as inferior, thus reinforcing the notion of adoption as transferring children from 'bad' to 'good' families and keeping first mothers at bay.

This chapter focused on the formation of adoptive families. The realities in these families change with time as the children grow. At that point adopters seem to relax and exclusivity may be stretched. We will meet these adopters again in Chaps. 7 and 8, which focus on encounters between adopters and first mothers. At this point, what Yngvesson (2002, 245–248) refers to as the enchainment of givers and receivers in adoption reappears with reference to the fact that the past relations of the child can never be totally annihilated.

4

The Un-Making of the Family of Origin: Adoption Social Workers as Intermediaries

[I]n the African tradition adoption isn't something they accept easily. Because they consider it to, like, throw your child away. I often have problems with the families and they're not allowing the girls to make their own decisions. (Adoption social worker, interview No. 1)

The areas of social work and adoption have undergone profound changes in South Africa since the end of apartheid. With regard to adoption there has been a shift from white, predominantly middle-class first mothers to poor black women (see Chap. 2). At the same time the focus in social work has switched from the living conditions of the white minority based on theories developed in the Global North to the needs of the majority population. A new paradigm was introduced in the government White Paper of 1997 (Ministry for Welfare and Population Development 1997), outlining the need to change from an individualistic and remedial to a developmental approach to social and child welfare that emphasises social justice and the realisation of basic human needs as well as enhancing human capacities. One of the specific aims is to combat economic and

social marginalisation. The focus is on prevention rather than rehabilitation on the individual level (see Drower 2002; Schmid and Patel 2014).

As noted elsewhere, the full implementation of the developmental approach would require a strong social-security system and ample employment opportunities, among other things (Schmid and Patel 2014, 4). Another challenge is the strong reliance on concepts developed in the Global North, in Anglo-American countries in particular. It has been shown that social work as practised and taught today is still influenced by the Global North, making it more difficult to address local concerns and develop approaches that would be more pertinent in the South African context (Drower 2002, 17; Schmid and Patel 2014, 7). There is a strong emphasis on child protection in South African child welfare, for instance, although a developmental perspective focusing on the extensive child poverty would be more appropriate (Schmid and Patel 2014, 5). Other authors have drawn attention to the fact that many of the ideas and models promoting child welfare and 'proper' childhood in exclusive and stable nuclear-family settings developed in the Global North that have been imported into the Global South as if universal are ill-fitted to these contexts (Leifsen 2013; Penn 1999, 2009).

Suggestions have been put forward to change the current adoption model in South Africa, which relies on Western concepts of the nuclear family, to a more locally based, indigenous system that would appeal to potential black adopters and include options such as joint adoption and stand-by adoption. In the case of joint adoption more than one person or couple could adopt, thus relaxing and enlarging the nuclear-family focus of current legislation, whereas in stand-by adoption the adopter would come to an understanding with the first mother that in case of the mother's death, the adopter would take care of the child (Gerrand and Nathane-Taulela 2015). The position and rights of first mothers have not been addressed, however.

This chapter focuses on adoption social workers' depictions of their aims and their encounters with first mothers when facilitating adoption. How do they approach adoptions and first mothers? My interest is in the values and ideas that guide adoption practices, and the interaction between the predominantly white adoption social workers and the predominantly black first mothers. Given that adoption is a largely

unknown and ill-understood concept among black South Africans, the role of adoption social workers in mediating between first mothers and the adoption system is considerable. '[O]ften they say "adaptian", you know, they don't even know how to say it,' as one social worker remarked (interview No. 2).

Social workers have the power to give assistance, and to control and regulate. It is through them, for instance, that first mothers can gain access to counselling and other services as well as in some cases to accommodation and skills-development programmes. They also have the power to remove the child from the mother if they deem that the requirements of parenting are not met. In depicting this double role, I utilise the concept of compassionate domination developed by Aihwa Ong (2003), who specifically focuses on the practices of social workers, among other individuals. Reflecting older colonial notions such as civilising racial others seen as inferior, in which coercion was intertwined with paternalistic ideals of uplifting these others, compassionate domination works through the simultaneity of caring and regulating. Applied to social work the aim is to instil in clients certain values and norms that tend to be middle class and white, and thus to transform them into certain kinds of human beings. This happens regardless of the possible good intentions of individual social workers (Ong 2003, 145–167). In framing adoption social work in this way I draw attention to the effects of power and seek to discover how first mothers are influenced by dominant ideas and values. Ultimately this power emanates from the wider adoption system and its regulations and practices. Nevertheless, it is embedded in the position of adoption social workers and works through the mechanisms of compassionate domination.

'We Can't in Any Way Encourage Mothers to Keep'

The adoption social workers I interviewed were unanimous in their belief that economic reasons constituted the prime motivator of adoption: unemployment, poverty, a lack of housing and HIV were the most common underlying reasons. What was most disturbing from the perspective of these social workers was their inability to alleviate these structurally

induced causes. Although South Africa has a more extensive social-grant system than other African countries, what is available to poor unemployed mothers is of low monetary value. As noted in Chap. 2, the child-support grant is totally inadequate and there is no compensation for unemployment. The adoption system does nothing in the way of providing material assistance to mothers who would like to keep their children. The social workers were fully aware of the shortcomings of a system that did not give them the resources to assist impoverished first mothers. They all knew that what was needed were job opportunities and with sufficient pay, or in the absence of jobs, some kind of financial assistance and affordable accommodation. They were thus witnessing the plight of first mothers but were unable to mitigate the consequences of poverty and inequality. Under these conditions, permanent adoption is, in effect, the only option social workers can offer women who cannot afford to raise their child in their current circumstances. As I will show, most adoption social workers did not favour temporary options such as foster care, which in any case would have been very difficult to achieve in court because of the new restrictions (Seekings and Moore 2013, 9–10). Proof of abuse or neglect of the child is required, but this is very difficult in the case of a very young or newly born child. The following statements of leading adoption social workers in two organisations summarise the issues.

> Because the majority 99 per cent of the mums giving up are giving up purely due poverty and just helplessness and hopelessness and destitution. [...] They're not giving up, because they think it's the best thing for the baby or because they think that they're too young to look after the child. They're giving up, because they can't do anything else. [...] We say to them in the counselling, you know, it's adoption or keeping. [...] So, you're not offering them anything. (Adoption social worker, interview No. 3)
>
> We know what the three big motivators are: it's HIV and AIDS, it's poverty and it's unemployment. [...] The difficulty is that we cannot offer employment, we cannot offer housing and we cannot offer a financial solution. And that is what most of them need. So we get into a situation very often where adoption or relinquishment of the child is actually the only option. [...] And there is a real sense of desperation in the moms that we work with because we can't offer them what's needed most. (Adoption social worker, interview No. 9)

What the social workers could do was to offer first mothers support in the form of pre- and post-adoption counselling. They were compassionate and caring and felt for them. Many of the first mothers I interviewed also acknowledged this, saying that being able to talk and being listened to had helped them. The social workers also made themselves available to first mothers outside of office hours by giving them their mobile-phone numbers, and tried to arrange other services such as medical help for their other children. A caring attitude combined with limited resources and the inability to be of real help sometimes led to exhaustion, self-doubt and even self-blame. One social worker mentioned her own need for counselling: 'When I came here I found that it was too emotional to some extent, that it affected me personally. [...] I had to make a balance between my personal life, physically or health-wise for me and for my work. [...] Because we are not dealing with paper files here, we deal with real people's life' (interview No. 6). Another questioned the ethics of her work: 'I just feel so helpless when they come, they say, you know, I just want temporary care and I have to say but there isn't. These are your two options [keeping or adoption], which is horrible. I mean, I just feel, what kind of a job am I doing here' (interview No. 7). The numbing of emotions in the face of extreme social suffering has also been reported among adoption social workers (Blackie 2014, 52). Witnessing another person's distress and not being able to give the necessary assistance clearly has repercussions for social workers.

In practice, official regulations were stretched and social workers tried to find ways of helping first mothers in more material ways. The general rule was that the social-work system could keep the child in their facilities or in a children's home for three months, as explained in the following excerpt from my interview with an adoption social worker (interview No. 9): 'We can offer them a temporary relief from looking after the child. [...] They have a three-month period when we look after the child. [...] And they can then look for a job, alternative accommodation, we try and help with childcare grants, we look at trying to support them in whatever they do.' One social worker told me that they tried to keep the children in their care for longer than three months if it was evident that the mother was 'seriously' involved (interview No. 10). Another one remarked: 'I've in fact provided one girl food and clothing for three months, so that, you know,

her boyfriend could, in that case there was a boyfriend who was with her, so, that he could get himself a job within those three month, but at least the baby didn't have to suffer, and the baby didn't have to be removed' (interview No. 7). Keeping the child for a few months was not long enough in most cases, however: according to the social workers, most changes in the women's circumstances took place after six months. I was told of cases in which the mother had come back later wishing to be reunited with her child, but usually the child had already been adopted and there was nothing to be done. Many of the social workers said that if there were a way to support these mothers or to have the child taken care of for at least six months, many of them would find a job or otherwise improve their situations, and would be able to take back their children. They commented as follows, for example: '[With adequate child support] a lot of our girls would keep their babies'; 'with an interim option, even HIV-positive mothers can keep their children' (interview No. 7); 'most of them, if they got a job, they wouldn't give their children away' (interview No. 10).

The social workers also suggested and had tried out new and more efficient ways of keeping mothers and children together. They proposed, for instance, that the government allow them to use one of the currently empty city buildings to accommodate first mothers and their children. Childcare would be offered so that the mothers could look for jobs. These propositions were not accepted, however. Others explained that they were involved in various community-outreach or community-development projects. One organisation was planning to cater for first mothers who wanted to keep their children in connection with a separate project, which they later executed. There is now at least one home for women wishing to raise their children:

> [P]art of it is to have a home for single mothers choosing to keep their children and they have the same kind of services, supporting them; and maybe they can live there for a year and have a small business and the children can be cared for kind of thing and then we can assist them to reintegrate into the community. (Social worker, interview No. 5)

These examples show that adoption social workers and organisations were neither unaware of nor insensitive to the problematic basis of adoption

practices. However, a lack of resources led them to conclude that under such economic circumstances 'we can't in any way encourage mothers to keep' (interview No. 3). Their primary responsibility was to keep the children safe. As one adoption social worker said (interview No. 6): 'If I know that there is no way this baby can go back to the birth mother, I, as a social worker, is responsible for that child's well-being. If I release that baby to her, I will be in trouble if anything bad happens to that baby.' The social workers were thus caught in the middle with limited authority to intervene other than to recommend the permanent removal of the child for adoption. Under such circumstances there is the risk that poverty, in effect, becomes an acceptable and justifiable reason for adoption.

The social workers' actions then start to resemble the policing of first mothers' material conditions instead of providing assistance. There were examples in which the social workers concentrated on monitoring the first mother's financial situation and living conditions, and if they were not found to be adequate, the child was removed. One social worker (interview No. 4) exemplified this situation: 'If anytime in the process the girl will change her mind we will respect that and we will say, you know, if you can keep your baby, that's fine, but we will make sure that she can.' Here the 'making sure that she can' refers to policing, not to providing assistance to bring it about. This is fully endorsed by The Hague Convention and the adoption system and is the accepted way of conducting adoptions provided that the first mother is not coerced (by another person) or induced by money to relinquish her child. Money enters the equation, of course, in being the reason for the adoption because first mothers lack the means to support their families.

'Overseas Parents Are Amazing'

All the adoption social workers were aware that there were many more families overseas wanting to adopt than there were adoptable children. A leading adoption social worker described her astonishment when she was visiting a European country into which a number of South African children are adopted each year: 'I walked into a room, where they've got the files waiting for children and it's huge. I stood there and I thought "Jeez".

It's amazing.' She continued that the abundance of prospective parents made transnational adoption feasible: 'It's so easy to go to inter-country. It's because these parents are waiting, they're prepared, they, you know, it's wonderful' (interview No. 5). A social worker from another organisation remarked that they had a 'rather long waiting list' for overseas adopters (interview No. 9) and a representative from a third agency said they always had 'more families than babies, which is good. [...] if we don't have our local families, we always have the overseas families' (interview No. 7).

One discernible thread among the adoption social workers was a strong belief in the superiority of adoption, and in particular transnational adoption, over other care-giving options. Overseas adopters were seen as better parents. They were represented as outstanding and 'wonderful' (No. 5) to whom the child was 'precious' (No. 2) or as 'amazing' and 'wonderful parents' (No. 1) who really cared about the first mothers (No. 8). There was a lot of talk about the opportunities the children would have. The material affluence of adopters was often conflated with moral superiority (see also Leshkowich 2012). Being able to provide the child with opportunities and affluence indicated capable, loving and skilful parenting. By implication, black families and culture were rendered inferior, or lacking. This sentiment was discernible in many interviews. The adoption social worker quoted next, who herself did not support this idea, pointed out the implicit repercussions of idealising overseas adoption and adopters. The superior overseas family is constructed vis-à-vis the less highly valued domestic black family, which is not considered to be as capable (interview No. 3):

> Sometimes there's a perception that children are better off in first-world countries, are better off in a trans-race family. Some agencies I think have that philosophy. That children will do better and you're giving them a wonderful opportunity, you know. [...] that it's so great that they're going there. And that for us is a slight misconception, because then what are you saying about those children's families that they come from. They are black children, you're saying that their families, that black families are not good to raise children. Not good enough, their standards are not good enough, or their way of life is not good. So it's like second-best to place them locally.

As mentioned in Chap. 2, the Global North family notion easily equates poverty with irresponsible parenting, the most extreme form of which is

depicting transnational adoption as rescue. The following narrative illustrates the belief of some social workers that adoption was a way of rescuing children from bad circumstances and bad mothers. The underlying causes were attributed to the parents', specifically the mother's, faults and inadequate parenting. Drastic measures, such as removing the child and relinquishing it for adoption, were justified by the notion of the innocent child. The (usually hidden) idea of adoption as the transference of children from bad to good mothers is explicit here. Adoption is even seen as a remedy for the developmental challenges, that is poverty, in South Africa. The possibility of dealing with the situation by arranging mother-child shelters, for example, is not mentioned:

> [T]he children of the world belong to us, don't they, they belong to all of us. I believe I've sinned if I can do something better for a child and I don't. So I would ask the hard question. I will rescue a child from the street or take it away from its mother if I have to. [...] that child belongs to me because he's in the world with me. He's vulnerable and he cannot speak for himself, and we know that his mother is not always capable of being the best mama. So adoption is an answer to the needs that we have. (Interview no 2)

Depicting overseas adoption as by far the superior option thus connoted the devaluing of the first family. The characteristics attributed to adoptive families are conspicuous by their perceived absence in the first family. Black first mothers are often represented as ignorant, child-like and in need of guidance. Social workers generally refer to these women as 'girls', even though most of them are women and some were older than the social worker. Given that the women referred to as girls were black and the social workers were predominantly white, this echoes the power differences and the social distance between the two groups. It is similar to colonial discourses of salvation that simultaneously infantilised its objects and imposed a moral responsibility for self-improvement on them (Wilson 2011, 329). Many of the social workers individualised material deprivation as a character fault or a fault of black culture in their representations of first mothers.

A closer look at the most extreme case will shed light on how such individualisation and compassionate domination works. Traces of similar ideology were also evident in other interviews. The social worker quoted

next is describing the routines in homes for pregnant women in crisis. According to her, black women come to the home without knowledge of basic modern living and manners. She is clearly compassionate and feels strongly that more should be done to help black women. At the same time these women are taught certain values that stem from white middle-class culture. It is simultaneously an act of caring through the offer of upkeep and accommodation and an act of paternalistic domination. The emphasis on 'them' also strongly normalises and generalises black people and gives the impression of their having pre-given traits; in other words, their actions are not contextualised as taking place in a particular time and place (Pratt 1992, 64). As the social worker explained (interview No. 1):

> Also just the normal trying to teach them, you know, there's a better way to live. A lot of them have to live in a hut, they've never had a proper flushing toilet, never had running water, don't even know what it's like to have a proper bath, you know. [...] You actually need to say to her very nicely, you know, this is how we clean the toilet. You're not gonna say 'do you know how to clean the toilet'. [...] They all get chores to do, they all get cooking opportunities. [...] so that they know this is how your bed's made, this is the standard in the house. Because when they leave they would know, you know, there's a better way to live. They all have to set the table together, eat their meals together, 'cause some of them have never been able to have an opportunity to do that, you know. [...] because a lot of them have lived in terrible, terrible conditions.

Here the assumption is that black people are primarily in need of civilising, having the connotation of teaching and educating lesser others. It is their lack of 'culture' that is highlighted and not the harsh material contexts of their lives and the lack of economic means. The context of the current structural inequalities behind the problems of black women and families were left out and instead their problems were individualised and seen as deficiencies in the women and their values. The implication is that their situation would improve if they knew there was 'a better way to live'. Such reductionism hides from view how 'having a proper meal together' depends on being able to afford it, and has nothing to do with ignorance of the practice of eating meals together. The women are being taught the values of modern living, hygiene and proper standards

of housekeeping and domesticity. Mere knowledge of this 'better way of life' is thought to be empowering, although it is beyond their reach economically. It is equated with having purchasing power. Poverty then also becomes moral failure.

First mothers are also taught the value of self-improvement and 'proper' gender relations. This empowers them but also inculcates in them norms that come from different contexts, in which women are not economically dependent on men. The following social worker's account is illuminating (interview No. 6). It shows that the social workers disapproved of what they interpreted as men taking advantage of young girls by offering them financial incentives to be their girlfriends, and strongly wanted the girls to refuse.

> It's something that we've incorporated in our counselling system for empowerment of women and young girls. To be able to say 'no', and not to rely on the man, you know. I think sometimes when one is in poverty and there are no other means of financial fulfilment and you find this man, who's there, who has the means to provide for you financially and these young girls get very vulnerable to that.

In reality the picture is more complicated. As Mark Hunter (2010) shows, men providing for their girlfriends materially is still an accepted part of South African romantic relations in contexts of unequal resources. It is unclear to what extent women in difficult situations could suddenly say 'no' or be empowered to make such choices when the basic means of survival necessary for leading a good life and being independent are lacking. A better and more efficient route would be to help women find jobs and earn money so they could be independent, as many first mothers I interviewed indicated.

'The Girl Must Choose'

As I have shown, the social workers spoke compassionately about the injustice of not being able to offer first mothers real alternatives so that they could choose between keeping the child and permanent adoption.

Yet, there was also a strong tendency to frame adoption as an autonomous individual choice. This echoes the guidelines of The Hague Convention and national legislation (South African Children's Act 38 of 2005), both of which emphasise the 'freely given' consent of first mothers/parents (see Chap. 2). The adoption social workers understood voluntariness along these lines as referring to not being induced or forced by another person, and the force of circumstances was not considered. They stated adamantly that '[a] girl can never be pressurised or manipulated to make a decision like this' (interview No. 4), or informed their clients that '[t]hese are the options that you have and it needs to be your decision, not my decision because I'm not going to live with that' (interview No. 1). The social workers saw their role as that of a disinterested party in the middle, safeguarding the rights of first mothers to decide, even if in reality this so-called decision only involved one option. They strictly followed the protocol and ensured that the legal requirements of adoption counselling were met.

The 'choice' that the social workers referred to was often constructed as being between adoption and abortion. Abortion was generally regarded as a bad choice that should be avoided. Only one social worker referred to problems related to the availability of legal abortion. She told me that public clinics and hospitals were frequently overbooked, which led to delays in abortion appointments and often meant that abortion was out of the question because by then the pregnancy would be too advanced. She gave this as one reason why many first mothers resorted to adoption or abandonment instead of abortion. Many more social workers deplored what they perceived to be high rates of abortion in South Africa. Some were also of the opinion that in making abortion freely available to young girls, South African society was, in effect, 'biased against adoption'. Abortion was frequently considered immoral: 'A 14-year-old can have an abortion without telling her mother, but she can't have her tonsils out. [...] It's wicked really' (interview No. 2). There was even in some narratives a stated explicit goal to induce women to place the child for adoption instead of having an abortion. This same social worker told black women she met about the adoption option: 'It's a choice that you have, it's a wonderful thing to do.' Some social workers appeared to be almost on a mission, as illustrated in the following dream of one of them: 'We

could help so much more women.' She informed me that although they were already 'reaching thousands of women per year', they could 'triple it' (interview No. 8). Another one deplored the fact that 'they [black women] would rather have an abortion than place the babies in adoption' (interview No. 1). The problems with such an approach become visible if it is transformed to another context. Finland has extremely low numbers of babies available for domestic adoption and the abortion rate is higher than that of South Africa (see Chap. 2). Yet, no one would suggest banning abortions and promoting the adoption of the subsequent children instead. It seems that such measures are in place only for those who can be 'othered' as being completely different from 'us'.

The following account suggests that the empowering work of the social worker is sometimes a way of changing the woman's values so that she will make the 'right' choice. Although the social worker mentions offering 'other options' to the women, these only refer to adoption. Such a framing ignores the fact that many mothers resort to both abortion and adoption because the option of keeping the child is not open to them. Implicit in this social worker's narrative is the idea of empowering women to choose, to become agents, but without providing any means or resources that would allow the making of a real choice from some realistic range of options. The fact that increasing economic problems and extremely high unemployment have made it very difficult for the majority of the population to raise children is obscured.

> If you offer a desperate mother other options. [...] We have found that this mother will choose life for her child. [...] We give that responsibility back to her to make sensible, with our assistance, make sensible choices on her own. So we empower her to take control. And that makes a vast difference for the mothers, and we've seen many mothers have chosen life because of the positive adoption option. (Social worker, interview No. 8)

Adoption social workers are required by law to include wider extended family members when they are counselling first mothers who are under 18, which they did. Many complained about having to do this, however. They compared it to abortion, where no such permission is needed. Partly their unhappiness about involving kin had to do with the fact that the extended family was not necessarily favourably disposed towards

adoption. As shown in Chap. 2, the usual way of approaching unplanned pregnancies in the extended family system is to absorb the child into the circle of kin.

> You know, if you do adoption we encourage the girls to involve the family, but by law a girl of fourteen years can go for an abortion and she don't need her parents' consent, she can do that, it's fine. [...] [Whereas] a birth mother at the age of eighteen needs to have the consent of the guardians to relinquish her child for adoption. (Adoption social worker, interview No. 4)

The implication is that the individual should decide and interference from the extended family should be avoided, as exemplified in the quote that opened this chapter. According to the social workers, the extended family could coerce women into either opting for adoption or keeping the child, but only gave examples of interference in the form of being against adoption. In the following excerpt the social worker strongly advocates the rights of the individual, which she identifies as being realised via adoption. Here, care within the extended family is in effect placed in opposition to adoption, which is considered better and perceived as rescue.

> [O]ften the mothers are forcing the young girls to make adoption or forcing them to keep the baby. I see a lot of that. I hate it. Because the girl must choose. It's her life. As long as she has all the facts. [...] There's a girl, and I've been with her in the birth, she wasn't fond of the baby, not at all, I think she was sixteen at the time, not bonded, not interested, not, completely clear, and suddenly the *gogo* [grandmother] discovered that there was a baby and she forced her to take the baby with. I remember her being at the hospital and holding this baby and just there was nothing, and the *gogo*'s smiling. And (sighs) it was just so wrong. But you have no control over that, the girl is underage, and, you know, also it's the cultural tradition. So you can't argue with that. So, you know, some babies you rescue. (Adoption social worker, interview No. 2)

It is clear from further remarks made by the same social worker that adoption and the nuclear-family model are considered superior to care within the extended family. Her comments reveal that the tradition of sending the child to be cared for by the grandmother in fact stands in the

way of adoption. The extended family system then becomes an obstacle to adoption: 'That's why it's difficult to get a girl to make a plan, because she knows *gogo* [granny] will take the child' (interview No. 2).

One significant outcome of social-work practice was the instilling in the first mothers the value of autonomous choice. Black women were being taught to become modern independent decision makers. Being embedded in kin networks, which in collectivist cultures is of high importance, was seen as tradition and as harmful. The aim was to mould the women into dropping their traditional reliance on kin and the extended family and thinking individualistically. The good decision maker is a first mother who can be transformed into an autonomous chooser, who is detached from her extended family and would choose adoption even if her extended family felt otherwise. This is illustrated in the following narrative. The social worker first talks about how many black extended families refuse to place the baby for adoption because they feel it is 'their child'. The difference between the Global North and white South African understanding of family and the indigenous view according to which the child belongs to its kin is clear. She then goes on to emphasise that only the woman concerned should make the adoption decision, not the extended family. The complicated context of most adoptions is revealed in the reference to the possible temporary nature of extended family support. That help could be given to the extended family taking care of the child is not mentioned. Instead, the primacy of financial reasons is eventually played down. The social worker also implies that care in the extended family is inadequate. It is even claimed in this scenario that decreasing the number of children cared for by the extended family would reduce the number of street children.

> We often have to deal with the grandmothers, and the aunties, that say, you know, we'll help, we'll help and when the girl does go home with this baby they help maybe for the first month, and then they kind of say 'oh, jeez, we didn't think that we couldn't.' [...] I often get involved with the families and say, you know, if you're not able to financially look after your families now [...] how are you actually gonna do this? Besides the fact that she should have the right to choose. It's not always about the financial situation, it's about the emotional situation, 'I'm only eighteen, I want to still

study, I still want to be a young person', whether the pregnancy is her fault or not she has the right to decide. [...] Whereas they say 'you got pregnant, no matter how, now you take that responsibility and you mother this baby' and in the end this child ends up a little street child, and an underfed little child that runs around in the locations, you know. (Interview No. 1)

The assumed inherent goodness of adoption came across in many interviews. Most homes for pregnant women in crisis only allowed women who were going to place their children for adoption to stay there because, according to the social workers, allowing women who were keeping their children to stay in these facilities 'had a bad effect on the other girls'. Presumably, then, many might have changed their minds and decided to keep their child.

'If Your Circumstances Don't Change'

In the course of the interviews I heard many references to first mothers wishing to change their minds. The women who stayed in the homes made various comments indicating that the adoption decision was not always clear-cut. One said: 'Girls that come here, they stay here but after a time they tell [the house-mother] or so that they want their child back and everything. Because they are very sad. […] [But] they can't take their child back.' Another one remarked: 'I saw with some of the girls that was in the house, they were here for adoption. And then, it was two weeks after, but I think it's the first time when you go back to the nursery to see the little one. Then they started to no, but I must make a plan to keep it, I must make a plan to keep it.' These accounts suggest that being 'adoption-minded' or 'parenting-minded' as some social workers described the first mothers, were fluctuating concepts and that getting the baby back may be very difficult.

Changes of mind are not generally accepted if material circumstances have not improved. In such cases counselling was sometimes used as a method of inducing the mothers to accept adoption as inevitable. The period when the baby is born is critical, as apparently many mothers want to change their minds at that point. The social worker has to be prepared to tackle such issues. The social worker in interview No. 6 made

this clear. From the account we learn that a first mother wanting to keep her baby has to be reminded of her non-existent resources and poverty.

> Sometimes a birth mother who's just given birth, who's seen her baby, she would say 'no, I want my baby back'. But if she goes back to reality and thinks about her present situation, you find that it's not possible for her to keep her baby. [...] She feels she wants this baby, but then we would let her go through the counselling programme at her own pace, and then she would eventually accept and see that there is no way.

Other social workers also referred to the need for first mothers to 'explore their feelings', which would make them realise that adoption was the only option. Moreover, compliance with adoption has to be carefully monitored during the counselling period. The social worker has to make sure that the mother does not bond too closely with the baby:

> The other thing is when you're working with the girl, and preparing her for birth and for the adoption, that balance between how much you want them to love the baby and care about the baby, that they don't get too bonded. Because their circumstances are bad. So there's a fine line with that. (Social worker interview No. 2)

In some instances, the first mothers attempted to change their minds before the adoption was finalised. It is stated in the law that consent can be withdrawn within 60 days of signing the form (South African Children's Act 38 of 2005, Section 233: 8). Once the two-month-period reserved for first mothers to reconsider their decision is over, it is in practice very difficult to reverse it, as the next example illustrates. Here the social worker was able to change the first mother's and her friend's minds by referring to all the opportunities the adopters would be able to offer the child. The key appears to be the superiority of the adopters' financial status. No importance is given to the return of the genetic father or to the first mother's obvious reluctance to go through with the adoption. As the social worker explained (interview No. 2):

> I had a girl that made the adoption plan, she came, sixty days were well up, we were waiting for people to come from Denmark. And, she and her friend came to see me. It was two weeks ago. What did they want? 'Oh, we

want the baby back'. Yeah, so I asked 'Why?' I said, 'I'm sorry, you know the sixty days are over'. No, the boyfriend, the passing boyfriend has come back on the scene and he says where's the baby. So I said to her, you know, 'why do you want the baby?' She said: 'I don't know. My friend's gonna help me now'. I say 'But the people are on their way. We got the meeting on Friday, to meet the adopters; the boy is already four months old'. She took the baby home first, but then brought it. [...] but the friend is now with her. [...] I said, 'no, this is how it works' I said '[The birth mother] had a long time, she had the sixty day. [...] and it is too late'. Except if the birth father was never told. [...] We check with her, she did tell him she was pregnant and he ran away. And suddenly he's come and now all of a sudden. And he doesn't even ask for the baby, he just wanted (inaudible), of course they were a bit worried because now it's public as well that she's made the plan. And, but then it was great because when I explained to the friend what had happened with the child, she said: 'Ah, you mean he's got a wonderful home? You mean these people are going to take care of everything for him?' She was thrilled, absolutely thrilled. And [the birth mother], she wasn't really bonded with the baby, she's positive now, the baby is free, so. He's now living on a farm in Denmark. Farming people. Wonderful.

In another case the first mother had second thoughts at the meeting with the adopters. It is clear that the first mother cannot change her mind. The social worker managed the situation in favour of the adopters and the 'difficult' first mother was placated. Identifying with the adopters, she referred to the adoptive mother as the more suitable mother who had bonded with the child. She also expressed the view that the two-month reconsideration period of first mothers is 'long' and more than adequate. There were many references to circumstances in this and other social workers' accounts, invariably referring to the lack of financial means to care for the child. The fact that the circumstances were bad materially, and that there had been no change in them was regarded as a legitimate reason for adoption. Hence, the notion that poor people should not, in effect, have children lurks behind adoption practices.

That was a strange meeting. Because [the birth mother] she cried in the car and then when she got there she immediately, she saw the baby and he's beautiful, she went quickly and grabbed him out of, fortunately he wasn't

in the mom's arms, he was in a little chair and she grabbed, and held him and played with him, but he was already connected with the new people. It was great to see, but it was hard for her. And in the end we let her sit and we tried to talk and they took the babe and took some photos. Mother's crying. But afterwards [the birth mother] said: 'But what if I did change my mind? Could I have it back?' You know, two months, sixty days is long enough, it really is. And if your circumstances don't change, you know, you can't. (Adoption social worker, interview No. 2)

In general, if the child is already in the adoptive family, adoptions cannot be overturned. One social worker (interview No. 9) said in answer to my question of whether first mothers ever wanted to have their children back that they did get such cases: 'They come back and they say it's really hard, but we know that it's really hard. But in most situations there isn't a great change in the situation, in the personal circumstances, but there's just regret because there's a sense of loss.' Another social worker (interview No. 10) told me the following story: 'The girl came a year after adoption. And the child was already in Holland. And, you know, it was when she realised that she, according to her, she felt that the decision was not right. And she wanted to reverse the process and unfortunately there's nothing we can do.' Even if there has been a change in circumstances it is very difficult for first mothers to get their children back. Adoption arrangements have to be made as quickly as possible, as illustrated in the following account (interview No. 7). It seems that the adoption system does not acknowledge in any way the more short-term temporary difficulties that the first mothers may experience.

We can't keep the child in our care indefinitely. We've got to report to the court every six weeks to say why we've got this child still in our care. And then, when the child is three months, the moms haven't come back to us because nothing's changed, we place the babies and six months later we meet them and find the things have changed. And that is so sad because the child belongs with his biological family, really, if that can happen. So, that's the hardest part, is that, you know, things can, look, I'm not saying every instance it's change, but there have been a few instances where it has changed. And, you know, there is no choice because then the adoptions have gone through already.

Changing one's mind about adoption is difficult on every level whether the adoption order has gone through or not. Even if such cases were rare, they indicate that first mothers are the least protected party in these exchanges. In the absence of any intermediate care options, time works to their detriment. These narratives also reveal the problematic extent to which the poverty of first mothers influences adoption.

'We Are Looking for Families for Our Children'

The goal of the adoption social workers was undoubtedly to ensure the children's well-being, although often in a pro-adoption manner. As they pointed out, 'we are looking for families for our children, not children for families. Trying to help the children's needs' (interview No. 3); 'For us it's finding the best possible solution for our children. And I must say that I've just seen amazing results for international adoption programmes. It's an amazing option for those in children's home or anything else' (interview No. 5). The problem is that the family they have in mind is of a particular kind. The family that comes through as ideal in the accounts of the adoption social workers (and in adoption legislation and treaties) is the nuclear, exclusive family of the Global North, which is also prevalent among white South Africans (Bray et al. 2010, 53–54). Although the nuclear family comprising a married heterosexual couple is changing through the increase in divorce and re-constituted families (see Chap. 2), in adoption circles it still seems to be the ideal against which all other family forms are compared.

The adoption social workers emphasised the value of having one parent of each sex: a mother and a father. Black single mothering was considered inadequate. As one social worker explained, such families were dysfunctional, possibly producing 'street children': 'I believe street children come from mothers who're not bonded with their babies. There's no father in the picture' (interview No. 2). Having no father in the family was, according to the social workers, extremely detrimental in every way. A family such as the typical black South African matriarchal extended family with no male members was depicted as having something seriously wrong with it. The absence of a father was seen as the same as

having an abusive or alcoholic father. The following account is illustrative of this. The social worker first mentioned poverty but then went on to project the nuclear model onto first mothers.

> Material need is number one. [...] Second place, the absence of the birth father, that kind of a support, that commitment; having a relationship. We've seen that most of our birth mothers come from families where they were either in an abusive relationship with the birth father or he was absent or, abusing alcohol or whatever. So that was the abusive relationship, it was an unhealthy relationship. And a lot of them want to have a father and mother for their child. (Interview No. 5)

The social workers' belief that the matriarchal extended family was inadequate was then transferred to black female clients of social work. When I asked about the reasons for relinquishment, one social worker answered: 'There's lots of reasons. A lot of our girls grew up without a father, so if I can say, emotionally they want a mother and a father for their babies, they want a family setting' (interview No. 4). She went on to talk about the benefits of adoption and of the nuclear family, revealing that these were her values: 'If there's an absent father then it's a loss for a child, there's a loss in that relationship. So, I think every option has got its positive and negative stuff, but I feel for a child in a caring, secure adoption family, where he's wanted and loved. It can only be good.' In other words, the lack of a 'proper' family form is the reason and justification for adoption, reflecting (old) psychological theories developed in the Global North. No consideration is given to the fact that the fatherless black family is by no means an aberrant deviation. Instead, it is currently the most usual family form, with a minority of less than 30 per cent of children living with both parents (Hall et al. 2014, 91).

The domesticity of the Global North family type also emerged as the preferable option. As one social worker (interview No. 1) pointed out: 'It's a very big vision of having cottages for women to be able to live with their children, to have a family and life, and not all living together in one place.' 'All living together in one place' clearly refers to both the material lack of affordable accommodation and the practice of extended family and kin members staying together, in contrast to the nuclear family establishing a home exclusively for themselves.

The concept of a permanent family, which is highlighted in adoption treaties and legislation as well as in the social workers' accounts, clearly points to the materially stable adoptive family of the Global North. This family is then prioritised over the extended family. In some cases, permanence (and the Global North family type) was contrasted with fostering, but as the majority of foster parents in reality involve grandparents, this criticism was directed at the extended family. Kinship care in black families was seen as inadequate and not as a proper (permanent) family. As one social worker remarked, adoption is superior to all other forms because it forms a 'clear' and 'clean' family with no unclear and messy previous ties:

> I love adoption because it's clean and clear. [...] Personally I don't like [foster care]. [...] That's why I hate the foster-care system, you know. There are too many children in foster care, when they could be placed permanently. (Interview No. 2)

The next excerpt makes it clear that foster care within the extended family is considered a 'last resort', despite the fact that it keeps children connected to kin and enables first mothers to maintain contact and possibly regain their children after a while. Again, the social worker complains about the interest among first mothers in 'retaining a right over [their] child'. Stability and permanence 'in terms of a family' point towards the materially stable nuclear family. The social worker also maintains that children have a right to such a family. Researchers have shown that children have a right to remain in their family of origin, however. Although seeking family-based solutions for children who cannot live with their parents is encouraged, international law does not confer the right to a family per se (see Cantwell 2014, 73). In other words, children do not have a right to be adopted.

> We really want to move away from the traditional view, welfare view of childcare and look at permanency planning for children. Foster care and the children's home placement for us would be a very last resort. [...] Because we do believe that stability in terms of a family is the right of every child. And foster care is not a stable situation. It should be just a temporary solution. So if we are looking at foster care generally we're looking at foster

care for extended family members and the majority of our foster-care place-
ments are with extended families to keep the child within the family, but
also as a means of the biological parents retaining a right over that child. It's
a formalising of what once was an informal situation. It's really not the
premise we will bolt on, we believe very strongly in permanency planning.
(Social worker, interview No. 9)

Adoption is seen as superior to foster care or other temporary solutions
because it is exclusive and promises proper attachment. It is assumed that
all children need to attach to one set of parents, and that anything else
would be a risk to their psychological functioning and well-being. Social
workers were in favour of exclusive attachment and described the lack of
it as resulting in conflicting loyalties or being confronted with many kin
groups, as explicated in the following accounts by two of them. These
views are nevertheless problematic in universalising and taking as supe-
rior a family model that is ethnocentric. Domesticity and exclusivity in
this sense are, in reality, alien to the majority of families in the world. As
shown in Chap. 2, the lack of exclusivity is only considered a problem in
Global North settings.

> Attachment in an adoption situation is more beneficial for the child. […]
> Because foster care, it's always temporary and it's always people coming
> and going and children are very, you know, conflicting between biological
> parents and foster parents, and where does their loyalty lie. (Interview
> No. 4)
>   Even an adoptive child needed to belong after a period in his adoptive
> family, not be confronted with both heritages. (Interview No. 5)

In other words, family is seen within the framework of a bounded domes-
tic unit that is permanent and always lives together in the parental home.
Parental care in this model means staying together. Leaving a child in the
care of someone temporarily or in a children's home or a hospital was
equated with abandonment. Abandonment for social workers thus meant
the first mother 'disappearing' but without formalising their consent to
adoption. One social worker described such an incidence, deploring the
lack of a formal signing-off of rights. It seems that despite the spectacular
instances of abandonment in unsafe places emphasised by the media (see

Blackie 2014), leaving the child in the care of someone or in a safe place may be the more common situation.

> Maybe it's just my perception, but what is happening is often the moms are abandoning the babies in hospital. There the baby's born early, and often HIV-positive. And so the baby goes to incubator, the mother goes home, she's perhaps given a false address, you know, she changed her cell phone number, you can't trace her. I was with a baby this morning that her mom's just done that. [...] There's another children's home [...] she placed him there. So here's again, there's a baby in need that could possibly be adopted, who's got medical needs, and because the mother's just disappeared, she hasn't made a formal arrangement. I hate it. Because he's in no man's land and who takes responsibility for him. So we followed up a number of babies where the mothers just disappeared. So it's not so much that they're leaving in toilets, leaving them in fields, it's that they are taking them of other places of care. (Adoption social worker, interview No. 2)

The adoption social workers further disapproved of first mothers who left their children in foster care but were not prepared to release them for adoption. As one social worker explained: 'I think we have children that are abandoned and that end up in foster care, which is not permanent. And that we should change. We have children that are abandoned in children's homes. I know that for a fact. They have no contact whatsoever and those children are not available for adoption system and they should [be]' (interview No. 5). Similar sentiments are reported in another study based on interviews with adoption social workers in South Africa: 'Of greatest concern to the social workers, are the children who are left in institutions or in the foster care system by parents who are known, but who are unwilling to take care of them. These parents are not prepared to relinquish their rights to their child' (Blackie 2014, 56). The problem is that some of these mothers may be trying to get through a difficult phase in life and place the child temporarily in a safe place while looking for work and accommodation. Such cases are revealed in some social workers' accounts of 'abandoning' mothers who disappeared but later came back to reclaim the child. A common element in these cases is that the mothers did not intend to leave the child in someone else's care perma-

nently. These mothers are unable rather than unwilling to take care of their child.

> We've had birth mothers abandoning children in hospital and going away that we haven't been able to counsel that might come back two years later and said 'I just wanted somebody to keep the child for a while, but I want my child back'. And then it's very difficult to work with them. Uh, but 'no, we've placed this baby for adoption. You can't have the child'. (Social worker, interview No. 5)

As a further complication, black South Africans generally view adoption as abandonment. All the social workers I interviewed deplored the negative view of adoption held by the black community. Given the expectation that you always take your child home, adoption was understood as rejecting the child and was very strongly disapproved of. The first mothers I interviewed told me that adoption was seen as 'throwing away' or 'dumping' the child. The negative views may have something to do with not trusting the white welfare system that had abused them under apartheid. There is also a clear connection with the issue of losing or retaining the rights to a child. Many first mothers saw adoption as abandonment because it permanently cut off all ties between mother (and kin) and child. This was also made clear in another study, in which it was found that young black women facing unplanned pregnancy preferred the idea of foster care over the irretrievable break represented by adoption (Blackie 2014, 66–67).

The dominant Global North notions of what constitutes a family or parental care are imposed on the realities and very different understandings of black South Africans. It is problematic to prioritise nuclear domesticity in a context in which family forms are different and temporary separation between mothers and children is widespread. It is thus highly misleading to equate separation with abandonment. The real issue seems to be that mothers may not want to be permanently written out of the lives of their children, which adoption requires, but may favour temporary solutions or options enabling them to retain connections.

Conclusion

Adoption social workers are clearly doing the best they can in a professional setting that is undervalued, underfunded and understaffed (Jamieson et al. 2014, 55). They have to operate under the pressure of laws and regulations, governmental guidelines and rules with few resources at their disposal. Unable to address the pressing financial and survival needs of the first mothers, they do what they can. Adoption social work is thus largely rehabilitative, working on the level of individual first mothers and trying to help them cope (with the loss of a child), and not preventive as indicated in the developmental approach to child welfare. Adoption is seen as a remedy (for poverty), when the main task should be the prevention of maternal separation. Material poverty is, in effect, accepted as a valid reason for removing a child from its family and placing it for adoption, even though international bodies such as the United Nations, as indicated in its 2009 Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (United Nations General Assembly 2010), clearly state that poverty 'should never be the only justification for the removal of a child from parental care, for receiving a child into alternative care, or for preventing his/her reintegration, but should be seen as a signal for the need to provide appropriate support to the family' (cited in Cantwell 2014, 73).

The encounters of black first mothers with predominantly white adoption practices and social workers tend to activate mechanisms of compassionate domination, which purport to change 'them' into being more like 'us'. The framework of the exclusive nuclear family and notions of autonomous individual choice are imposed in contexts of extreme poverty and a collectivist culture. Although on the philosophical level adoption social work is based on the premise of finding families for children, the unintended consequences of applying Global North notions of family and the idea that every child has a right to such a family, and thus a right to be adopted by Global North families, undermine this goal. Family is thus a key term, but the problem is that what is considered to be proper parental care is socially constructed and evokes strong normative assumptions. The focus on permanency and exclusivity, which are also the goals of adopters (Chap. 3), effectively disconnects first mothers from their children. I will now turn to the first mothers' own accounts. In what ways are they struggling, and how do they understand their situation and the adoption process?

5

First Mothers' Stunted Choices

> When you'll sit down you'll think about the life and the children. Child is a person, it's not like thing that you can broke and you can fix it the next time, and you can buy, you go to shop and buy another one. Child is a difficult thing. (Mary, first mother)

What little information there is on first parents in other countries points to severe constraints on their decision-making. Historically, in the aftermath of war, discrimination against bi-racial children and desertion by American and European fathers left first mothers in China, Japan, the Philippines and South Korea with few choices (Briggs and Marre 2009; Choy 2013). It has also been pointed out that rescue operations aimed at orphans and orchestrated by Global North countries, together with the growing demand for adoptable children have from time to time led to child 'harvesting' without the consent of the mothers (Briggs 2012; Briggs and Marre 2009; Smolin 2012). Harsh population-control policies in China have forced rural families to hide or abandon daughters (Johnson 2004, 2012). Single motherhood may also be highly stigmatised, as research conducted in South Korea (Trenka 2012) and India

(Bos 2007) indicates. Material deprivation and dire economic circumstances as well as a lack of social support have been identified as major reasons for placing a child for adoption in disparate countries in the Global South such as the Marshall Islands (Roby and Matsumura 2002), Brazil (Fonseca 2003, 2011), Argentina (Giberti 2000), Ecuador (Leifsen 2009) and India (Bos 2007).

My aim in Chaps. 5 and 6 is to investigate the narratives of first mothers in contemporary South Africa. According to the information given by adoption social workers, the majority faced severe economic, subsistence-related challenges in contexts shaped by vital inequality (Therborn 2013). Chapter 5 outlines the complexities of agency in such conditions. These first mothers could be placed on a continuum ranging from those facing the hardest material circumstances with the fewest options to those whose situations, even though difficult, gave them slightly more autonomy and whose adjustment was less forced. Different factors are intertwined in the concrete situations of individual first mothers, reinforcing or weakening the respective effects. They are separated analytically here, although I discuss the combinations as I present the women's deliberations. I also encountered a small number of first mothers whose situations differed markedly from those described in this chapter. Their decision-making followed a different logic in that their improved material positions shielded them from the effects of vital inequality and extreme poverty. Chapter 6 goes on to explore how the process of polarisation into losers and winners in post-apartheid South Africa also structured the experience of placing a child for adoption. The focus in both chapters is on the first mothers' concerns and deliberations. What were their aims, hopes and reasons? What form did their deliberation and decision-making take and how did the context influence it?

Cruel Trade-Offs and Vital Inequality

Material circumstances and the low position of women in various social hierarchies severely limited the range of options available to the first mothers. As they talked about the situations leading to the adoption of their child, social and economic deprivation was a common denominator.

The lack of means to generate income, culminating in real suffering without even the basics to ensure survival, coupled with inadequate accommodation in dangerous and impoverished environments were mentioned frequently. Close scrutiny of the ways in which they related their aims to what they could accomplish under the circumstances reveals that their deliberations often took the form of trade-offs in which all parts of the equation were impossible or equally unwanted. The women faced the situation of having to consider whether they could raise their child if it meant a struggle for survival for them, their other children and close kin. Keeping the child and maintaining life appeared not to be an option. The trade-offs looked like dilemmas in which their major concerns were in conflict, often resulting in an unsolvable dead-end. The either-or nature of these trade-offs reveals that there were no real alternatives from which they could choose.

The trade-off could be articulated thus: if this last-born child is kept, the other children, kin and the first mother herself would suffer or might not survive at all, because they are struggling as it is and cannot afford to feed another child. The choice is, in fact, restricted to either keeping this child or staying alive. These dynamics are evident in the case of Mary, 34. Like so many others I interviewed she had migrated to the city in order to look for a job. She had recently, about a month previously, placed her child for adoption. An unemployed aunt living in a rural area looked after her other three children. Mary thus far had only had occasional piece-work jobs and was in temporary accommodation in the city. She lost her previous job as a live-in domestic when she fell pregnant with the child in question. Domestic workers are generally not allowed to have their children with them (Goldblatt 2005, 119). She described her situation:

> [Life] was difficult for me now, because I've got other children. […] But now that I saw them life is difficult. […] I took children to [the rural area], so I just stay here. So that's why I gave the baby for adoption. […] Because for now I'm homeless, I'm not working. […] My other children at home don't even have shoes to go to school.

She pondered on her possibilities and came to the conclusion that her last-born infant would be impossible to raise: 'The problems, I thought

I can't afford anything, yeah, anything. For the first feeding you, clothes, the place that I'm here like that when I'm here, you see. I saw that is so difficult I can't.' Mary explicitly refers to the lack of paid work as triggering the chain reaction: no job—no income—no food. She remarked how she and her family were always short of money and lacked the essentials towards the end of the month: 'Just, like, now, I'm just [having] little of money to buy some food only, because we don't have money. We are too [poor] so that is. Like now, I end up on a break, I end up [broke] until now.' Even without any regular income, most of these first mothers were supporting extended families living elsewhere. Mary was the sole provider for everyone in her (extended) family. As the aunt was unemployed, there would be no help coming from anywhere or anyone else. The responsibility for their families was huge and almost impossible to realise without regular income. Keeping the child might have meant the death of all of them.

> Look at the children. I don't have enough things to give them, the right thing that they want, so you see. That is the other childs. When I'm starting to sit down, to feed the baby until two years, two, three years, so what's going on? What would have happened to us? And she was not working, my aunt. They [are] all looking for me.

The trade-off specifically worked through juxtaposing reproduction and income generation. If their extended family and close kin lived far away or were otherwise not able to help with looking after the baby, the first mothers could not simultaneously nurse the infant and look for a job or continue doing small occasional jobs to earn some money. Without assistance there was literally nowhere to put the baby during the job searches. Keeping the child would thus jeopardise the chances of working, which would then endanger physical survival. Hope, 20, had recently handed her child to adoptive parents from abroad. She had come to South Africa as an illegal immigrant from Zimbabwe and discovered she was pregnant after she arrived. Although abortion has been available since 1997 and is widely practised, what was common to Hope and most of the

first mothers was that the pregnancy was too advanced by the time they discovered it, or by the time they managed to get an appointment at the clinic. Hope also had another child being cared for by her own mother in Zimbabwe. With no help and no family in South Africa, her trade-off was between keeping the child and continuing even with the on-off job selling second-hand clothes in which she was currently engaged. It was impossible to accomplish both.

The desperateness of Hope's situation was evident in that, first of all, she had no accommodation in which to live with the infant, had she kept her. She relied on other Zimbabwean women, occasionally staying at their place, and the adoption organisation's provision of temporary housing. Second, with a child she could not work or look for work. Without work she could not send money home. She could not take the baby to Zimbabwe either, as there were already too many mouths to feed. Currently she could not even afford the fare to go back for a visit, even though her mother was ill. They all depended on the money she sent them. Without her meagre remittances, her family would go without food. Under such circumstances, even small amounts of money could make a difference, as Flora, another Zimbabwean immigrant, explained: 'Because if I make some piece jobs here, you know, if I get hundred rand [nine USD] I can send home and when I send home it's a lot of money. And my child, they can survive with that hundred rand. But when I'm there, you know, nothing at all.' That these women's predicaments took the form of a particularly nasty trade-off with sheer survival at stake for all of them is evident in the following excerpt from Hope's interview. It was absolutely necessary for her to remain in South Africa and to keep sending remittances:

My problem is I'm looking my mom, I support my mom, I support my child. There's child of my brother, she is at school, and then my younger brother, he's at school. So I must send them books and food to eat, to go to school […] And then another, my brother is at home. He is looking my mother too. There's something. And then another, my young sister, she is eighteen years now. They said she gave birth only last two week. She is there with her boyfriend. […] If I send something to my mother at home I'm

feeling happy all the time. […] My mom now is sick. So I can't go 'cause I don't have money. (cries) […] I only have money to send them to buy food. 'Cause if stop it there's no food. […] So if I go to look after my mother then no one can send us food.

As is evident from these and other first-mother narratives, it was not just a question of not having enough money, it was also about not being able to secure the basic necessities of life. The inhuman consequences of vital inequality (i.e., unequal life chances of human organisms) (Therborn 2013) transformed the relinquishment of a child for adoption into a matter of life or death. The first mothers' talk contained frequent references to physical suffering and not having enough food. Many mentioned experiences of hunger. The social worker who acted as an interpreter in the interviews with three of the young women working as seasonal agricultural workers on white-owned commercial farms said of their circumstances: '[T]hey are all living below the poverty line. Just a thing of survival. They can't look after anybody else. They just have to look after themselves.' One of these women was Louisa, 25, who had given birth the previous day. She was a seasonal fruit-picker and lived with her mother, her five-year-old child, her sister and her children, all in extreme poverty. The social worker explained: 'Because in [that area] there is not a lot of job opportunities and the pay that they get from working in the vineyards, is, how much? Oh, 200 rand [15 US dollars] a week. I mean it's terrible, you can't. They really have a struggle financially to provide all their needs.' Miriam, 25, who had placed her child for adoption over a year previously and who had a four-year-old child living with her brother's family, said that the reason for not keeping her last-born child was her inability to provide for it. When I asked her if it was because of money, she replied: 'Even the food.' It was about her own suffering and that of her other child, had she kept her last-born.

What is particularly striking in most of the women's biographies is the number of deaths, tragedies and losses in their lives prior to the adoption. Petunia, 24, had just chosen overseas adoptive parents for her child. Her own parents, the father of her two-year-old child and of the infant she had relinquished, as well as three of her siblings had passed away. This was why she made the adoption decision when she was still pregnant.

She was already trying to provide for her first-born and two brothers: 'My little brother is at school, but my old brother he don't work. […] I'm supporting them.' They lived together in her parents' house, which was a small government brick house of four rooms, also known as a 'matchbox house'. She went to school and afterwards to college to become a hairdresser. She now works at a hair salon 'doing white people's hair' that does not pay enough. Petunia says she would need a better job and explains what is wrong with the present job: 'Working late shifts. And I'm suffering sometimes, the money is not enough.' This shows the problematic nature of low-paid jobs: even with a job it was not always possible to make ends meet.

Having No Choice

There was thus a discernible narrative of blocked decision-making, exemplified as, 'I chose adoption because I had no choice' and in comments such as: 'I love this baby, but I don't have choice in the situation' (Hope) and 'I have no choice' (Petunia). Cindy, 22, had relinquished her child about a year previously. She had been a student at the university but had to give up her studies because of a lack of money. She was currently unemployed and had been trying to get a job but to no avail. She did not have a place to stay in and was relying on friends to support her. These constraints compelled her: 'Then I had to give the baby up for adoption because I didn't have much of a choice'. Likewise, Simphiwe, who features in the next section, stated emphatically that she did not have a choice in the matter and therefore signed the consent form. This kind of talk could reflect the prevailing negative attitudes to adoption, to some extent. Emphasising the lack of choice could be a way of absolving oneself from active decision-making and hence from possible accusations of 'throwing away' the child. However, the fact that none of the first mothers investigated in Chap. 6, who had more resources at their disposal, even hinted at having no choice implies that talk about having no power also refers to other dimensions of the mothers' situation: cruel trade-offs leave very little autonomy of action in situations of vital inequality. Having no real choice from the existing alternatives shows the sinister logic of the trade-offs the women face.

An example of adoption that strongly resembles forced adjustment to necessity is the case of Lily, which reveals the intertwining of various constraints and the exacerbation of trade-offs. Lily's narrative brings to light a number of issues raised in the interviews with social workers. She stated outright that she did not want to part with her child. Because she lacked the necessary material resources, however, her baby would be taken from her and placed for adoption. This case reveals the cruelty of this policy and calls for a need to rethink the question of assistance to poor mothers and their extended families. It also concretises some of the effects of vital inequality that was a decisive factor in all the cases presented so far. The story of this woman's futile struggle to mother her child is thus indicative of wider processes at work in adoption from countries with widespread extreme poverty.

Lily, 37, was one of the saddest and most desperate mothers I encountered. She had given birth a month previously and was still in the home for pregnant mothers while the child was in a 'baby home'. She cried throughout most of the interview. Lily was born in a far-away rural area characterised by large-scale poverty, where there were no jobs and no educational opportunities. She therefore did not manage to get much education. She had two older children who lived in the rural area with her own mother, who was also unemployed. This extended family had no male members. Lily, like so many others, had to migrate to the city to enable the whole household to survive. The role of the extended family in providing childcare and support and in pooling their meagre resources is significant.

Lily eventually found work in the city as a domestic worker. Later she also worked in a fruit shop. At this stage she was faced with a surprise pregnancy, and hence could not keep her job, even though she tried. Nor had she been able to find a new job. The father of her last-born child abandoned her completely. As she remarked dryly: 'Men everywhere problems'. Lily wanted to keep her baby but did not have the means to do so. The trade-off here had an exacerbating effect. Lily's deliberations circle around a dead-end: wherever she looked there were obstacles. She formulated the dilemma thus: 'If I'm staying in [the rural area], it is too far, I haven't money for transportation. It's too far. There's no jobs. And here I don't have a place to stay.' She could not return to the rural area and her extended family because there were no jobs there and without

income they would all starve. She did not have a job or anywhere to stay in the urban area where she currently was. If she found a job in the city but only had accommodation in the rural area, she could not commute between the two places due to transportation costs. With a baby to care for she would need good accommodation and help with childcare if she were to work. Lily's account makes visible the disempowerment and feelings of entrapment of those who do not have access to even the basic means of survival. Again she said: 'I have problems. Not enough money. I haven't got money. No job. But I want to have my baby.'

As far as social networks are concerned, the situation seems equally gloomy. Lily could not rely on the help of relatives. Her siblings, sisters and brothers, were barely managing: 'They have their own problems. They are struggling.' Her sisters did not have jobs and could or would not help with the baby. She said that some of them saw that she was pregnant but did not acknowledge it and did not offer help: 'There is somebody sees me pregnant, because pregnant is pregnant. Somebody sees something is wrong. She sees me but she not tell me nothing. You see. Does not tell me nothing.' In conditions of chronic unemployment and dire poverty, people have to look after themselves. Lily also asked her friends in the urban area for help or shelter, but the problem was the baby: 'I tried, but the baby, where would she stay. She can't stay here.'

Lily's first thought in contacting a social worker was to ask for assistance in keeping her baby. She tried when she was at the hospital giving birth: 'I ask the social worker to help me. That I have a problem and I'm pregnant and I have got nothing.' The social worker told Lily about adoption, of which she knew nothing. After giving birth she again told the social worker that she wished to keep her baby. She was asked whether she had a home. As this was not the case she was taken to a home for mothers whose children are placed for adoption and the baby was taken to another home. Lily's pressing concern was to find some employment so that she could keep her baby. It is just a question of time before adoption proceedings are put in motion in homes for adoption-minded women. Lily knew that once she had been to court and it was established that she had no means to care for her baby, it would be placed for adoption. After signing the consent form she only had two months to prove that her situation had changed. She describes her feelings:

> You see, I'm very worried. Every day I'm worried and they are coming to see me every day, if they are ready to take the baby. […] Because it is not easy. (Cries) It is not easy. […] I want to take baby but I can't. Because I have got nothing. I have got nothing. I'm afraid to tell the court because I have got nothing. […] If I'm going to sign, I will never find the baby, because if you want the baby back, it's just two months. But now I have got nothing. And can't find job.

Lily tried everything. She tried to keep her previous jobs at the fruit shop and as a domestic, but could not. It is clear from her deliberations that she considered all sides of the trade-off and had exhausted all possibilities. She was even considering offering to work without pay, just for her own and her child's upkeep: 'Now I tried everything. I tried to find a job. […] I'm thinking if I find a job, maybe in somebody's house or, and I ask them, I will not want pay for two, three, four years, if me and my baby could stay or give something for me and my baby.' Lily also tried to adjust her concerns in the light of these impossible trade-offs. Having no other alternatives, some first mothers adjust their wish to keep the child to the scenario of adoption. Lily explained why this was not possible for her: 'And you know I tried to forget this baby but I can't forget. Now I'm not sleeping, I'm not okay. I stay awake until two or three, I can't sleep. I tried to forget but I can't forget. […] [E]very day I'm thinking about my baby and I don't sleep and I want my baby (cries).' Even visiting the baby did not help. The more she saw the baby the more she was preoccupied with it. There is also a terrible sense of urgency in Lily's narrative. Time is running out and she knows it:

> I tell my social worker I want to see my baby, maybe I would feel better, because I'm not feeling better every day, if I was going to see the baby. […] But I don't forget. I don't forget. I cry how is the baby, and next week I cry and it is the same as I see the baby. But then it's the same, how is the baby. I don't know. And if I hear a voice I think my baby is crying. And if I find that the baby is crying I feel bad. I wake up in the night and maybe it will be too late.

Lily also knew that even though she had made it clear that she wanted to mother her baby, the social workers could not place a child in conditions

of deprivation: 'I tell the social worker that I can't let take the baby, I want my baby. She says I hear you but I can't give you the baby because you have got nothing. You don't have clothes for the baby. You haven't got anything for the baby.' I offered to talk to her social worker but Lily did not want me to: 'It's better not to. […] Maybe she will be angry or.' The relationship between social workers and first mothers is caring but also one of unequal power.

Lily's narrative reveals the blind spots of the current adoption system with its focus on children as single entities, as if kinless prior to adoption. It shows the mother's perspective, which is rarely mentioned. Although it is often claimed that the 60-day period after signing the consent form, during which the mother may still change her mind about adoption, is too long, Lily's account shows how short it is in reality: against all odds she tried to change her material conditions and to find a job in just two months. In fact, she suggests that she might be able to improve her situation if she had more time during which the baby could be cared for. As shown in Chap. 4, the social workers saw substantial changes in the women's situations after six months to a year. Lily was, in effect, suggesting temporary care for her child. Her situation could change in the years to come, but if the baby were adopted it would be permanent, thus making it impossible for her to reclaim her. As she said: 'Maybe if they could wait for two years and then go to court, maybe I would find money, get a job, but now I've got nothing.'

Lily's narrative, as in the case of the other first mothers, is full of references to a lack of basic means of survival, including food. Her idea of working for several years just for the upkeep of herself and her child is another indication of the repercussions of vital inequality. The differences in life expectancy and life courses between the Global North and South give this a different twist. In the context of higher life expectancy and improved health care in the Global North, a 37-year-old is still considered young and able both to adopt and to receive state-subsidised fertility treatment. Lily at that age realises she is old: 'If you are young it's better, they can make more children. But I am old. […] Now I think this one's maybe the last one.' She knew that would probably be her last child and that she could not have more, and yet she had to part with it.

Lily's narrative resembles the narratives of passive agents or 'fractured reflexives' to whom 'things merely happen' (Archer 2003, 299; also Sayad 2007/1999). The internal deliberations of such agents do not appear to provide answers to the question of what should be done: they rather 'go round in circles' (Archer 2007, 96). Utter hopelessness in front of an unjust system and repressive conditions that leave very little or no agency for Lily certainly was a feature of her narrative. Powerlessness and the feeling of having no influence over what was happening showed in her deliberations. She stated that her concerns did not make any difference to the outcome: 'I don't like adoption but what can I do, because I'm poor and I have got nothing. […] I don't want that [adoption], and that is my problem you see, if I want or if I don't want, it is the same. It's the same. It's the same.' However, whereas passive agency in the Global North context is perceived as a lack of initiative in the person in question (Archer 2003, 304, 2012, 250–251), Lily's deliberations did not lead anywhere because of the constraints. Whatever she tried did not work. There seemed to be no way out and she just came back to the same thing again and again. She tried various routes to get herself out of her plight, even suggesting indentured labour. However, she had no job, no shelter, no assistance and no time. In the end she was rendered passive. Such conditions and limited resources block agency. It is thus likely that the mechanisms of becoming a passive agent are different in the Global South, having more to do with structural and systemic violence than is acknowledged in theories and concepts developed in the Global North that emphasise active agency.

HIV, Unequal Life Chances and the Need for Temporary Solutions

Given the high prevalence of HIV/AIDS, the trade-off also materialised in the form of reproduction or health. The HIV-positive first mothers were afraid of deterioration in their own health, in which case they would be unable to care for themselves, their other children or this last-born infant. This worry was generally combined with having few or no resources at their disposal, and no help. It tends to be the most vulnerable that suffer from multiple social inequalities and are subjected to the effects of the

pandemic (Hunter 2010). The three women who disclosed their HIV-positive status to me all mentioned this as one of their reasons for placing their last-born child for adoption. They knew their life chances were diminished, and feared what would become of them and their other children. They also mentioned unemployment and not having 'a good background'. Some of them viewed these issues differently after the adoption, as their worst fears concerning HIV subsided. Antiretroviral drugs were available when necessary, and as one of them remarked at the end of the interview: 'Even if you don't have HIV, you're still going to die'.

Health clinics routinely test pregnant women for HIV and other illnesses. In the cases of Elsie and Simphiwe their HIV-positive status came as a nasty surprise during pregnancy. The genetic fathers of the children deserted them when they heard the news. Elsie, 27, whose child had been adopted a year previously, was left alone with the knowledge of carrying the virus and with a pregnancy: 'It came as a shock. Then when I told him that, and they tell us this is positive, he said to me he doesn't want a positive child, and then positive mother.' She then had to go back home to her mother and stepfather, where her older three-year-old child and adult siblings, all unemployed, also lived. There had been problems before with the stepfather, who had chased Elsie away when she became pregnant with her older child. Elsie strongly felt that in such a situation she did not have the resources or the strength to take care of the child on her own. The trade-off took the form of her own health and life or keeping the child. She explained her reasons: 'The reason is that I didn't have a job, and his father ran away, and my stepdad also. I can't keep the child. Because I must look after myself.' It was also clear that she was trying to cope with multiple obstacles: she was HIV-positive and unemployed. She described how the situation hurt her and her family. This shows how tightly linked poverty and being HIV-positive are as reasons for relinquishing a child for adoption. To my question of what was the biggest problem Elsie replied:

> It's unemployment. It's hurting me. Because you can't get any money from anyone if you're not working. You must work so that you can get money. Right now I don't have clothes. If I want to go somewhere I must go and borrow some clothes, like look at my shoes. I don't have money to buy shoes.

Simphiwe, 29, had placed her child for adoption two years earlier. She was currently working as a cleaner at an optometrist, living with her six-year-old child and her own mother. She agreed to meet me during her lunch break at the shopping mall where she worked. During her pregnancy Simphiwe learned not only that she was HIV-positive but also that her other child had the virus. When he was told about this, the father of the two children left her: 'He chased me and then he just went. I never heard from him. […] He is just phoning sometimes but that is it.' Her circumstances were difficult before, but now her worries about the consequences of both herself and her other child being HIV-positive combined with a low-paid unstable job and no support from the children's father led to her contacting social services. She did not know how HIV would affect her capacity to look after her family, and as her older child had also been diagnosed with the virus, the trade-off forced her to choose between her last-born infant and her other child. If she had kept both, they might all have suffered. Her narrative also shows the caring side of social work. The adoption social worker had clearly helped her in taking care of her older child. Parting with the last-born was, nevertheless, hard.

> I just found out with the baby that I gave up that I'm HIV, so life has been so difficult. […] So I had to give up the baby. […] I felt I was still starting to deal with the HIV thing. And then I still had to because immediately after I found out, I went to test the big one and they also found out that she is HIV, so things are so difficult for me. […] [The social worker] also found a doctor for us and he is such a wonderful person. So he's so nice and has been helping a lot, the baby is undergoing treatment now, so he's such a wonderful doctor. […] I thought I'll never give it up because it was so difficult for me. […] So since then it's been ups and downs.

Intertwined with the illness was Simphiwe's lack of material security stemming from her precarious position in the lower ranks of the labour market, with insufficient pay and unemployment an ever-present threat. Her deliberation clearly reveals these constraints. It became obvious in her narrative that she was constrained by not being in a position to provide security for all of her children:

> I must also think about my background, I don't have much background so that I can protect two of them. Because it's not quite enough because maybe I work like if I have a nice job or a decent job I could have kept her because I knew I had a good background.

Rose, 43, had placed her child for adoption three years earlier. She had two older children from a previous marriage, and later had two more children with the man with whom she was currently in a relationship, an older girl of five and the baby she relinquished. Rose and the children's father are both HIV-positive. The pregnancy thus worried her. She and her two older children were all unemployed. The father of the younger children did some menial work on and off. Rose lived in very bad conditions in an informal settlement, in a tent with ten other people with no electricity and no sanitation. The five-year-old girl was slightly better off, living with her paternal grandmother, where her father was also staying. Rose saw her every day. Her reasons for having the new baby adopted centred on her anxiety about the future. As her account demonstrates, different trade-offs combine to produce even harder either-or situations, here unemployment and poor housing conditions exacerbating worries connected to HIV. The desperation in Rose's account is palpable.

> I got pregnant again and I was worried because I was HIV, so I didn't know what to do now because the father is also on and off working and of course [our other child] is supported by her father's parents. Like now, till now. So they are the ones that are helping me. Her grandfather passed away, so it's only the grandmother is left. So she stayed there with them. […] And I decided for the last one now, the one who's adopted, because I was sick and I didn't know what can happen and who's going to look after her, so I thought maybe that's the best place for her. […] 'Cause I didn't know how long I'm going to last. Yes. And then I'm worried if I don't get a job then I don't know what I'm going to do.

In time Simphiwe, Rose and Elsie, or rather Elsie's boyfriend and the father of the child, came to think about adoption differently. Although Elsie was not convinced that her boyfriend could provide for the child, he came back and repeatedly expressed a wish to retrieve his child, as I show later. Rose and Simphiwe would have preferred temporary solutions,

which were not available. In time they expressed sorrow and regret. Rose told me she would have preferred either a domestic adoption that would have kept her child closer and possibly within reach, or foster care and the child's possible return. As is obvious from her narrative, only transnational adoption was available. She was therefore reduced to passively waiting for the possible return of her (adult) child:

> I wanted the local one, but they said there aren't local one. […] Because I think maybe I can contact. […] I was only told about the overseas ones. But I wanted a local one or a foster thing. […] So now I can't do anything now until she's reached the age.

Simphiwe did not originally want her child to be adopted, as is evident in the way she talked about 'having to give the child up' and 'having no choice'. Here not having a choice refers to the concrete lack of other alternatives. The initial shock of her HIV-diagnosis made her contact social workers, but she would have preferred help of a more temporary kind, with the child being looked after for a while and then given back. With no interim options for first mothers and with new restrictions on the availability of foster care, Simphiwe was at a dead-end: her only option was to part with the child permanently. It is also symptomatic that although poverty is not considered an acceptable reason for (temporary) foster care, it is accepted as the major reason for (permanent) adoption. The permanency that is prevalent in the adoption system together with current thinking on child welfare thus effectively de-kin first mothers from their children. In Simphiwe's words:

> I just asked, I found out, I was sick and I thought, I wanted to do, what do they call it, not adoption but I wanted them to take the baby for awhile and then, yes, foster care. So they told me it's not possible. […] Because they said I can work, I'm not that much sick and my CD4-count is still good and I'm still working so there is a big ground that I can keep the baby, so. That's why they said it's not possible. And adoption is possible. It was so sad. I'm still missing her. […] I didn't want adoption but I didn't have a choice. By then I had heard about being HIV.

Despite being HIV-positive Simphiwe, Rose and Elsie were, at the time of the interview and several years after the adoption, in good health and had access to antiretroviral therapies but did not currently need them. As one of the social workers stated, HIV-positive persons can adopt a child provided they 'behave responsibly' in taking care of themselves and being committed to therapy. By implication, HIV-positive mothers could keep their children if support was available.

Simphiwe deeply regretted relinquishing her child. There will always be the doubt in her mind that maybe she could have managed to keep it. After all, there were plenty of poor people, even beggars, who appeared to be raising their children. Simphiwe's advice to other mothers facing adoption would be not to go through with it:

> It's such a difficult thing to do. It's not an easy thing to do. And I did it because I didn't have a choice. So I would wish other persons to think before they do this. Sometimes I used to say to myself there are some blind people out there, they are suffering a lot as they are begging for the money, but always they carry their babies at their back, I used to wish that even if I didn't do that maybe sometime would be different. I used to regret that, I used to see those people and then think if I had kept my child maybe things would be different again. I used to regret what I've done. Now that I see those begging people, they struggle with their babies, and those babies they end up growing so I should have kept my child and let God take care of everything. But because I was so emotional and then this thing with HIV came to me as a shock and then I couldn't think of anything.

Simphiwe's narrative raises several problematic aspects in the way the current adoption system works. One might ask how voluntary her placing her child for adoption was. She freely gave her consent in the technical sense required by The Hague Convention and national legislation. The social worker clearly did not manipulate or coerce her into making this decision. Yet, coercion was present, but it was structural and somehow hidden, having to do with unequal access to resources. Simphiwe obviously needed some kind of assistance but was offered none. She thought at the time, and it looked as if she was right, that temporary fostering would have carried her through the initial shock

and difficulties. Individualistic choice-based instruments such as 'freely given consent' remain empty and without meaning in contexts characterised by inequality of a vital kind.

Trade-Offs Between Education and Reproduction: Schoolgirls and Their Mothers

There was a trade-off between keeping the child and education, given that it was not possible to continue in education while taking care of a baby. Having no education in the current shortage of low-skilled jobs is likely to lead to a lack of job opportunities later. This was the case for those still at school, but it was also hinted at in some other women's narratives. The pregnant schoolgirls among my interviewees were all anxious to continue their schooling. They all had their mothers' support and the mothers were in fact influential in arranging and bringing about the adoption. Noluphiwo, 15, told me that her mother was upset at first when she was told about the pregnancy but that they had then come to the conclusion that adoption would be the only option in their situation. Noluphiwo and the father of the child were both still at school and there were several siblings with their children already living in the household of her single mother, who although working was getting paid very little.

Pam was just 14 years old. When I met her at the home for first mothers she was eight months pregnant. She told me that the most pressing issue was her education; the only problem with the pregnancy was that it 'reflected on my school work'. She dreamed of finishing her education: '[The social worker] told me that they could fax a letter to my school that after I give birth, so I can go back to school. 'Cause education is more important than everything else.' She wanted to be a pilot when she grew up. She and her mother had approached the social services about adoption because of Pam's young age and also because of their difficult economic situation at home. They did not always have enough to eat. Bontle, 18, another schoolgirl, had relinquished her last-born infant a month previously. She gave birth at night at home with the assistance of her mother. They then brought the child to the social worker the following morning and Bontle went to school. She was now living with her

aunt who helped with the upkeep of her other child. She did not have any means of supporting herself and her child and had to rely on the aunt, who could not feed another mouth. They struggled economically as it was. Bontle's narrative highlights the challenges of mothering and trying to attend school:

> And then this year January I've got another baby girl, which I gave up for adoption. Because I'm not working, I'm just a learner and then I got a second baby at a young age. I can't, the one who's supporting the other, the baby boy, cannot afford to support both the babies and then me. And then I can't afford to look after both of them and at the same time attend school. […] if I had a job, if I'd finished school and have a good job I would've kept her. Because I will be able to afford both of them. […] Everything is hard. Having to wake up in the morning, feed the little one, bathe him, make food.

As is evident from Bontle's account, too, economic factors were present in all the cases involving young girls. Here the extended families could not absorb the children and as most of the girls were very young and had to attend school, adoption looked like the only solution. It should be kept in mind, however, that young girls under 18 constituted a minority among the first mothers, as the statistics kept by one of the biggest adoption organisations in South Africa show.

Agency and Constraints in Fragile Economic Situations

The first mothers' circumstances could be placed along a continuum of situations ranging from the most difficult involving vital inequality to those featuring slightly less structural coercion. At this latter end, although there were still constraints, there was at least some room for their concerns and agency that entailed complicated negotiation between ensuring the future of older children and keeping the last-born infant. In these cases their deliberations did not take the same form of unrelenting trade-offs. Nevertheless, hovering over their decision-making was the fragility of their current economic equilibrium and the constant worry about falling into extreme poverty and being at the mercy of outside influences.

Natie, 27, who had relinquished her child for adoption about a year previously, was born in a poor rural area and was raised by her mother. She was employed as a domestic worker and was studying part-time to become a management assistant. She had two other children, who had always lived with her mother. She came to the city trying to find work, and later moved in with her boyfriend and fell pregnant again. The boyfriend was abusive and Natie only found out she was pregnant when she had left him. Like many others, she was providing for her mother, her siblings and her two older children. She said that the reasons she resorted to adoption were economic. She explained that it had, at times, been a real struggle to provide for her children and extended family. It was nevertheless also evident that they had reached a point at which they were managing and she was able to save some money and to study. She pointed out that her plan was to get a more secure and better-paid job through her studies. It was this survival strategy for the future that another mouth to feed would have jeopardised, as she pointed out:

> I couldn't kept my child because I'm not working. Actually I can't support the child, even though right now I'm the breadwinner at home. I have sisters and brothers, but I'm the breadwinner at home. […] They have their own families here, so my mother and the other two at home and my two children. […] I'm not ready for this child. I've suffered, I've suffered through a lot about the other two. I wasn't planning to have another kid. […] It's hard, but you have to work hard to create something for yourself and the other children. I have to work hard. […] I'm saving money.

Cathy, 30, had placed her child for adoption seven years previously. She explained that she was unemployed at the time, young and already had two children. Having had problems with the father of the child she moved back to her mother's house where many of her siblings and her two older children also lived. All were unemployed or still going to school. It was in this difficult situation that Cathy decided to relinquish her child. She had come to the conclusion that she would not be able to look after it. She also reasoned that it would be at a disadvantage compared to her older children because of her worse economic situation and because the child's father was unwilling to provide any financial help. As she said:

When I got pregnant with him I didn't work at the time, I was unemployed and his father and myself we had problems, he was like involved with someone else and I had to move back to my mother's place and my mother wasn't working and I had brothers and sisters and all of that, so I couldn't take care of him. That's when I asked if I can give him up for adoption. […] I can't give him what I want to give him, do you understand, I was unemployed and I didn't want him growing up not having what other babies or what my other kids got from their dad, so that's why I decided that it's best if I give him up.

What was common to other first mothers, too, was the worry that their current material situation would deteriorate substantially if there were another dependent. Connected to this, these first mothers wanted to ensure that their other children made it through life. Cathy, Natie, Lucille, Lerato and Margaret spoke at length about the need to provide opportunities for their children, and lamented the fact that they could not do the same for their last-born. Keeping that child would also have lessened the other children's chances. Although their options were limited, they were nevertheless able to weigh them up. Margaret's case further demonstrates these dynamics. Margaret, 33, was the only married woman among the first mothers I interviewed. She and her husband had four children together. The doctor had told Margaret that she was 'too fertile'. She was taking the contraceptive pill, and had been making arrangements to be sterilised when she realised that she was several months pregnant. She and her husband then decided together to place the last-born infant for adoption. She recalled the subsequent conversation with her husband, in which worry about this child's subsistence is present, but alongside the economic constraints there is more room for deliberation.

So I told him that we are not going to fight, we are just going to sit down and talk this thing through. I know that we are struggling, but there's always a solution. He said to me I don't know. What are you going to do? I said no, the doctor told me about this people's adoption what, what, what, what. So what are we going to do? He said to me I don't know. I said if you don't know then we're going to keep the baby. He said then what is the baby going to eat? I said I don't know because when I ask you something you said you don't know, oh, I don't know, too. We must just sit

down and come to an agreement. We must speak this thing out, you see.
Then we started sitting down, talking, arranging; came here, met [the social
worker].

It was clear that they had financial worries. Margaret further elaborated
on their economic problems: 'We are having four children now, and then
[the child relinquished for adoption] was fifth one. So we are struggling
about finance, financially. And then I'm working, he's working, but I'm
doing part-time job. He's working at [this company]; and they don't earn
much.' As Margaret's job was part-time they did not earn enough and
there was no job security. They were trying to make ends meet with their
poor pay. At the time they were just managing, but sometimes strug-
gling towards the end of the month. Not having a proper job seriously
constrained their ability to parent the way they wanted to. Inadequate
pay prevented their planning for sudden illness or even for the children's
meals at school. However, it is also clear that the constraints in Margaret's
case were of a different kind to those of the first mothers discussed earlier.
Although their house was not spacious enough for a family of six, they
nevertheless had a house. As she explained:

I'm suffering financially. [...] And the accommodation also, our house is
too small. [...] If there's no money then it seems like we are stuck with
everything. Your life doesn't go on. And I think that if I get a permanent
job, a security also, you see, maybe I'm working for government, I'll know
that maybe I'm having a medical. If a child get sick I'll be able to take it to
hospital. [...] If I'm still stuck in [this job], I don't see any future there. [...]
[Y]ou must buy the child whole books, uniform, you must know that what
is, he's going to eat for the whole year. [...] with this job you can only
budget for a week or, or for a month, you see. And then before that there's
nothing in the house. So you're starting to take money out of your coat and
maybe three rand and say take, you'll buy from school, and then the chil-
dren doesn't eat properly.

The constraints Margaret faced were not as severe as those of Hope and
Lily, for instance, who were struggling just to survive. Fear of such an out-
come was also present in Margaret's case, however. The carefully acquired
balance of making ends meet was easily tipped. Margaret and some other

first mothers thus anticipated future trade-offs that might materialise if they kept the child. Their other children and the last-born, if kept, may well have suffered in the future.

Giving the Child to 'Better' Parents

Researchers leaning on evolutionary theory have identified similar maternal trade-offs, attesting to the importance of circumstances in maternal decision-making. According to this research, mothers have always been torn between whether to invest in the new infant or in subsistence-related activities and in other children and kin. When neither birth control nor abortion is available, such decisions are made after the birth. A lack of material resources and social support lead to the withdrawal of maternal commitment, and to child abandonment (See Hrdy 1999, 2008; Johns and Belsky 2008; Keller and Chasiotis 2008). However, this approach takes the fact of difficult circumstances as given, the implication being that circumstances are equally difficult for everyone everywhere. Such an integrationist perspective does not fit the context of transnational adoption, which is based on inequality. The rationale is that there are parents elsewhere who are better off. The South African first mothers were very aware of this and were influenced by compassionate domination in interactions with social workers. This created the image of a better life for the child elsewhere. With no assistance forthcoming, these mothers were faced with not being able to provide for their infant, and started to see adoption as sending the child to a place of safety. Significantly, maternal commitment is not generally withdrawn. As the social workers indicated (Chap. 4), most women approach social services in the hope of some sort of assistance in order to keep the child. The trade-off for these first mothers was thus: either keep this child and the child will suffer, perhaps even die, or place the child for adoption and it will thrive. Their poor circumstances were contrasted with the affluence of adopters.

The social workers' positive views of adopters were reflected in the first mothers' accounts. The mothers were told that there were long queues of parents who could not have children but desperately wanted them and were able to offer so much more. This becomes clear in the account of Lucille, 38,

whose child had been adopted over ten years previously. She also knew that the youngest children were the most wanted and the most highly valued:

> [T]his other social worker explained. […] She told me that you know there are very very very well-off people who doesn't have kids who are able to take care of kids, so I just wanted to leave her in good hands, I don't want that the child is going to grow up and suffer you know. So they told me there is a long list of prominent families who want to adopt kids and this is a newborn and usually a newborn has a better chance of adoption because they don't know nothing.

The adoptive family was seen as being able to offer a life free from physical suffering, that would provide more opportunities and, eventually, good jobs. The first mothers were convinced that they would harm the child by keeping it. As Elsie, like many others, remarked: 'I'm unemployed, I don't have clothes, I don't have anything. What can I give the child? I don't have anything. […] Sometimes I go to bed without eating. I'm happy my baby not suffer but went for adoption.' In the quotation that opened this chapter Mary ponders on the situation from a wide time perspective, and thinks about all the consequences of dire poverty for the child. As she states, a child is 'a difficult thing', implying that one needs to think not just about now but about the future, which for most is poverty-stricken. The first mothers who had been struggling for years trying in vain to secure a life for themselves and their loved ones came to see adoptive parents as their only hope for a future and a life for their child. These other people in higher positions are perceived as being able to give the child things such as an education that the first mother never had. Miriam, for instance, valued education highly and pointed out her own lack of it. This excerpt also demonstrates how these benefits of adoption are emphasised by social workers and adopters, as further illustrated in Chap. 7. As Miriam said: 'They even told me that in Holland the education is fine. That's why I was so happy because me, I couldn't go to school (crying), even now, I still want to study.' Just how painful the comparison between the first mother and the adopters and sending the child away can be is illustrated in Margaret's account. Adoption was seen as the only way these mothers could prevent their children from suffering.

> It's very difficult, but sometimes you must just let go. You must just tell yourself that maybe I'm not going to give her life, maybe those other people will be able to give everything, see (cries).

Many first mothers emphasised the well-being and happiness their child would experience somewhere else. They seemed to have a very idealistic picture of 'overseas' as a 'wonderful', 'safe' and 'clean' place. In this they were clearly influenced by their encounters with the adoption social workers. That the child's life with its first mother in South Africa seemed so unsafe also points to the effects of social sundering, which is one consequence of resource inequality and poverty (Therborn 2013). Social sundering tears apart social networks, eventually destroying trust and engendering fear. The first mothers worried about having to live in impoverished and even dangerous environments, where people could not be trusted and the crime rate was high. As one interviewee, Meg, who is introduced in Chap. 6, described it:

> The trust level in South Africa is bad because you can't trust anybody. […] You know, it's like you never know who will come behind you and stab your back or just do something to you, even if it's your own flesh and blood. It's horrible but then you get those and you can't trust anyone.

The obvious implicit comparison point here is the far-away better place in the country of the adoptive parents, as Elsie explained when she heard about my life in Finland: 'The good thing is happiness and safety of the child, and environment, clean and safe environment. It's a good, it's a big thing for a child.' Some first mothers expressed a wish to leave themselves if they could. Simphiwe put into words what was implicit in many other accounts. The violence and high incidence of rape as well as the material lack she mentions point towards the dangerous impoverished environments where the poor have to live. This environment, which constituted a serious hindrance to proper parenting, was contrasted to the image of safety and abundance of opportunities in other, affluent societies. The concern for the safety of the child and the connecting of safety with adopters was shared by many and was further reinforced by social workers. Ultimately it is indicative of the division of the world

into safe and unsafe, liveable and unliveable, impoverished and well-to-do parts.

> I made overseas adoption because I knew there's a life in there, she will get the best education, she will get the best job. Here kids are getting raped, terrible things are happening to kids in South Africa, you always have to be scared when you are at work. […] It's so bad for the kids in here so if I could choose I would go there even myself. […] that's why I did this because she will have so much opportunities.

First mothers are told about these other parents who have everything in situations in which no help or interim alternatives are available that might enable them to keep their children (see Chap. 4). Adoptive parents were described by first mothers as 'better parents', 'good people' or 'wonderful people'. Material affluence thus included the connotation of superiority as a parent and as a person. The other parents were seen as better in every way. This elevation of adopters simultaneously denigrates the first mothers, implying that they are not as good or as capable as parents. There were some indications of the internalisation of such views. The idea of morally better adopters is evident in Lucille's account, for instance: 'If my kid had a chance to get a better schooling, a better life from better parents, then I would rather let her go there.' Natie points out that adoption was a way of placing the child in a higher position away from poverty: 'I didn't have anything to give the child. So I thought this is the best thing that this child can get, better than myself.' Mary virtually described herself and other first mothers as irresponsibly having children without being able to provide for them. She was very aware of the stratification of parents as wealthy and better with no children, and as poor, like herself, who only have their children. Here the notion that birth mothers are only good for birthing, which reduces them to 'mere, unthinking bodies' defined by their bodily functions (Cuthbert et al. 2009, 408) becomes part of their own thinking. Mary exclaimed: 'I'm so happy that some people they have a lot of things, but only one thing that they doesn't have the childs. You see. We have nothing, but we just birth, right, all the time.' South African women do not 'birth all the time' in reality: the total fertility rate is the lowest in the African continent and has been declining (see Chap. 2).

Inequality, compassionate domination and the notion of poor women as inferior parents could thus lead to 'psychic violence' (Fanon 2008/1952) and the moulding of the first mothers' self-perception.

The material superiority of the other parents and their own poverty made it a moral imperative to relinquish the child. The first mothers felt compelled to give the child to the adopters. Thus, the narrative of better parents is connected to the perception of having no choice. The inter-twining of compulsion and their own conditions of extreme deprivation are evident in Hope's and Petunia's narratives, for example. Hope stated: 'Cause I don't have a choice. I don't have anything to stay with this child. If there's someone who gonna take care of this child, I must give her.' Petunia, likewise, pointed out the necessity of giving the child up: 'It's hard, but I didn't have a choice. How to give a better future for the child.' In other words, the mothers felt that the only way to guarantee a life for their child was through adoption.

Lacking Social Support

Breaking Down the Extended Family: Missing Mothers

The first mothers' accounts of family and parenting differed markedly from the expectations and practices of familial bounded domesticity in the Global North. The link between family and place of residence was loose, and movement between different locations was frequent. Almost all of these mothers had at some point lived with grandparents or other kin. Their own children also lived or had lived with grandmothers or other female relatives. A few of them had taken the child to its father's extended childless household. Parental care was thus different from the model overseas adopters adhered to, involving the care of children in different households by mothers and various kin. Periodic separation between mothers and children was common. Temporarily placing the child in the care of another person, usually kin, was both a necessity in conditions of poverty and an indication of a different way of parenting. A lack of support from the extended family could therefore have severe consequences for these mothers.

As emphasised throughout the interviews, the most reliable provider of support and childcare help was the first mother's own mother. The first reply to the question 'who belongs to your family' was often 'my mom', and then came other family members. It has been shown that even in conditions of dire poverty, the support of one's own mother and other female kin significantly reduces infant abandonment and mortality (Hrdy 1999, 370–372, 2008; Johns and Belsky 2008, 79; Keller and Chasiotis 2008, 103–104). Those whose mother was no longer alive or who did not have a good relationship with her gave that as one reason for the adoption, frequently coupled with inadequate support from the rest of the extended family. Molly, 20, who had placed her only child for adoption about a year previously, had lost her mother. Although her father was still alive, he was ill and Molly felt that 'at the end of the day, nobody's taking care of me'. Molly had lived with her aunt since the age of 11, for one thing because she could go to a better school. Her mother died during Molly's pregnancy, and the father of the child abandoned her. Not only did Molly lose her mother, her extended family did not come to her assistance. Even close kin and family were struggling and, as she said, their help would have been temporary. The extended family also appeared unsupportive of the idea of another child. As Molly explains, she was on her own and did not even manage to attend to her studies. She also describes her ambivalent feelings regarding her child and adoption. What it all seems to boil down to is that she did not have a mother to assist her.

> I mean, they [family and relatives] would've helped me, but then I know for the first few months, from there I'm on my own. […] I found out that I was pregnant and then everybody abandoned me, including my family. […] They treated me as if I've killed someone. […] Then I had to drop out of school. And nobody was taking care of me. […] By the time I was pregnant I felt like I hated the baby. […] Today my family doesn't want me anymore because of you. […] The minute […] she was born, I fell in love with her. And then I was like, I'm not sure about what I'm doing. […] Then I took my mind back. […] I mean they weren't giving me any support, so I was like I know that what I'm doing is right. […] All I could think about is her happiness, you know, think about the future. […] And

then I made up my mind. Then I gave her for adoption. […] I just so
wished my mother was still alive, maybe I wouldn't have done it.

Other first mothers pointed out how not having a good relationship
with their mother resulted in similar feelings of being alone in the world.
Lucille told me that she felt she was 'a disappointment' to her family
because she had so many children. She had three, and placed the fourth
for adoption. Later she had had two more. Neither her family nor the
child's father was supportive of another child and Lucille felt she had to
keep the pregnancy a secret. She gave birth on her own at night without
help and then took the child to social workers: 'I was sitting there and she
was asking if she could call my family and I was saying no, I don't want
anybody to know about this because I feel that I am such a disappoint-
ment to my family.' The social workers nevertheless called her mother,
who according to Lucille had said she wanted 'nothing to do with it'. Yet,
later strongly disapproving of the adoption her mother repeatedly berated
Lucille: 'We don't do those things at home, we are not you, you gave up
your child.' Lucille still, after all those years, talked bitterly about her
mother letting her down.

Some first mothers feared that if the extended family knew about the
pregnancy they would refuse even to shelter them and that they would be
left without a place to stay. As was shown, Elsie's stepfather had chased
her away when she was pregnant with her first-born. Rosina, 22, had
placed her child for adoption slightly less than a year previously. She
had a five-year-old from a previous relationship, and was living with her
cousin, her sister's child, her own child and her mother. She could not
tell her mother she was pregnant because of bad relations and arguments,
and for fear of being driven away. She still wondered whether the out-
come would have been different if her mother had supported her when
she was pregnant:

> I just thought that if I tell her, she would kick me out and I wouldn't be
> able to go anywhere. […] No one knows in my family. […] If only I had a
> house and I had the chance like when I was pregnant I would have told my
> mother to see how she felt, and if only things were right between in our
> family, I think I would have kept him.

Likewise, one of the reasons Cindy gave for having her child adopted was that no one was looking after her: 'Because on the other hand my mother wasn't taking care of me, so it will be difficult for me to look after a child while I have no one to look after me. So I had to give the baby for adoption.' Cindy's narrative points to a lack of both psychological support and practical assistance. She was also unemployed and had no proper accommodation when she became pregnant. Her two younger brothers were living with the family of her grandmother's brother. To the question of what would have made a difference and enabled her to keep her child she replied:

> If I had a good relationship with my mother I think. Because she didn't know me when I was a baby, so I think if we had a closer relationship with each other, even if his father ran away, maybe my mother would advise me and support me where it's needed.

Cindy's account, as well as those of others, also demonstrates the stronger significance of one's own mother and extended family over the genetic father of the child. Under the current conditions, one's own mother is a more likely source of assistance than the male party to the relationship.

The Disappearing (and Reappearing) Genetic Father

As demonstrated in Chap. 2, men are rarely permanent members of black South African families (Goebel 2011; Hunter 2010; Moore 2013; Walker 1995). The first mothers' narratives implied strained relations between men and women. The fragility of couple relationships and the absence of the men who fathered the children were striking. There were no men in most of my interviewees' families, nor did the women express a wish to form a family with men, although some expressed admiration for 'the married couple and their babies' as a rather unattainable dream. Family for most meant living with their children and their parents, mostly mothers. Mary explicitly stated that she no longer wished to have a man as part of her family. Her husband had abused her and deserted her and his children, and the father of the child relinquished for adoption had abandoned

her. In response to my question of whether she hoped to remarry she said: 'That is the last thing that I don't want anymore.' Others expressed similar sentiments. Many had dreams for the future that did not include men. Lucille, for instance, was emphatic: 'In five years' time I want to have a very big house, take all my kids and live there, that is my dream. […] No men, men I'll see outside.'

Related to these concerns was the explicit wish not to depend on other people, men in particular. Given the widespread poverty, black women's unemployment and low status in society, and the historical legacies, many women have to rely on men for survival: as girlfriends they are provided for (Hunter 2010). This is hinted at in Elsie's account when she ponders on her options: a realistic possibility in the circumstances was a male provider. In the context of suffering and not being able to find work, and being without any means of supporting herself and her daughter, she stated: 'The problem is that if I can't get [a] man or a job, so that I can maintain myself.' The frequency at which wanting to be independent was mentioned shows that the women were tired of this exploitative relationship. Molly would 'see myself working and then being independent. Not depending on anybody.' Natie explained the downsides of being a mother and wanting to provide for your children but having to depend on a man and being subjected to his whims:

> When you are a mother and you are expecting somebody's money, you are waiting for someone to give you, it's hard. You are living with your kids, you see that you want to give them something, you don't have money, you are expecting someone, and if he doesn't want to send you then we're in trouble. You don't know what to do, you don't know where to start. So it was hard for me. For me it was hard. I don't like expecting some, I'm not saying I like to be independent, but it's hard to be depending on someone. If he doesn't want to do this for you then he will say, then you have nowhere to go, you are stuck.

When the first mothers mentioned men and the fathers of their children, the figure that they most frequently described was that of the abandoning man who made himself scarce as soon as his girlfriend informed him of the pregnancy. When Mary told her boyfriend that she was pregnant

he said he 'doesn't care about that' and went away, so Mary was on her own without help or support. Cindy told me that her pregnancy was 'unplanned, it was a surprise. […] but it happened and when I told him, he just disappeared.' Both genetic fathers of Lerato's two children left without telling her their new address. Many of the men had multiple girl-friends. Rosina mentioned the father of her other child, who did support both of them at first: 'He did for a year but then he just left everything, because he got another girl pregnant. I couldn't put up with it, and I had to leave him.' Lucille likewise told me about her former boyfriend and the father of her child: 'Until my kid turned three, those four years he stood by me and while he is a man he would go with other ladies and I couldn't take it.' These and similar examples indicate how it is almost taken for granted that men are like that, or will start behaving like that after a while, which further shows the power and prevalence of this type of male figure.

This is not the whole picture, however. The abandoning genetic father sometimes reappeared, his disappearance apparently having a lot to do with lacking the means to be the kind of father he envisioned, in other words to provide materially for his family. One young black father inter-viewed by Hunter (2010, 171), for instance, told him: 'Sometimes you don't deny your baby because you want to, but because of the situation'. This seemed to be the case with the returning fathers in my data. As described earlier, the father of Elsie's baby abandoned her, and Elsie then placed the child for adoption. Sometime after it was adopted the father returned. He had been able to improve his situation slightly, although he still did not have a permanent job. He told Elsie that he had run away because he had financial problems. He also said he wanted his child back. It seems as if the child only materialised for him when he saw the photo-graphs and the physical resemblance to him, as Elsie recalled:

> He did come back. And he says I want to see the baby. Then I told him that it was too late to do that. […] At the time he didn't understand, but when the time goes on he came on his own and talked to me about it was a good thing to do that and that for the child. Because I asked him why did he ran away, he said he was having a financial problem. […] He just said he looks

like him, at another day he said to me he wants his child back because he saw the pictures.

Molly had a very similar experience. Her boyfriend deserted her when she was pregnant but returned later. He had found a good job and was in a very good financial position. He seemed to want to change things, and now that he was ready for fatherhood and could assume financial responsibility he asked to have his baby back. Molly recalled his behaviour during her pregnancy, however, and how he not only ran away but also denied that it was his child. He in effect left Molly totally alone. As Molly says, she had to act based on the situation then. As adoptions are processed at a quick pace and are irrevocable, the father's possible return happens too late.

> He abandoned me. […] He told my social worker that he wasn't the father of the baby and whatever. […] [In] August, in the last month he called me and I was so surprised. And then he told me that things are working out fine for him, you know, he's got a very nice job. He just achieved so many things that he wanted. And then he told me that he wanted his baby. […] He told me that now that I'm okay and then I want my baby, where is she? […] I think he really regrets what he did. And it's too late for that. […] If maybe he was there for me emotionally. You know, supported me all through the [pregnancy], I would think that, I would regret. […] But then, he wasn't there for me.

The most disturbing aspect of the first mothers' narratives, however, was the prevalence of rape, often involving more than one man. Agnes, 18, whom I met in a home for pregnant women, was pregnant as a result of rape by unknown men. She had not made up her mind whether to keep the child or to relinquish it for adoption. Her mother had died a year previously and she had been living with her cousin, who 'likes alcohol'. Her mother's best friend had come forward and was now supporting her, offering her the option of living with her afterwards. Agnes gave me the following distressing account of how she had been brutally raped and how she had been in danger of losing her life. Her narrative also shows that she had been trying to make something of her life by investing in

her studies, but had been ridiculed by neighbours and peers for not having time for boyfriends. The rape by several attackers she experienced is unfortunately not a rare occurrence in post-apartheid South Africa (see Chap. 2).

> I'm a person who's doing actress. Every Friday we used to go to theatre and act there. […] I was coming from there and it was late, so I came across with three guys. I was not going alone, we were three girls, so when we come across with that three guys, they run after us. And one ran after her, we separate there, yes, and two they run after me, and then, when I thought I was safe because I was getting to go in another side of the house I came across with, they thrown me with a stone, so I fell there. And they rape me there. So, they told me that I've got luck because I don't know them, if I knew them they would kill me there. […] When I went home I was even scared to tell my aunt because my neighbours were, they didn't like me very well. They even told me that I've got a pride because I'm an actress. And the girls that I'm growing with, they always laugh at me, they say I don't have a boyfriend, I'm a stupid girl.

With the exception of rape cases, genetic fathers of adopted children do not comprise an undifferentiated mass of men who never assume responsibility for their offspring. The picture is more complicated, revealing links between fatherhood and financial position. As researchers have established (Hunter 2010; Ramphele and Richter 2006), in the current context of chronic and widespread unemployment and poverty, many black men end up excluded and exclude themselves from family life. Absence of support from the genetic fathers as well as from extended families exacerbates the first mothers' lack of choice about keeping their children.

More-or-Less Coerced Separations

The majority of the first mothers I interviewed were struggling against insurmountable obstacles that often took the form of trade-offs with no good options. These trade-offs were about survival, about lacking the

basic necessities of life. In such conditions permeated by vital inequality the discourse of choice that is prevalent in the adoption system begs the question of where the choice is. Indeed, some first mothers were rendered passive and felt victimised whereas others faced various levels of more-or-less forced adjustment to adoption, which may not have been their first choice if the option of keeping the child had been available. Adoption placement was the only way of caring for their children. Unequal power emanating from resource inequality was even embodied in their subjectivity. Their sense of inferiority as expressed through the familiar narrative of giving the child to 'better' parents was the counterpart of the adopters' sense of entitlement.

Some first mothers came to accept adoption as inevitable, especially if they received information about the child afterwards, whereas others struggled more. Maternal commitment generally persisted, and the mothers wondered what had become of their children. The first mothers' views about post-adoption contact and connections with the child are explored in Chaps. 7 and 8.

6

Inequality Among First Mothers: The Power of Resources

> I don't need anything and I can afford to maintain this child. And I can get support at home: financial, emotional, everything. But I really don't want to keep this child because it will remind me of my mistake that I did. (Gugu, first mother)

As discussed in Chap. 2, there are two general trends in post-apartheid South Africa: the falling formal employment leading to massive unemployment and deepening poverty for the majority of black South Africans, and the sudden growth of a new multiracial middle class (Seekings and Nattrass 2006, 314). These processes have also engendered new forms of inequality among first mothers. Whereas most were grappling with subsistence issues (Chap. 5), a minority clearly exhibited different trajectories and forms of deliberation. These women constitute the subject matter of Chap. 6. Having more resources and being better placed in contexts that allowed them more options and more personal decision-making autonomy, these women revealed different dynamics in their narratives. Adoption for them was one option among many, including keeping the child.

Although not all these women could be described as belonging to the 'elite' or middle classes, they all had more resources at their disposal and hence had more leeway and the possibility of improving their position in the near future. They had all matriculated from upper-secondary school and had completed or were currently undergoing or planning further studies. In some cases, having white/wealthy benefactors made the difference between having and not having options. It is almost as if some of these women were living in a different world than that of first mothers in constrained circumstances. Their concerns were not locked into survival issues.

Choosing Adoption

A Bright Future

There was a big difference between the struggles and marginality of the majority of the first mothers and the aspirations of those who were able to distance themselves from the masses. Gugu, 34, had placed her last-born child for adoption about a year and a half previously. Her first-born was living with her own mother. Gugu stood out the most from the other first mothers I interviewed. She had a very good family background. Her childhood was unusually secure, materially and emotionally. Both of her parents were working and her grandfather was a traditional leader in a rural area. As in the other cases, family for Gugu included her extended kin. Her narrative reveals that she identified herself and her family as middle class. Her carefree life without material worries is in stark contrast to the precariousness of the existence of those without adequate means to support their families. The first mothers who feature in Chap. 5 talked of lost rather than worry-free, happy childhood. As Gugu recalled:

> I grew up with a family, with big family, because of the extended, relatives. My mama, my cousins, and a lot of kids at home. But we were very happy because our parents [were] actually in the middle, what do you call, I can't say working class because, middle class, so, and we were Christians. […] I was a very happy child, because everybody at home was caring and looking

after us. So I didn't have any problems during my childhood. [...] So it was very easy for me even to move on with my life the time I was moving alone, going to school after passing my matric, so it was, I had good life in terms of childhood.

Gugu's life after school continued in a set of good moves enabled by her background. She completed a secretarial course at a technical college and worked as a secretary in many offices. She then advanced to the position of personal assistant to directors. In her current job she travelled a lot and had many opportunities. She also had plans for the future, and could contemplate a different career. The ability to make and execute plans and to have a sense of agency is indicative of a secure position. Instead of ending up on the breadline each month and wondering whether there would be enough to eat, Gugu saw her future as bright and her life as easy and enjoyable:

> I would love to, for instance, next year, I would love to join the events management program. So I want to go to school and do that. Sort of a project management because I want to change my career. Being a personal assistant for so many, but I'm still enjoying my job because, I'm a very calm and cool person. […] I would love to go to that side and arrange events. I'm very good to organise functions and, so I'd love to do that in five years. So, I can still see my future, it's still bright and I'm still enjoying my life.

Gugu not only saw her own future in positive terms, she also regarded life in South Africa in general as good. Her perspective was one of relative privilege, whereas the women discussed in Chap. 5 who had extremely difficult lives saw conditions as hard and strenuous. For Gugu, such challenges were more remote, just 'politics', and did not affect her. Real poverty touched other people and existed somewhere else, not in her country:

> You know, life in South Africa is okay. […] There are lots of challenges in terms of politics, but it's not affecting me. […] [Before] we didn't have water, we didn't have electricity, we didn't have proper houses. But today we've got water, and electricity, and we also have big houses, you know. So I can say life, it's much better. […] I can compare, I travel a lot, like, recently I went to Kenya, Rwanda. You see the challenges in the continent,

and you come to South Africa, it's a different and you go to these countries there're a lot of challenges. […] So, in our country, yes we still have problems, but not like other countries. And in terms of poverty, and you know. Rural areas in South Africa are better than going in the continent.

Olive, 26, was about to place her only child in the care of adoptive parents from abroad. She had chosen the family and the date for a meeting was set. She was also offered the job of assistant house-mother in the home for pregnant women in which she had stayed. She was in the process of acquiring a driving licence as the job involved taking the expectant mothers to hospital and back. She realised how lucky she was to have been offered that position: 'Sometimes they see you can do stuff, then they employ you or make a point to give you a job or look for a job. I was one of the lucky ones I guess.' Like Gugu, Olive described her childhood as fairly good on the material level: 'I would say comfortable. There were food and whatever I needed and school stuff.' She lived with her parents and then also sometimes with her grandparents. She also had some education and had held various jobs: 'I studied a computer course and then I did jobs. […] I worked for this plumbing place. I used to do the books for him and make appointments and so. […] I liked it very much.' Again reflecting Gugu's experiences, Olive described life in South Africa as enjoyable: 'For me it was okay. It was good.' She had many plans for the future. She talked about wanting to do a bungee-jump. She was the first woman to talk about personal dreams and goals that did not concern the need to find employment or subsistence. As far as work was concerned, she wanted to study more and used expressions such as 'I'm going to', not just dreaming of something that was not practically possible: 'I also like to do a nursing course and work-wise in the future I'm going to go for a course in counselling HIV people.'

Zandi was in her late 20s. Two of her children had been adopted abroad by the same family, the first eight years previously and the second some three years previously. She lived with her mother, her first-born child and her brothers and sisters. Zandi had become friends with the social worker who facilitated the two adoptions, who was also present during the interview and at times took part in it. Zandi, too, matriculated from upper-secondary school, and had since had various jobs. She currently

worked at a pizzeria but regarded that as a temporary job while she was on the lookout for a career: 'It's just a job. I need a career. I want a career.' Zandi was also planning to find a house in which to live with her first-born child, who she hopes will want to 'go to college'.

Alice and Meg both had white mentors who strongly supported them materially in giving assistance and advice. Alice, 23, had placed her only child for adoption six months previously. It was supposed to be an unrelated (stranger) adoption but at the last minute the child's paternal grandparents decided to adopt him. Alice had lived all her life in the premises of the white family for which her mother had been working as a live-in domestic for over 20 years. Her mother's employers were also Alice's guardians. Alice's position in this white family was exceptional: 'I was like their other child, so I was just brought up in their family ways and so if I needed anything, they would give it to me.' Alice passed her matriculation examination and proceeded to university. She did not enjoy studying, however, and was now working. There is an obvious difference here from the trajectories and concerns of the women discussed in the previous chapter, which were driven by necessity: these women merely dreamed of finding a job. As Hope, for instance, stated: 'I want to be a cleaner. […] If I find a job, I think everything will be alright.' Alice, on the other hand, could set self-fulfilment as a goal and look for an interesting job that would be meaningful to her. She was even in the position to turn down the chance of a university education, which was unheard of in the other group. She was fully aware that these were her personal decisions, to be made at will:

> I started studying further but then I really wasn't enjoying it at all. I started doing a BA marketing. I hated it. I was so bored. […] So it wasn't keeping me entertained at all, so I just said no and then I've just been working ever since. […] I went into media, I was a junior media buyer and then I left there because it was just up to me to decide what I wanted to do and I still wasn't too sure. And then I left and I went to recruitment, hated that. I was bored out of my mind. Same thing every day. And now I'm working for a publisher's company which I'm loving.'

Meg, 22, had placed her last-born child for adoption about three years previously. She had two other children and lived with them in the house

of a family who had been helping her for a number of years and used to go to the same church as Meg and her original family. The family lived in a big house with a pool and a domestic worker who collected Meg's children from school. They took Meg in and put her back in school after she had her first child, and did the same when she had her second. Meg was thus able to matriculate. She currently had a job at a hair salon, but she regarded it as temporary, something to help generate some income while she was looking for better opportunities. She wanted to train to become a beautician and then set up her own business: 'But my priority now at this moment is to find a stable job so I can save money to go for a course for a beautician. And then from there I'll see what I can find, but five years from now I'll have my own business, my own car and my own house and be happy with my children.' Meg's prospects in life were good. She also had two aunts living in Germany, who had invited her over, and she planned to go in the near future: the rest of the family visited them but Meg had not been able to because of 'my cash-flow problem'. Meg was thus in a position to refer to a lack of money as a temporary 'cash-flow problem' rather than a problem that threatened her survival.

Lebohang, 19, was pregnant as the result of rape: 'I used to go to school. […] after that I go to church. That's what I did all my life, go to church, school, home, church, school and home. [...] I've been a virgin all my life and I got raped.' She had been studying at university to become a computer programmer. Her grandmother, who brought her up, paid her university fees from her old-age pension and the money she generated from her small informal business. With her grandmother's help Lebohang would be able to finish her studies after giving birth: 'If my grandma is still alive, I'll be able to just go back.' She wanted to be a computer programmer or a pastor, as she was very religious. Even though her life was not financially stable at that time, her prospects for the future were good, given her pending university education. Lebohang was also considering going abroad for a while to work and to save money. Unlike the mothers discussed in Chap. 5, who could not even afford to travel within South Africa, Lebohang could contemplate going abroad and presumably would be able to raise the money for

the airfare. Importantly, she was the recipient of material help from her grandmother, and not the provider.

> If I can go to another country, I would definitely go. […] Maybe I might go work for a while, 'cause I thought of finding a job in England, maybe as an au-pair, look after someone's child for a year or something and try to get money and come back, and finish up my studies. […] 'cause the jobs here you get paid nothing.

These women were in a totally different material situation than those in the other group. They also had the resources to ease the process of adoption, which is not accepted among black South Africans. Many, for instance, were able to have a private room in the hospital when they gave birth. This made it less painful for them as the hospital staff acknowledged it was an adoption case and the women were not exposed to other women breastfeeding and keeping their babies, which was the case for the first mothers discussed in the previous chapter. Gugu's doctor, who did not approve of adoption, even arranged for her to have a Caesarean section so that she would not be confronted with the baby. As Gugu said:

> I went to my doctor, I've told him that this is my decision and he was concerned, he said are you sure about this because this will stay there and you'll feel that emptiness for the rest of your life. Because in our culture it is something that is not acceptable. […] Then my doctor arranged that okay, we'll go for Caesar, so that you don't see the baby. It was a good arrangement.

Alice's account of her encounters with the healthcare system when she gave birth brings her privileges to light. She had her own car to 'get in' and a private room protecting her from seeing newly born babies. She befriended the nurses and everything went smoothly. Such 'cushions' were largely lacking among the women discussed in the previous chapter, many of whom were mistreated and shouted at by black nurses who did not approve of adoption. Margaret was even told to start breastfeeding the child she and her husband had decided would be adopted. Alice, on the other hand, told me:

> At first I was with everyone else in the room and then I got my own room, private room, and then I got really bored. [...] I gave birth Thursday morning, then I went home, sat at home for about an hour, got bored, got in my car, decided to go to my doctor for medications and off I went and I went to the shops and even at the hospitals, the nurses, they kicked me out, they told me to go home 'cause I was driving them mad.

Positions carrying at least some security with them lead to more hopeful prospects and to a different attitude towards life. Feelings of being trapped and having little or no agency are replaced by a more proactive approach including notions of personal efficacy.

Emotional Coping Takes Precedence Over Financial Reasoning

Deliberations regarding adoption among these first mothers did not take the form of impossible trade-offs in which there were no good options. There was no talk invoking the 'I didn't have a choice' type of argument that was so common among the other women. Instead, their deliberations indicate more conscious decision-making that was also closely intertwined with a determination to actively find substitute parents for the child and a wish to be involved post-adoption, as discussed in detail in Chap. 7. These women's narratives contained utterances such as 'taking this option' and 'it's my decision.' When the first mothers in straitened circumstances talked about adoption as a good decision they invariably meant that it was essential for the child, so that the child would survive and would not suffer. Those with resources, on the other hand, talked about adoption being a good decision for them, too. They did not refer to financial reasons, which were predominant in the other women's narratives, but talked more about their potential difficulties in coping with motherhood emotionally. None of them referred to adopters as better parents.

Gugu had been in a long-term relationship with the father of her six-year-old child, but they had some problems and split up. Gugu then had a relationship with another man, who turned out to have deceived

her. When she told him she was pregnant he was already involved with another woman and was about to marry her. A big part of the problem was that the family of his future wife were neighbours of Gugu's extended family and there had been some problems between the two kin groups. Gugu clearly did not wish to maintain any ties with this man:

> Because, you know, if that child was there, and this guy is married to that wife, they will think that he's coming to visit the child or, you know, there's something between us. So I decided to cut everything. Not leave any relations with him, with his family, or with other people. Because I didn't want to be involved to anything. And at that time I was very angry because, you know, this guy I was doing everything for him. And, you know, I invested a lot to him, and he broke my heart.

At this stage Gugu and the father of her first-born child patched things up. He was fully supporting her, and Gugu took their child to live with them. Her account clearly shows that economic factors were not among her reasons. As she states in the citation that opens this chapter, she could afford to keep the child. The problem was more with the kin groups and the fact that this man had badly hurt her. As in many other cases it turned out to be difficult to explain the adoption to the extended family. The father of her first-born would even have raised the other man's child and voiced concern about the possible repercussions of adoption for Gugu, as she explained:

> I was still pregnant, I've taken a decision that, you know, I'm not going to keep this baby. I contacted my family, I told them. By that time my [other] child's father was back already. […] Then he accepted that it's not his child, but he'll give me support. […] So they thought that maybe, since I'm pregnant, I'm too emotional about these things. Then I said to them no, I'm not. This is the decision that I sat down and think about it, that what is the future for this baby. Because the other child will have his father here too, and then this one, it's just going to be difficult to tell him that your father is not here. And then he said okay, I'll support your decision and, really, I respect your decision, but I'm worried about you: how are you going to take this, being pregnant for nine months and then after that you don't have your baby.

Gugu further explained that adoption was a good decision from her and the child's perspectives. She also said that she had, in fact, sought professional help and counselling in order to deal with the adoption: 'That time I was going through therapy, and I've decided to take leave for two months. And I got enough support from my family. They were very supportive. Whereas even now it's still difficult for them to talk about it. But I can say it was a good decision for me.'

Olive found out that she was pregnant after her short relationship with the baby's father had ended: 'He got involved with another girl before. We made out and then he got involved with another girl. And then I found out that I'm pregnant.' After considering her options and talking it over with the father of the child she decided to place the baby for adoption. Although she also mentioned financial reasons they were not as pressing as the impossible trade-offs of the first mothers in dire straits. These financial reasons concerned the fact that Olive and her boyfriend were not doing as well as previously, although the boyfriend still had his own business. Olive further decided not to let the social worker ask her extended family to help. Her narrative implies that she also had serious doubts about her own (emotional) coping. What she does not mention among her reasons here, but was influential is the fact that she had been offered the job of assistant house-mother at the home for pregnant women, which was an opportunity for her. Part of the reason for the job offer was her personal experience of relinquishing a child and thus providing an example to the others. As she told me:

> I didn't want to do adoption at first, I wanted to keep it. But then we talked and me and the father and we sat and we talked more and it made me realise that no, we can't. I'm not working, I wasn't working at the moment and so and he wasn't. He's got his own business and wasn't doing so well and so. And I think on Sunday my counsellor asked me what if I would tell my parents and they would say they would look after me and the baby and I said no it's done. I think it would be for the best for the baby. I was thinking about myself all the time, what if I can't cope and what if I can't give the baby stuff and then I thought no.

Meg had two small children in addition to the baby relinquished for adoption. The younger one was just a year old at the time of the adoption.

She opted for adoption for a variety of reasons. She talked about the young age of her second-born as well as her own status as a young person having recently completed her education. Economic factors were mentioned, but so was stress resulting from her inability to cope emotionally. In Meg's case her guardians/mentors also advised her to place the child for adoption. Like the others, Meg, too, put a lot of emphasis on the adoption being her decision.

> Reason being that my second child was still a baby, he was a year old and I wasn't working, I just finished my matric and the child's father wasn't working and it was too much and the people I'm staying with were already helping me with the two and it was going to be a whole lot of stress and at the end I decided to give my baby up for adoption. [...] They told me not to keep the baby because under the circumstances and I also thought about it and I agreed to it. [...] If we were both stable, if we both had jobs, stable jobs, I would have kept my baby. [...] But I made my decision.

Meg's reasons concerned her feelings of not coping more than financial aspects. She also appeared to have made her decision without consulting the father of the child. He and his parents were quite upset about the adoption. As Meg explained, she did not have the emotional resources to care for another baby, and therefore she could not let the father of the child or his parents interfere:

> When I fell pregnant I told him to tell his parents that it's not his child because I knew they would give me hard time if they knew about the adoption. Because I think he was angry or scared, he just went along and he said it's not his, but at the end he told his parents that it is his child and you know. He was quite upset because I told him I don't care what you say, what you feel, this is what I'm feeling now and I can't handle it.

Meg was receiving information about the child post-adoption and has shown the photographs to the father and grandparents. Given that this was a domestic adoption it is possible for them to see the child. It is obvious from the excerpt from Meg's narrative that had she been willing, the child's paternal grandparents would have helped to raise it:

And the first set of photos that we got and I send it to the family and it was really emotional because and then they were jumping on my head that why didn't you tell me that it was our grandchild, we would, because it was the first great grandchild and the first grandchild on their side. […] So it was a big issue and I explained to him that's how I felt and he was upset, it was hard for him to deal with it because he just wanted to know and he wanted to see him and I told him he won't be able to see him, he can only get photos and things. But now at this moment I've discussed with [the social worker], they want to see him, so that he can also get closure, to understand what he is feeling.

The main issue behind the relinquishment of Zandi's two children concerned the fathers: both were into drugs and Zandi did not want the children to grow up in such an environment. The father of the first child was a drug lord and a criminal, although according to Zandi he never brought any trouble home. He did not want his child to be adopted, in fact, but his rights were denied because, in the words of the social worker 'he was not good father material and that was common knowledge.' There was also some drama with the adoption in that when the father said he could not sign the consent form, Zandi's mother also 'became unsettled', and Zandi and her mother both considered keeping him. The child was taken to a temporary place of safety but was adopted later on. At the time of the second adoption Zandi was married to the child's father and friends and family had arranged a big baby shower for her. She knew at the time that she was going to place the child for adoption. The marriage did not work; the husband was violent. The way Zandi gave her reasons implies, again, that adoption is a conscious decision for women in these situations, an option they take. It is as much about looking after the children as it is about the women themselves. Zandi did not appear to have any regrets:

I didn't want my babies to be adopted, but at the end of the day it was the option and I took it. And I knew I wanted to meet them. […] I feel about it some days, but I know I did the right thing for both of them. […] I regret about myself, about a lot of stuff. Especially also because I was pregnant to my marriage and it didn't work and all that. But still I knew what I wanted to do because it was really the best thing for me to do. […] Like I say: I don't have regrets about them. Or the fact that I chose

this option because it was the best thing for me. It was really the best thing for me.

Alice first heard about adoption from a family friend who used to work in a home for pregnant women. She did not want to raise the child with its father because she found him immature and too dependent on his parents, although she admitted that she was 'still in love with him'. His father had recently started another business just for him and in Alice's view 'he just sits around and waits for everything to come in his way.' Alice, again, had a combination of reasons, both economic and her own immaturity. The economic reasons were relative in that her boyfriend's family were extremely well off. As she told me:

> My financial status, or both of us, because we are both still living at home and depending on the family so and I just don't think I was emotionally ready yet cause I can't really actually look after myself let alone having to look after someone else.

Even though Lebohang was pregnant as a result of rape, she did at some stage consider keeping the child, but in the end she decided against it. Her decision to place the baby for adoption did not appear to be based on financial constraints alone or even primarily. She did not feel she was emotionally ready to be a parent. Although she wanted to avoid giving the child a 'difficult life', her main reason was a lack of emotional stability. In the cases of Lebohang and the other women discussed in this chapter, the decision to place the baby for adoption seemed to be about 'blessing' others rather than sending the child to 'better' people. As Lebohang said:

> I've chosen adoption because at this point I cannot raise my child, though I've grown fond of my baby, but I can only really think of myself right now, here alone, I can't. [...] First I would have to be emotionally stable and financially. 'Cause I can have money but again, if I'm not emotionally, I wouldn't be able to give my child love and he or she will grow up feeling unloved and make the wrong decisions when they grow up because I wasn't there. Which I don't have right now, I don't have either, I'm not emotionally stable to raise a child nor financially. […] At the end of the day it's my decision. I won't put my child in a situation when I know he or she is going

to have a difficult life, I won't do that. [...] So I just, maybe it's a gift, though it happened in that way, but maybe there are some people who need this, so I can just give it to them.

The reasons for and ways of talking about adoption are strikingly different among first mothers in contexts defined by vital inequality and the women discussed here. Necessity and compulsion give way to personal deliberation in the form of active decision-making instead of only having one option.

Escaping from the 'Nobody' Group

Another type of discourse also emerged. Highly unequal and polarised societies create the need in individuals to distinguish themselves from those at the bottom. Even those who do not belong to that group fear sinking into it, and feel they need to do their utmost to escape such a fate. The impoverished majority were described as 'nobodies', implying a lack of personal identity and autonomy as well as not being respected and simply not counting. Several interviewees mentioned the 'nobody' group and connected it with lacking both education and initiative. Natie, who featured in Chap. 5 and was studying part-time to facilitate upward mobility, gave a good description of what was involved:

You are nothing without education. You are not going anywhere. […] When we are nobody, nobody can recognise you. You will stay like nobody and, like in rural areas it's difficult to get to better schools; and, even though you can pass in high degrees, high grades, it will be difficult to get some bursaries. […] You can't stay and wait for something to come. You have to go and get it. Nobody will come and give it to you. You just have to go out there and find it and get it. Then you'll say life is not difficult.

Others used even harsher analogies: 'being a nobody' was equated with disease and death. Sibongele, whose first choice was adoption, emphasised the difficulty of life for the uneducated majority: 'It's very difficult […] Diseases, no jobs.' She also pointed out the lack of will and purpose of those falling within such a group, thereby holding the 'nobodies'

responsible for their fate. She continued: 'There are some of the girls sitting at home saying I want a job. You can't find a job when you're sitting, no. You have to do something else. Go on with your studies. At least just pass the matric, maybe you will find a better job, but if you don't do that there's nothing. Nothing's going to help.' Edith, whose first choice was to keep the child and who tells her story in the next section, hinted at the risk of premature death among the nobodies: 'You have to be educated here, if you have nothing, you will just be in poverty. There's this disease, you will just not do great in your life. You'll just die here. You need education and a proper job. Then you can survive.' Edith and Sibongele both had good prospects ahead of them and were on the same escape route.

All these interviewees emphasised that it was the responsibility of women 'to do something', thus individualising the issue. This closely resembles the neoliberal idea that acquiring value and being valued require cultivating one's own competitiveness and adding to one's worth (Ong 2006, 14–16, 24). One should constantly monitor and build one's marketability, maintain good health and add value through education and training. It is thus up to individuals to improve their position, and they are to blame if they fail to do so: it is a question of the survival of the fittest. Nobodies were described as being indistinguishable from one another, just part of the (poor) masses, without value. The only future trajectory for such a person is becoming ill and dying. This reflects the harshness of South African (neoliberal) reality for the black majority.

Some of the first mothers thought that adoption would be a way of avoiding 'becoming a nobody', although as the case of Edith demonstrates, placing the child in temporary care elsewhere while the mother finished her studies and established herself could also help her to avoid such a fate. Dina and Sibongele both had a strong motivation to get ahead. Their families had assisted them in their endeavours and now their pregnancy threatened to annul these efforts. Dina, 19, was pregnant and was staying in a home for women in crisis. Her life thus far had been comfortable. She was raised by her grandmother but was also close to her mother. She had recently matriculated. The whole family had invested a lot in her future career and was anxious for her to improve her

qualifications and to end up in a higher position. Her mother had put all the money she received after being made redundant into Dina's studies. Dina was taking driving lessons and she was scheduled to take a course in computing. Her pregnancy cut short this trajectory. Only her mother and grandmother knew of it, and her grandfather and friends were not told. In Dina's words:

> I fell pregnant and my mother found out and she was very upset, yes she was very upset because me and my mom and my grandma we cried together because I have a future planned out for me to study, to first to get my licence and before I came here I was doing driver's licence and then I must cancel it because I found out that I was pregnant and my mom was also because she told me that I must run another study, computer courses and I was on a course February, but I didn't.

Dina was eager to 'make it': 'I want to have a job first. [...] I would like to be successful because of my mom, what she gave me I would like to give her back, the love, everything.' All these expectations bore heavily on her as she was expected to fulfil the dreams of the rest of the family: 'At evenings, every night I cry. For the whole month I cried because they were looking up to me. [...] Now I ingrate them because they were expecting much of me because I make my matric and everything.' Dina explicitly stated that she was not ready to be a mother. As the example she gives of a friend who had recently had a child illustrates, motherhood was considered an obstacle to upward mobility and too strenuous for a young person. Dina nevertheless thought that it would not be easy to let the baby go:

> When in the hospital and the baby is there and you see the baby and you see how beautiful he looks and everything then you are very sad. Then you are thinking oh it's so beautiful why must I now give him away. But I ask God keep me strong because I'm too young, I'm too young for this. I have a friend that has a baby but she's younger than me but I can see how her life is now, it's a big responsibility. She must stay now in the home, she cannot do studies, nothing. She must watch the baby every time and when it cries everything and she is not ready for that also. Also I'm not ready for baby.

Sibongele, 20, was similarly set on succeeding in a career. She was seven months pregnant. I met her in a maternity home in another city. Her two young children under the age of three lived in a rural area with her father, sister and other kin. Her mother lived and worked in the city as a domestic, only going on visits home towards the end of the month. Sibongele was in the city because she was studying VIP-protection in order to become a bodyguard. Her father was paying the fees from his pension. She had almost finished her studies and only needed to do the practical internship. This was, in fact, her second visit to the home for pregnant women. She was there the previous year, hoping to place her infant in an adoptive home. Her father and kin found out and more or less forced her to take the baby back home. This time she was determined to keep it a secret and to proceed with the adoption plan:

> I have two boys. The second one, I used to be here before. […] My dad didn't know I've got this adoption thing. Only my mom. I don't know what happened. Then suddenly he knew that I was here and I gave up the baby for adoption. But the baby didn't, by that time was, the baby was still here. And he told me that I have to go back and take that baby back. And all of my families were like rejecting me, there was 'if you don't bring the baby back then kaput, we're not, don't come back here'. Then I said well, let me just go and fetch the baby. But now nobody knows.

Sibongele's role model was her sister who had become very successful, making it to the top management of a big international company with houses both in the USA where she lives and in South Africa. Sibongele wanted to follow the example of this sister, who only had one child: 'She only have one kid, one daughter. She have everything, that one. I just want to be like her. […] She has three cars, the house, a home in [the rural area] and the other one in Johannesburg.' She was very eager to finish her studies and explained that this was her last chance. She believed her only chance of success was to place the child she was expecting for adoption. She already had two toddlers, and taking responsibility for a third baby could prevent her from achieving her goal. The road to a secure and comfortable middle-class life appeared to be full of caveats. Sibongele had tried to seize opportunities when they arose, and this meant rethinking motherhood:

> I have to go with this thing because I've lost lots of times, opportunities that are gone now. I have to go on. I can't. […] My studies, everything. And this is my last chance. This one is my last chance with the studies that I'm doing. And it's very expensive. My dad told me that if you fail this one, then it's over. So. But right now I passed everything. The only thing that is left with me is just to go for practicals.

Trying one's uttermost to escape from the 'nobody group' is one indication of the extreme competitiveness and inequality in current South Africa. Those who can are willing to sacrifice a lot for potential success, which is seen as individualistically based and induced. The notion of a loser or nobody points to the shortcomings of individuals, regardless of the structural factors.

Keeping the Baby

'They Could Keep the Baby Until I'm Ready to Get Him Back'

When I met Edith, a 19-year-old student, she was nearly eight months pregnant. She lived with her mother, who worked as a nurse and later as a domestic worker, and her younger siblings. Life was not always easy for them: 'Sometimes it was very difficult, sometimes we were just coping. It was in the middle, sometimes bad. We just coped.' When asked who she regarded as her family she, very much in line with the others, replied: 'It's my mother, she has always been there for us in the hardest times of my life.' Her mother also managed to give all her children an education. Edith was studying business management in a nearby college: 'My mom is paying for my fees. And then I also had a job, I worked for weekends. […] I'll be finishing this course next year June. It's also on hold now. I'll be getting back when I'm ready.' Edith was determined to be successful in life: '[In] five, ten years I'll be running my own business. I'll be a manager of a big company. I'll be something in life, that's for sure.'

In this situation of almost having finished her studies, Edith fell pregnant. As for many other women, the pregnancy was too advanced for

her to have an abortion. She seemed to blame herself: 'It was unplanned, unplanned. Oh, I feel bad that it happened, I really feel bad. Cause I'm going to school and I should have been careful not to fall pregnant, but it happened. I was so confused I went for termination but they told me I couldn't do it, 'cause I was too far.' Edith, in fact, took all the blame and totally ignored the contribution of the child's father. Here it is evident that the prevention of pregnancy is seen as the sole responsibility of women. This is one indication of unequal power between men and women and a gender system that is unfavourable to women. Gendered attitudes arising from gendered practices are then internalised by women. As Edith told me:

> It's like I don't want him to think that I want him just because I have the baby now. Just because I have the baby he must just be with me or he's forced to be with me. He can have his own life, I will take care. I know it's a mistake that I've made, so.

Edith was staying in one of the homes for pregnant women run by the adoption organisation. She had doubts about permanent adoption, however. She would have preferred a temporary solution, so that after a year or so she could get her child back. She would by then have finished her studies and would be in a better position to look after the child. As she told me, it would currently be impossible for her or her mother to care for the infant, but this was expected to change soon. Edith was also certain that her mother would be against adoption:

> Now I'm not so sure what to do, if it were adoption or but I can't parent the child. I just need more time, you see. Maybe the child could be put in a place, maybe, until I work, then I can get the child back. Maybe after a year or something. […] Now I can't go home with a small baby, you know. There are my studies. And my mother works and she struggles, you see. […] I don't think my mother will approve of adoption, she'll never approve.

Edith happened to see a brochure on foster care and asked for more information about it. It seemed to be a much more acceptable arrangement because instead of losing touch with the child she would continue to see

him and would eventually get him back. In other words, she would not totally lose her rights over him. Given that this home, like most of the others, only allowed adoption-minded women to stay, Edith was facing a dilemma. Adoption looked like the only option and she felt alone in her desire to retain her rights to and to keep in contact with her child.

> Here in this place, I think it's only the girls here that are here they are all for adoption. Everyone else is for adoption. Here, I haven't heard anyone about foster care. […] Because everyone here is for adoption. I didn't think they also knew about me, whatever. But I just assumed as everyone here is for adoption I might as well just do adoption. But then I saw this brochure, I thought okay, this is good for me because after this year I'll continue with my studies and then I have the baby back whereas by adoption I will not get the baby back. I won't even have contact with him. You see, maybe it will be far away from me, won't know me, and maybe he'll have new people in his life. But with foster care I can contact him, visit him and have him back when I'm ready to have him back.

At the end of the interview Edith recapitulated her feelings: 'I actually think it would be the best thing for me, 'cause I can't live with my child away, you see. 'Cause I carried him and now he's going to be with other people.' Unfortunately, the government had introduced a stricter policy on foster care (Seekings and Moore 2013, 9–10). Due to the rapid increase in recipients of foster-care grants it was beginning to be allowed only in cases of neglect or abandonment. One of the social workers (interview No. 2) mentioned, however, that foster care could be an option if the mother could prove there was a real 'opportunity of improving circumstances'. It may be in Edith's case that they will judge her position to have changed when she finishes her studies, so that the foster-care-grant period would be short, thus minimising the cost to the state.

'It Would Be Unfair for Me to Give My Child Away'

Sindiswa, 26, was also staying in a home for women in crisis, but in another town. She was pregnant and had made up her mind to keep her child. This home allowed parenting-minded women to stay. Sindiswa

had a fairly privileged background. She was raised by her mother and grandmother, and later also by a stepfather. Although lacking education her mother managed to build a successful business selling clothes, which secured Sindiswa's and her brother's education. Throughout the interview she emphasised the possibility of establishing a materially secure life almost from scratch, her own childhood being financially stable and comfortable:

> [My mother] started early, she bought furniture for her house, she paid for her siblings' education. Today she's not a teacher or a nurse or whatever but she lives in a fully paid up house, fully paid up cars, took me through university, you know she made it. She did make it without all that much education and good background.

Sindiswa had a diploma in electrical engineering. She had held down good jobs in various companies and had thought about entrepreneurship as one option for the future. She got to know her boyfriend through work, and the result was an unplanned pregnancy. This was a shock to both of them as they had planned to get married first. Sindiswa was very religious and felt ashamed and disappointed to be pregnant at this stage. Abortion was against her religious beliefs. She came to the pregnancy crisis centre to avoid having to face her family. She had not yet told anyone about the pregnancy. Her family, mother and friends already thought she had 'taken this Christianity thing too far'. She now feared that they would tell her to relax her strict religious beliefs:

> I think one of these days she'll tell me oh no stop this nonsense. You say you are a Christian and now you've got a baby, so stop being so serious. […] My mother or they won't understand, so I went away, came to the crises centre. […] I haven't told my mother but I plan to tell her very soon.

Sindiswa did not want to live with her boyfriend yet because she did not want them to 'fail' again and maybe have another child out of wedlock. They did have plans to marry in the near future, however, and the boyfriend supported her and would help with the upbringing of the child. It also became clear that practices related to bride-wealth payments were

still prevalent, although not necessarily favoured by the younger generation: 'I don't believe in that, I don't like it, but if my parents want that there is nothing I can do.' Although her boyfriend appeared reliable, Sindiswa, like the mothers discussed in Chap. 5, was not fully convinced. The image of the abandoning man was so common that she had made plans in case she were to be left on her own: 'So even if the father changes along the way, and I'm not putting my faith in him. [...] So I want to get a job. [...] So far he hasn't disappointed me, I'm just trying to be safe, that if he should change.' Sindiswa was in a far better work situation than the other women who wished to keep their children. She was able to take advantage of new policies aimed at promoting black people to higher occupational positions, which also favoured educated black women. Her narrative thus reflects the privileged position of the new black middle classes with all the opportunities open to them.

> And if you are at a company, as a woman and as a black person, you get more opportunities because yes, that's what happens, there is this affirmative action thing going on and gender equality. They want women in positions. So if you just strike it lucky and get a job, especially when you are qualified, there are a lot of opportunities. Where I worked I was a senior technician and I moved to senior very fast. That's it. And they are looking for women. So I think I will find a job, they are looking for women, cause they want to balance their figures and all that.

Sindiswa could even afford to resign from a good job to look for something better suited to her: 'I worked there for two years in a power station. I resigned because of a lot of things and I tried my hand at business.' She was also able to contemplate what would really interest her. She might change her career altogether: 'Do something that I'm really talented at, 'cause I believe everybody has a purpose to serve on earth, so if I can just do something that is aligned with my purpose, I don't think engineering is.' In five years' time she hoped to be in an even higher position: 'But if I'll still be working, I'd want to be a manager in five years' time. Or at least have my business running.' Her everyday life after the baby was born could include paid childcare help when she returned to work. Financially there were many options open to her that would smooth her

path even if she were to become a single mother: 'I'll hire someone or maybe stay with someone that I trust and can look after the baby when I'm not there.'

With her privileged position and good prospects for the future she was sure she would be able to keep her child: 'I want to raise my child myself. Because if there is any reason why I wouldn't, would be because I don't have money or I don't have a job, something that could change in a short while. So maybe I'll regret it if I just give my baby away.' Sindiswa's reasons also resonate with the general disapproval of giving one's child away. She expressed doubt as to the real motivation behind adoption. After all, many poor people manage to raise their children, and in her case all the material resources would be in place. She firmly believed that women should keep the children they carried.

> I think it would be unfair for me to give my child away. That's how I see it. I think it will be unfair because, I don't blame anyone who wants to give their baby up for adoption but I don't think it's right to give your baby up for adoption for convenience, you know, I want to go to nightclubs, I still want to party and now I have a child, those kind of things, it's not fair. [...] So I've seen women or families raise children under very difficult circumstances and those children were successful like my mother. […] If you really are in a difficult situation, yes, but if you are like me, you will get a job, you just want to groove around with something, it's just not right.

Sindiswa's case implies that single motherhood is not the problem. The problem is inadequate resources. Both Sindiswa and Simphiwe (in Chap. 5) mentioned possible regret following the relinquishment of a child for adoption, but Sindiswa had the choice of keeping her child whereas Simphiwe did not.

From Life on the Streets to Motherhood

Vuyo, 16, had a very different profile. She had given birth two weeks previously and had also decided to keep her child. She was in a home for pregnant women and, with help from other people, had a place to go with her baby. Vuyo's trajectory shows how, with assistance, it is possible

to recover from the consequences of living on the streets. Without finding benefactors it would have been impossible for her to manage with a baby, or even to keep it.

Neglected and abandoned by her mother and also by her grandmother, Vuyo ended up living on the streets at the early age of 11 or 12. Her situation was dangerous and depressing. She was frequently beaten up and life was a struggle. She told me that she sometimes just stood in the middle of the highway wishing her life to end. The people who took her off the streets turned out to have done so only to use her for prostitution. Vuyo was determined to improve her situation, however. She approached some others whose children she had looked after sometimes, and asked them for help. She wanted to go back to school and asked them to pay her school fees, which they did: 'They putted me into school, paying school fees for me every month.' Nevertheless, she was still living with the people who were 'selling' her. In this situation she met her current boyfriend and the father of her child. She was afraid to tell him that the people she was living with were not her family in case he took advantage of her. When she found out she was pregnant, therefore, she was desperate, and even tried to commit suicide. In the end she was referred to a home for pregnant women and the boyfriend came back into her life promising support. The boyfriend's mother has also expressed a willingness to help and was coming to see the baby the following day.

Vuyo felt sad and angry when she talked about her mother and grandmother: 'They are also not looking for me. It's been four years, four, five years now. So I don't think they care anymore.' She was determined to be a better mother for her child, of whom she had great expectations. The child would give her the chance to have a family and to be cared for later:

> Everything has changed now. I can't sleep at night, I have to be responsible. […] Now I'm a mother I have to take responsibility because I don't want to do what my mother did to me. […] I've got a new family now. I've got my baby. She's the only family I've got now. […] I've got someone to depend on, my baby when she grows up she will do something for me. […] [I want to change] the way my life is, I don't understand. It's not okay. It is fine because I've got people who are helping me, but it's not the thing I wanted. I wanted to be loved by own family, so. I want to be a loving, caring mother to my baby to prove people wrong.

At the time, Vuyo expressed hopefulness and determination. She was determined to carve out a future for herself and for her child, and for that she needed to go back to school and complete her education. She did not want to live with her boyfriend while she was going to school because it might affect her studying: 'You know, girls, which are staying with their boyfriends they end up sitting down.' Although her boyfriend had agreed to support her and their child, Vuyo also expressed the common view of not trusting men. When I asked her whom she thought of as her family now she replied: 'It's my baby, plus this friend of mine, the one who's helping me. I can't say the father of my baby is my family because he could change, you can't trust men. I'm not saying he will change, but you don't have to trust anyone.' All in all, Vuyo regarded herself as lucky: 'I'm happy that I'm sixteen years today. I'm still surviving.'

Resources and Women's Agency

Processes of differentiation and inequality in South Africa are creating stark contrasts among first mothers. The deliberations of those who were in better material positions or had at least some resources at their disposal differed markedly from the narratives of those who were struggling to cope. The women in the former group were not preoccupied with subsistence, and could stop and think about what they really wanted to do in life. Moreover, they were not obliged to maintain other kin members. Having more options than the struggling women they were not affected by impossible trade-offs and could choose between relinquishing their child for adoption and keeping it. Even a temporary solution in the form of foster care is available to women who can show that the period will be relatively short because they will soon be able to afford to reclaim their child. Thus, behind the adoption decision in these cases was the underlying option of raising the child. Without this the whole notion of choice is lost. Agency is underpinned by privilege, as is evident in the striking difference between the narrative of 'having no choice' among the first mothers introduced in Chap. 5 and the narrative of 'taking this option' among those discussed in this chapter.

Frances Latchford (2012) claims that, within the Global North context, some birth mothers are victimised on account of the 'imperative of naturalized motherhood' that curtails their freedom to choose a life without motherhood. Most first mothers in the Global South context, as exemplified in Chap. 5, were victimised with regard to poverty, vital inequality and a lack of alternatives. However, some of the South African first mothers taking the adoption route who feature in Chap. 6 resemble, to a certain extent, the willingly and voluntarily relinquishing women to whom Latchford (2012) refers. Gugu and Sibongele, for instance, clearly expressed an unwillingness to raise their children and absolutely wanted to have them adopted. The US birth mothers in Latchford's study, however, also wanted to renounce motherhood completely, and not to maintain any ties. As I will show, only one South African first mother, Sibongele, firmly stated her wish not to maintain contact afterwards. This reflects the differences in the family systems of the Global North and South. Latchford, for instance, refers to 'bio-narcissistic nurturing' and the 'heteronormative' ideals of the family as dimensions of the naturalised motherhood imperative (Latchford 2012, 74), thus evoking exclusive and intensive attachment mothering within the nuclear model that the birth mothers she interviewed wanted to avoid. The most common family form in South Africa is the matriarchal extended family. The mother who gives birth to the child is not necessarily the one who raises it, although she tends to return at some point. A key issue among the first mothers discussed in Chaps. 5 and 6 concerns the maintenance of some rights over children who do not live with the first mother. This preoccupation with retaining connections differentiates these women from those to whom Latchford refers who wish to break the ties. This is the subject of the next chapter.

7

Re-Making Family: The Struggle Over Belonging

We want the birth mother to move on. (Adoption social worker, interview No. 6)

We are praying that [...] [the biological mother] would get a chance to have a new family, to have more children. (Piia, adoptive mother)

I would hope to see my child. [...] It keeps me going (cries) that one day I'll see him. (Rosina, first mother)

Thus far I have focused on the making and un-making of the adoptive family and the family of origin, and have shown the two processes to be interdependent. This chapter and Chap. 8 further explore the relationship between the two families. The child is transferred from one family to another, but leaves traces behind. Negotiation of the meaning of such traces takes place in the context of increasing openness, referring to higher levels of transparency in discussing adoption and the other parents, and to actual contact between them (Brodzinsky 2006). Open adoption, meaning that contact is maintained after the adoption, is already common and is considered good practice in domestic adoption in the UK and the USA (Grotevant 2009, 313; Neil 2006, 3; Reamer and Siegel 2007, 12). It is also under debate in the context of transnational adoption

in which it has been common practice to keep adopters and first mothers separate from and unknown to each other, although adopters sometimes meet the first parent(s) when they come to fetch the child, and they may exchange letters and photographs.

This chapter addresses questions related to how the different parties (adoption social workers, adopters and first mothers) understand and manage the traces left by the transfer of the child. What kind of family comes into being after adoption and who belongs to it? In particular, what is the role of the family of origin? How are encounters and contacts between adopters and first parents understood and facilitated? My primary sources of data are the experiences of 15 interviewees who adopted from South Africa, and accounts of five meetings with first parents in particular, as well as the recollections of first mothers and South African adoption social workers.

Creating Exclusive Belonging

The Hague Convention and national adoption legislation in Finland and South Africa are based on the notion of clean-break plenary adoption, meaning that the child's previous kinship ties are severed and the adoptive family becomes its only family. The policy of the South African adoption organisations in my research was to facilitate non-disclosed adoptions, which they considered were best in line with the legislation: no identifying information is exchanged between adopters and first parents and they do not communicate directly. First mothers may, however, receive letters via the social workers for a while. Adopters are encouraged to send letters and pictures of the child to the adoption agency for the first mothers to collect for a period of two years, but after that all contact ceases. Some of the adoption organisations also arrange encounters between adopters and first mothers. One of them actively encouraged brief meetings with the first parent(s) when the adopters came to fetch the child, another sometimes arranged meetings, and one did not facilitate them at all at the time. Such meetings appear to have become more common, however. According to the adopters who had met the first family in South Africa, the encounters were fairly brief, generally lasting between five and ten minutes. All parties

have their own social worker and the first parents in particular are closely monitored. The first mother generally spends some time with the child beforehand and then they all have a few minutes together. After the meeting the first parents leave first, through another door.

As illustrated in Chap. 4, the adoption social workers complied with the Global North notion of a permanent and exclusive family that forms the basis of The Hague Convention. It was considered best for the child to have a bounded family unit, and to belong to only one set of parents. In this model the adoptive family completely replaces the family of origin. Adoption social workers operating within and implementing the principles of the wider adoption system gradually distanced the first mothers from their children and the adoptive family. Such strategies aim at the permanent and total exclusion of the first mother from the life of the adoptive family. The process starts when the child is handed over to the adopters at least a week and sometimes two weeks before they meet the first mother, thereby effectively distancing the first mother and creating a bond between the adopters and the child. The adoption then seems inevitable and the adopters are seen as the child's natural and only parents. The first mothers are now onlookers and outsiders, almost strangers to their children. The adoption social workers emphasised the importance of this symbolic and practical disconnecting of the first mother from the child. In their opinion it was beneficial to all concerned. However, at the same time as being assured that good care will be taken of her child, the first mother is stripped of her connection with it.

> We always do it a week, at least a week after placement. To give the parents the opportunity to bond with the baby and the baby to get to know them. It's better for the mother to see that. (Adoption social worker, interview No. 8)
>
> The meetings is very positive for the girls because on that day, the [adopters] will bring the baby in a bit earlier, so she will have time to spend with the baby and to say goodbye to the baby and she will hand the baby over to the parents. [...] And a lot of time she can see there's already a bond between the parents and the baby because the parents been here now for two weeks. And she can many times see the child won't come to her, the child will cling to the adoptive mother. And that's good. She feels that, then she knows they will take good care of the baby. (Adoption social worker, interview No. 4)

As these excerpts demonstrate, the social workers arranging the meetings between first mothers and adopters viewed them very positively. However, although they also stressed the benefits to the first mother who witnessed that her child was being well looked after, the perspective is that of the adopters. It seemed that in some cases the meeting was even more important to the adopters and social workers than to the first mothers. It is evident in the following accounts of two meetings given by social workers from different organisations that the social workers identified with the adopters, who are portrayed as loving and concerned about the first mother. In the first example the adopters are said to be eager to know 'everything' about the first mother, even about a 'kink' in the child's ear. This preoccupation with inherited traits and family resemblance is further illustrated in the accounts of adopters presented later. The meetings thus serve the adopters' need to know more about the (genetic) background of the child and reduce the risk of the unknown that some adopters fear. According to the second account none of the adopters regretted the meeting, which is described as a purifying emotional experience for them (and for the social workers). Nothing is said about the first mothers and their emotions. It seems that the meetings are tailored to the adopters and their desire for the 'exotic'. In connection with fetching the child the adopters usually go on a safari and a township tour, and now 'let [the birth mother] talk in her own language on the video'. Meetings thus provide an occasion for adopters to consume and enjoy the experience of Africa, which merges with the adoption experience. There is also conflicting information about whether the first mothers come to these meetings: those living in very bad circumstances may well find it more difficult to attend and to answer the adopters' questions. The whole encounter reinforces the adopters' power and parenthood. It is over in five minutes, and the adopters walk away with the child leaving the mother behind.

> I love meeting the parents. I mean, for me it's something so special because every couple is so special and it's always very emotional, it's, you know, it's happy and it's sad 'cause she's happy and she's sad, you know. But it's a beautiful, wonderful experience. [...] And even if the girls don't meet the parents for some reason I still do meet them. 'cause they often want to just ask about the girl and things like that 'cause they're very special to the

adoptive parents and that's a wonderful part of this whole programme. [...] Especially the overseas parents are amazing. They always want to know everything about the young girl. I remember one couple saying to me, they couldn't meet the mom because we couldn't find her, she disappeared, and, you know, she changed her number. [...] and they said to me do I think that [the birth mother] had that kink in her ear as well, you know. They were such wonderful parents. [...] Ninety per cent of the girls actually want to meet the parents. [...] And it just gives them so much peace. (Social worker, interview No. 1)

Many of them [first mothers] don't come for the meeting eventually, but we really try to arrange that because for all involved it's extremely positive. For the birth mother to see her child is safe and that the parents really love the child. [...] It is an extremely emotional meeting. Both parties are wrecks before the time. And, but even though the meeting may sometimes be difficult with language barriers, but it is still, I've never heard of a couple who said 'I wish we didn't do it'. All of them were so happy, taking photographs, taking video, sometimes let she talk in her own language on the video to the child and sometimes they offer to sing a song out of their language or, you know, it's very special, it's very emotional and after all these years, after 12 years most of the time I've still got tears in my eyes during this happening. It's a very profound emotional experience still. (Social worker, interview No. 8)

The meetings are also fraught with potential dangers: first parents may display excessive grief and even wish to change their minds. This is the greatest fear of adopters, which certain strategies are meant to counteract. These include becoming familiar with the child in advance and the careful monitoring of the meeting by social workers, with a special emphasis on the mood and behaviour of the first parents. The first parents, usually the mothers, are given instructions beforehand about how to behave. This is obvious from the adopters' accounts of these meetings. Several adoptive mothers wondered how it was possible for the first mother to appear so 'calm', 'positive', 'happy' and 'smiling'. However, the staged nature of the meeting was revealed when one of the adopters caught a glimpse of the 'sunny' first mother 'collapsing' after she left the room. As Susanna told me:

The mother was really sunny. [...] We took really smiling pictures. [...] She walked out of the door in a happy mood saying bye-bye, but I saw that

when she walked out of the door, she collapsed. And I realised what an effort it had been for her to come there and how painful it was leaving the child.

Another adoptive couple, Piia and Sami, similarly realised the role played by social workers through their own experience. The mother of their first adopted child did not show up at the scheduled meeting, but the mother of the second one did. As Piia explained, she was sure that the first mother had been well counselled before the meeting, and thus the encounter was pleasant for them. Power makes its appearance through first mothers having to engage in emotional labour so that they appear positive and grief is concealed for the sake of the adopters. In Piia's words:

> That meeting was very successful. She had the strength to meet us. […] The birth mother had received a lot of psychological support from the social workers before she came. She was very calm, a very positive person, a really lovely person.

Rather unexpectedly, the genetic fathers of the children were also present in two such meetings the adopters told me about. African men who did not conform to the behavioural pattern of the abandoning father appeared in these accounts, too. The meetings were described as very emotional, the sorrow of the first parents being visible. The pain of the fathers in both cases was palpable. Meeting the first parents of the child was a surprise to Mia. She was not told until she arrived that she would be meeting not only its mother but also its father and sister. She even became emotional when she was telling me about it, vividly recalling the tears of the father: 'It's nothing if we women cry but then the father started to cry. [...] He wiped his tears on his cap. […] and then his eyes were becoming blood-shot. […] they were completely red.' Susanna's case further illustrates the difference between the reactions of the first mother, who had received counselling from social workers, and of the genetic father who had not. She told me that the genetic father turned up to the meeting rather unexpectedly, and that he was therefore monitored by another social worker who talked to him and followed him to make sure he complied with the conditions:

The social worker stayed close by the father's side all the time. […] The mother was really sunny and I had almost motherly feelings that don't be so cheerful, this is not such a joyful occasion. But I think it was some kind of a coping strategy, to try and not think about it. But for the father it was clearly more difficult. […] He was so sad. And it was even more difficult to see the man, or a young man, really a young boy. […] And he looked exactly like his child. […] It was really hard to see the father's reaction and sadness.

These excerpts also illustrate the preoccupation with genetic links among some adopters. Piia told me that the first mother 'looked so much like [the child] that sometimes when I see [the child's] facial expressions, I see the biological mother.' Mia was pleased that she could now say to the child, 'you have your father's facial expression or your mother's smile.' This adopter also frequently took photographs of the child and placed them beside those of the first parents: 'I think it's lovely to see, when I have managed to take pictures where he has his mother's and father's features.' One function of the meeting is to make the child's origin transparent. The child is linked in appearance to its first parents but physically and emotionally remains within the adoptive family circle.

 Other strategies for reinforcing the child's belonging in the adoptive family included strengthening the image of the adopters as better parents. The social workers generally emphasised the advantages of adoption and the merits of the adopters during the meetings, repeatedly telling the first mothers about the wealth of the adopting nations and families, for instance. They highlighted the superiority of adoption and material opportunities for the child in the Global North. Susanna recalled that they 'told the first mother that in Finland anyone can study even as far as university and it does not depend on whether you have money or not.' Mia told me how the social worker marketed the advantages she, her family and her country possessed:

The biological mother was surprised when I told her I would be at home with the child for one to two years. And the social worker told them that this was the general custom in Finland. And the social worker went on to tell the parents that I was a teacher and that I had a large extended family. She advertised it a bit.

This same tendency to consolidate adoption and to create the image of the adoptive family as superior and of the child as happy is evident in the monitoring of the sending of information after adoption. Adoptive parents are advised to send certain kinds of pictures. Ideally such pictures reinforce the idea that the adoption is a success and that it was the right thing to do. The position of the adoptive family as the only family is legitimised through the notion of better parenting. As Susanna told me:

> They [adoption social workers] always tell us that we should send happy pictures, and not [pictures where] the children are crying. [...] but [pictures portraying] how happy he is now that he is... It's understandable; I would perhaps prefer to see such pictures, too.

As I have mentioned, no further information is sent after two years, which completes the process of cutting first mothers out of the lives of adoptive families. The reasons given for the two-year-rule revolved around the assumed benefits of exclusivity, in other words the child having only one set of parents. It was considered best for the first mothers to forget and to 'move on'. The experience of placing one's child for adoption was even compared to going through a divorce, again implying that the child would be permanently lost to the first mother. The relationship between her and her child, according to this analogy, could be terminated in the same manner as a couple's relationship that has gone sour. It is also clear from the excerpt that contact between the two sets of parents is terminated even in cases in which all involved would wish it to continue. As one social worker (interview No. 5) explained:

> In terms of the whole period of loss, if you think about someone divorcing, you know, the general principle is we get two years nothing less, you know, so. That's a good process of going through the whole emotion of mourning. We have had many requests of birth mothers wanting to continue, and we've had many adoptive parents, especially international, wanting to continue. But it's a non-disclosed adoption, so already legally we are making more information available than is prescribed. It's something that we have to explore in future to what extent should we be open to prolong this period.

Other adoption social workers echoed these sentiments. They pointed out that the cutting off of ties between the first mother and the child was eventually beneficial to all. They agreed that most first mothers wanted some information about the child after the adoption and that this helped them to get over it, but it should only be temporary. The social workers thought it was healthy if the first mother stopped needing such information after a while. Moreover, although the assumption among social workers is that first mothers, for their own good, need to forget about the child they relinquished and accept its permanent loss, the need to protect the adopters also features prominently: they also need to move on. For them, cutting the first mother out of the picture confirms their status as the child's only parents.

> It contributes to their healing. So receiving letters and photos is very important. [...] For a period of two years. [...] we set two years because we want the birth mother to move on, and the parents as well to move on. (Adoption social worker, interview No. 6)
>
> They get letters and photos. That's all. [...] No direct contact, but we encourage them for two years. [...] For two years to send letters and photos. [...] Then it's terminated. [...] We will try to accommodate that, but many times, you know, the biological mother also needs to go on with her life, and the parents. (Adoption social worker, interview No. 4)

According to this view, the sooner the first mothers acknowledge the fact that the child is no longer part of their family the better. They can then get 'a new life'. That there may be other reasons for the ban on sending information after two years is revealed in the account of one adoptive mother who asked the South African adoption facilitator if they could send letters to the first mother after the two-year period. It is evident that the adoptive mother agreed with this policy. From the point of view of the adopters, the relationship between the first mother and the child is 'in the past' and has no relevance in the present.

> And they said no, it has to stop because they [first mothers] also have a right to a new life. [...] And [the adoption agency] has no facilities for archiving such amounts of letters, but the mother must also have a right to get a new life. [...] I of course understand. This is all in the past and nothing

will heal if you have to keep wondering where the children are all the time. (Piia, adoptive mother)

One organisation did not tell the adopters whether or not the first mothers had collected their letters until after the two-year period was over, and even then, as another parent who had adopted from South Africa told me, 'you often have to ask five times.' This practice effectively discourages exchanges between the two sets of parents. Even in the other agencies the adopters were not always given information about the reappearance of the first mothers. One reason for this is the lack of resources: they have their hands full as it is. They also focus more strongly on facilitating new adoptions than preoccupying themselves with ones that are settled.

Moreover, the inability of some first mothers to make themselves available to the adopters within the two-year period met with disapproval among the social workers, who depicted the non-accommodating first mother as someone who did not come back for the meeting, who disappeared, who did not write back to the adopters and whose interest 'dwindled' after 'just six months' (adoption social worker, interview No. 9). Another social worker first talked about first mothers who did not come back, who 'just want to move forward', who 'don't want to look over their shoulder, look back and think', and then told me how hard social workers have worked to 'change the mind-set' and that they were now coming back 'for counselling, coming back to get the photos and letters, writing back'. She continued, making it clear that the disappearance of first mothers was very bad from the point of view of the adopters in particular, as some of them were eager to know more.

It was very difficult for us to explain to people from Finland or from Holland that they write these awesome letters to the birth mother and asking, you know, reasonable questions about, that she can answer and she doesn't bother to answer back. And I had to explain to them that it's not in their culture to write letters. (Adoption social worker, interview No. 8)

However, changing what goes on in someone's mind does not change the relations of power in which encounters between first mothers and adopters take place. It may consequently be very hard for first mothers

to answer questions from adopters with power. Coming back may also be too difficult because it reminds them of their decision and brings back the pain related to the relinquishment of the child. The social worker's account also ignores the effects of the harsh everyday struggle for survival of most first mothers. In such situations writing letters may not be the first priority. The force of circumstances may prevent some of them from coming back. Many struggle financially: being likely to lack a permanent address they tend to be mobile, and they may not have the money for the fare. This was the case with two first mothers in another country of the Global South as I learned from an adoptive mother who had searched for and found them through the Internet (see also Roby et al. 2005, 65–67). I also interviewed two first mothers who did not want any information at the time of the adoption but came back more than five years later eager to know more. As one of them explained, a first mother in an extremely difficult situation may have no energy to spare from her material struggles. The time scale of someone in such a situation is likely to be different. What for privileged adopters (and social workers) might seem like a long time could be extremely short for first mothers trying to solve overwhelming practical problems. In Lerato's words:

> Maybe she is still having problems, she's thinking that okay I'm going to go back there, she is thinking, but you know sometimes time runs so fast, one year is nothing, you know one year is just like a day if you are busy planning your life and it's not getting okay. You just see two years gone by, you have never done anything, that's how it goes, you know. You wake up and two years is gone, you have not done anything, trying to solve out one little problem. Maybe she is trying to plan, to do, sometimes life is not fair. Some people are just fortunate in this life, they just get everything or so well, for some the life doesn't go well.

The overall goal of the practices described here is to transfer the child smoothly, permanently and exclusively to the adopters by first distancing the first mother and then erasing her from the picture. The two-year-rule and the strategies agencies use to naturalise adoption bring the adoptive family to the fore and obliterate the family of origin.

Adopters and the 'Forever Child'

The adoptive parents' understanding of family was firmly embedded in the Global North image of a bounded and exclusive unit. Their need for a family and a child of their own implied both permanence and exclusive belonging (see Chap. 3). These expectations led to tensions in the encounters with first mothers: given the either-or nature of parenting in the Global North, the mere existence of another mother activated the fear of losing the child. Eeva's statement illustrates the worries many adopters experienced: 'I do have fears […] what if she suddenly appeared saying it's my child and I want him back.' All the adopters who met the first mother had worried about this possibility. The thought of facing the other mother also scared the Finnish social workers, as is suggested in Aila's account. Aila told me that she was the Finnish adoption facilitator's first adopter to meet the first mother. The whole office had been following her case and worrying about how she would react. The social worker first gave her details about the child over the phone, that it was a small healthy baby, and then at the very end of the call quickly uttered: 'Oh, and one more thing: you have to meet the mother.' According to Aila, a tense silence followed. The constellation of two mothers is so alien to the understanding of family in the Global North that it evokes extreme worry and nervousness.

Even if there is no fear of physically losing the child, the figure of the other mother threatens the adopter's own parenthood, making him or her seem less of a mother or a father. The appearance of another parent detracts from one's own parenthood in the substitutable parenthood model. To my question of whether they thought the child had one or two families, Paula and Timo replied: 'He only has one family, our family. He's our son.' They went on to talk about (the unlikely) possibility that a first parent would suddenly turn up at their front door in Finland, fearing that it would disturb the child, but it would disturb them even more. Mia, who had met the first parents, noticed that other adopters did not want to talk about the background of the children at all or to hear about her experiences. She said it was as if talking about the child's first family 'weakened the parenthood here in Finland'. Katariina, who adopted from

another country in the Global South and had searched for and found the first mother of her child, told me about the disbelief and outright disapproval of other adopters.

This effect seems to be even more pronounced if the link between adopters and first parent(s) is more concrete. Those who met the first parent(s) had to come to terms with the ambiguity of multiple parents. According to their accounts, the adopters shared the understanding among South African adoption social workers that the meetings and the sending of information led to the gradual removal of the first family from their lives. Although the adopters appreciated the meetings, which were quick, one-off encounters, because they allowed the mothers to meet their child once again, they were the ones who would permanently have the child afterwards. The image of the 'forever child' is familiar from the wider rhetoric of the adoption system, in which the adoptive family is referred to as the 'forever family' that 'will be forever present even if the birth family is forever lost', thus reinforcing the hierarchy between them (Brian 2012, 112). The following account by an adoptive mother of her meeting with the first mother is illustrative of the idea of the forever child. Her narrative reveals both empathy towards the first mother and a sense of entitlement. Permanence is indicated in the strong belief that the child would be hers for 'the rest of my life'. At the same time, it implies exclusivity in that the first mother is assumed to completely disappear from their life after 'these five minutes'. The adopters, who would finally acquire the child, could afford to be generous and make temporary concessions at the meeting.

> I can now spend the rest of my life with this child, but you just have these five minutes. […] I had almost motherly feelings. […] Don't spoil this, hold the baby, it will stay in your memory. […] We had a similar sense of humour. The whole situation was so natural. [My husband] cried next to me and held the baby. […] It is one of my life's most wonderful experiences that I could enable the child to see her mother and the mother to see her child and I have not put my own ego in-between. It became crystal clear to me that I alone am not the mother of this child, this child has two mothers. If I could I would invite her for a visit but I can't. But this I could do. (Susanna, adoptive mother)

Susanna expressed the wish to 'invite the first mother for a visit'. Mia had a similar wish to continue the contact: 'I would like to go for coffee [with the first parents], for example, if it were possible.' However, she stressed that she would not take the child to such meetings. Both added that such meetings were not possible. In four out of five meetings with the first parent(s) the encounter did not lead to their keeping in touch. The adopters sent some information back to the adoption office but had no contact with the first parents. Mia sent a letter to the social workers in the country of origin when the child was one, and again at the age of four. She said: 'It was never even my intention to provide any continuous, regular sending of information.' Her reasons for discontinuing the contact were connected with the expectation of being the only mother of the child, as exemplified in her account below. The impossibility of being a mother a little bit or for 'a little while' is inherent in the exclusive nature of motherhood. At the end of the day, one either is or is not a mother, and the adoptive mothers have waited so long to be one.

> These are after all big issues, and I think it has been established that it would not be good for the mothers to meet more often or keep in contact. I feel that there is no bigger issue than one's own child. [...] You should not open it up too much, because you can't suddenly be someone's mother for just a little while and then not. [...] It would be too disruptive to have two mothers.

Hence, the adopters thought they would completely replace the family of origin. The other side of the coin and of the 'forever' child is that it will be completely and 'forever' lost to the first mother. Piia and Sami, who had met the first mother told me: 'We are praying that their [first mothers'] life will improve and that they [...] will get a chance to have a new family, to have more children.' Piia clearly felt for and sympathised with the first mother but the account also exemplifies the logical end result of exclusivity and permanency. The only way the first mother can have a family after adoption is to give birth to new children, because the adopted child no longer exists for her. Family here does not include keeping in contact with children who have been lost to adoption, for instance.

As exemplified in Chap. 3, the idea of the 'forever child' is closely connected to feelings of entitlement. The child can be taken because families

in the Global North are thought to be superior. The permanent removal of the child was further justified by placing it within the framework of individual choice. First mothers were thought to have voluntarily chosen adoption. The adopters, just like the adoption social workers and the adoption system, emphasised the first mothers' active decisions, several of them making similar comments to the one Mia made: 'If someone has made the decision to place [this child] for adoption, then the child would in any case have gone for adoption. That's how I always explain it to myself.' Piia even said 'we were chosen' based on the first mother having chosen their profile from among many potential adopters. Underlining choice obliterates the pressures exerted by dire poverty and relentless trade-offs that were often in the background, as demonstrated in Chap. 5.

The vast material inequality between the adopters and the first mothers also had an effect on the meetings and on the way the child's first kin were conceptualised. Some adoptive parents feared that contact with the first family would lead to requests for money. A few of them recalled an incident of which they had heard when an adoptive family met the first mother who, the moment the social worker turned her back, asked for money saying that she could not make ends meet. Helena said as she told me this story: 'And what do you do then? I don't know what I would have done.' Some adopters even used the word 'blackmail'. There were fears that adult siblings of the adoptee would later try to get money from the family or would cause other trouble, or that other kin members would contact the adoptee asking for assistance. Another adoptive mother, Susanna, said that (South African) adoption facilitators have strictly forbidden any direct contact between adopters and first parents. She had heard stories about adopters suddenly receiving a letter stating, 'we have financial problems', and 'it was not from the [biological] parents but from some acquaintance of an acquaintance.' Contacts with the first family were thus constructed as dangerous. This was also one reason why the third agency I contacted in South Africa did not arrange meetings between adopters and first mothers, further highlighting the role of inequality in structuring such encounters and adoption more widely. Consequently, as discussed earlier, social workers feel they have to supervise the meetings very carefully and tie them to the process of distancing the first mothers.

The 'forever child' that adopters seek exemplifies their permanent and exclusive parenthood. Brief meetings with first parents can be accommodated and this is applauded because it provides more information about the child. Proper parenting, however, is premised on the distancing of the first mother. The child is understood as belonging only to the adopters, forever.

First Mothers and the 'Returning Child'

Although the adoption social workers and the adopters believed in forming 'forever families' and thought that first mothers should forget and get on with their lives, the first mothers did not forget and predominantly hoped to maintain contact with the child. They understood adoption as temporary separation rather than permanent rupture, most of them believing that the child would return when of age. They, in other words, thought of the issue in terms of continuity rather than total break-up. There was a clear tendency to reshape adoption into a practice that would retain links rather than sever them. I explore these points in greater detail below under three themes: thinking about the child, wanting to stay in touch, and expecting the child to return.

Thinking About the Child

Separation from the child was difficult for the first mothers, with the exception of one woman to whom I will return at the end of the chapter. They described feelings of sadness, grief and pain, as well as guilt and a sense of loss. Many had suffered from depression, especially if they had not heard anything about the child post-adoption. In such cases the experience of placing a child for adoption can haunt the first mother for a long time. Lucille, for example, had relinquished a child more than ten years previously. She did not want to receive any information about it at the time, but had recently returned wanting to know. The implication is that not knowing or trying to suppress all memory of the child does not help but may rather make the first mother's situation worse: in Lucille's case it resulted in self-destructive thought patterns.

Sometimes when I work and see a child and I can just imagine that she must be about ten, eleven, twelve or something, just you know, get a child and you ask yourself I wonder if this is my child or something like that. So it's like, I've actually wiped the memory out of my head, but as I was telling you I had a couple of rough months at the end of this year and you know, old things were rushing back and I just, I just couldn't deal with it at all. […] The reason why I can talk about this now is because I'm going to counselling now. I almost had a breakdown earlier this year. […] After giving her up there was a time when I wanted to commit suicide so many times.

It was also the case, understandably, that those who explicitly stated that they did not want to place their child for adoption suffered the most even years afterwards. As mentioned in Chap. 5, for instance, Simphiwe bitterly regretted the decision to have her baby adopted and the loss continued to sadden and haunt her. Her sorrow and intense longing for her daughter permeated the whole interview. The pain had not eased over the years even though she received information about her child. Margaret, on the other hand, who had given birth just a few weeks previously and decided with her husband to place the child for adoption, described her feelings as involving tears that 'never stop' but at the same time felt that adoption was the right decision. In the light of her family's financial struggles, she had come to accept it. The decision was hard, but they could not afford to keep the child. Her account also reveals the importance of knowing what happens to the child and in what kind of family it is placed. Other first mothers also told me that without this knowledge they would have suffered more. As Margaret said, not knowing if the child was well cared for would 'destroy' her:

I miss her already, you know. But I'm just telling myself that everything will be fine. She will be fine too (cries). […] As I've said, it's difficult for, very difficult, you see my tears doesn't stop. It's falling but my heart tells me that everything is going to be fine. […] Especially at night when you must go to bed, you must think about her before you drift on sleep. Where is she now? What is she doing? Who's feeding her? You see, all those questions. But I'm just telling myself that she'll be fine. I have to believe in that because if I don't, it will destroy me, yeah, destroy.'

The first mothers did not forget their children. Instead, many questions came to mind concerning their welfare. These memory triggers included the child's birthday and meeting children of a similar age. Many described the child's birthday as the most difficult day of the year. Cathy told me: 'I think I'll never ever forget his birthday. I always think about it.' Some other mothers spent the day crying and did not get out of bed at all. For Simphiwe the birthdays were a reminder of how 'she's growing up' and that 'she's turning this much' when there was no way of being involved. Even though Gugu had managed to arrange an open adoption and received regular information about how the child was faring, she recalled its first birthday. Although the adopters openly talked about her to the child, it was hard that it was so far away:

> He had a birthday this year, first year this year, so they wrote me a letter, telling me that they had a party. They also had my photo in his room. […] They can add that feeling that I'm part of it. And I was telling you only that, you know, that day I had a problem 'cause I was crying, but I didn't know what I was crying for. […] Because I had this feeling that it's his first birthday, but I couldn't do anything.

Encounters with other people's children also brought back memories. When Molly saw her friends' children she caught herself thinking: 'I just so wish mine was here.' Elsie, likewise, found herself wondering how her child had turned out: 'When you see just a child. […] You start asking yourself some questions: how is he? His mind, his hands, or he's grown, how much he's now, he's bigger, smaller, fatter, how the colour? We always ask ourselves that.' The first mothers seemed to wonder about the physical looks of the child and possible family resemblances, indicating that the child had its place in the chain of generations of this kin group, too. Molly's narrative is illustrative of this need, further indicating that she was starting to cope with the fact that the child was not there. Some first mothers were thus adjusting to the situation: on many occasions they referred to the necessity of 'living with' the fact that their child had gone for adoption or lived far away. Molly explained:

> So I wanted to see the baby because, I mean, I was gonna ask myself so many questions. Does she look like me? Does she look like the father? Does

she look like the granny? You know, all those kinds of things. So, I wanted to make peace with my heart; that is why I did that. And I know that it's gonna, I mean, every day of my life I'm living with that every day. Wherever I go, whatever I do I know that it's part of my life.

Indeed, the first mothers' thoughts about their children were not always negative or full of sorrow, but could also be more positive (see also Fravel et al. 2000). The prerequisites for this included knowing where the child was and being able to receive updates on its life. Rosina and Mary both received such updates. Rosina, in the first excerpt, starts by describing intense longing and grief. She had been heart-broken having had to part with the child she had relinquished some eight months previously. She struggled to come to terms with the adoption and exhibited signs of lowered self-esteem and maladjustment leading to drinking, which she was later able to curtail. Her narrative, however, also shows her fluctuation between feelings of hopelessness and only being able to cry, and her more positive act of praying for her child. Concentrating on positive thoughts about the child with the knowledge that it was being well looked after helped this first mother to cope. This is further illustrated in the second excerpt, which is from Mary's interview. Mary's thoughts about the child were largely positive, not regretful.

> The worst thing is me, I'm lonely, alone. […] I feel like no one. It eats me a lot, I struggle a lot. […] I end up starting to drink every day. Just to forget. I just told myself maybe if I can drink every day when I come from work, every day will be fine but things got worse. […] It doesn't help and I had to stop myself before I was addicted. But now when I'm lonely, I just cry before I go to sleep. […] I cry myself to sleep. But at times, it doesn't happen every day, I can pass a week, and I feel like I forgot him, not thinking about him, not crying for him, I feel like I forgot him and I'll cry, then I stop myself. It's better to think about him, not cry about him. And I try every day when I get up to pray for him wherever he is. It gives me a good start for the day. (Rosina)
>
> I'm think about him, that is the thing that is going on, on, on. Can't be just go away just like that. […] I'm thinking about him. Always I'm praying for him. So, for him and that parents that adopted him, that please, God, give them life and give him life to be in the family, to be in love. Yes. I'm always thinking about that. (Mary)

Adoption has been conceptualised (in the Global North) as 'ambiguous loss', meaning ambiguity between absence and presence in that the child is physically absent but psychologically present to the first mother (Boss 1999; Fravel et al. 2000). The loss is unclear and results in unresolved grief. Referring to adoption, Pauline Boss (1999, 35–36) points to the need for a more fluid and flexible concept of family that would also include the absent first mother on some level, and allow for the free flow of information among those involved. This kind of family fluidity already exists in the Global South. South African first mothers are used to the fact that children do not always live with their mothers. Physical absence may thus be a normal part of mothering. Adoption differs from these patterns in its permanent nature and in doing away with all first-mother rights, including the right to receive information post-adoption and to maintain contact with the child. The problem with adoption may thus have more to do with exclusivity than with physical absence. Lucille, for instance, referred to the widespread practice of informal childcare when one's child can live 'far away'. This could also lead to a particular way of adjusting to adoption, one that does not necessarily involve constantly thinking of the child while acknowledging its existence.

> Like in our culture we say that if your child lives far away, you don't hold him in your heart because you're gonna, that person will be sick wherever he is, because he's away and wanting, wanting. As long as you know how much you love that person.

What these narratives imply is the continuing importance of the child to the mother. Maternal identity is maintained in some form and the child is conceptualised as part of the wider kin group. The first mothers thought of their children as not being with them but nevertheless somewhere as opposed to being totally disconnected from them. Similar results have been obtained from research on US first mothers placing children for domestic adoption (Fravel et al. 2000; Modell 1994, 61–90): the child remained 'in the heart of or on the mind of' the first mothers and they worried about its well-being (Fravel et al. 2000). It was not the case that the child no longer existed for the first mothers or that they could just move on.

Wanting to Stay in Touch

Going against the prevalent general view among black South Africans of adoption as abandonment, the first mothers saw it as looking out for the child, not 'dumping' it. They showed this by making sure that it went to a family that would look after it well and wanting to know what happened in its life afterwards. Such sentiments were also diametrically opposed to the exclusive clean-break practice of adoption and the two-year-rule terminating all contact. Cathy, for instance, explained to me that she 'didn't wanna like get rid of it [the child]', but 'just wanted someone like take care of it'. Natie wanted to know 'what's happening in this child's life.' Mary emphasised that she 'did not want to throw away of my child altogether' referring to her wish to receive information about it post-adoption. Those who had not yet relinquished their child were thinking about the possibility of receiving information and thus keeping in touch with its life. Pam, who was just 14 and pregnant, expressed a hope to 'not lose connections' with the child and its parents. Margaret said that in order to know that she did not 'throw' the child away a mother wants to know how the child is: 'Sometimes it's like you're throwing her or what. And maybe to know something, it will help. Just to see how she's doing, is she smiling, or what (cries).'

Those who were receiving news and photographs confirmed that it did help. Pictures and letters are tangible and can be preserved and resorted to when needed. Rosina explained why receiving them was so important: 'When I'm pretty lonely I read the letters and look at the pictures. It does help. […] It's tough, but just seeing him in the pictures, I know he is still there, he is out there and he is fine and I feel much better.' Knowing that the child is well helps the mothers to cope with the adoption. The first mothers made inferences about their children based on the pictures. Molly and Elsie both emphasised the power of the photograph. As Molly said: 'Even though I think about her I can think about the picture there, because I can see some photos, and all that. Not imagining things that do not exist.' Elsie said that having struggled to accept what had happened she now felt joy each time she received news of the child. She, and others, made the point that forgetting the child was not what they wanted:

> At first it was not so easy. I was always thinking about him, but now I'm
> not thinking about him. I know that where he is he is happy because I see
> the pictures. When the child is not happy we can see on his eyes that he's
> not happy. So I don't worry about my child. […] But when the times goes
> on or I get the pictures my heart is having joy, enjoying. […] Because I'm
> not trying to forget him. I just want to accept. If you see something you'll
> accept rather than not to see. (Elsie)

The first mothers can see in the photographs how the child is growing
and are involved in this limited way in important occasions in its life.
Photographs and letters may also evoke the illusion of presence, so much
so that one thinks one is able to do something for the child as if one were
present in its life. Even though the mothers realised that the possibilities
for them to act were non-existent, knowing was better than not knowing.
As Natie explained:

> This is better than not knowing anything. You know, it will hurt that I gave
> the child away, I don't know how he's doing, how he's coping. Maybe he
> has problem, even though I'm far away, but I can help. Even though you
> don't know how, but you feel that, you know, if he has a problem I can
> help. Even though you know that there's nothing you can do.

Sometimes the photographs were almost too powerful. In Simphiwe's
case they seemed to further underline the fact that she could not be phys-
ically present in her child's life. As she said, it hurt that she could not
witness the stages in her child's development that mothers take pride in.
She therefore opted just to read the letters for the time being, because
looking at the photographs was too painful for her, almost intolerable.
She nevertheless knew they were there with the social workers who medi-
ated between her and the adopters:

> It's hard to see pictures when I was away when she was teething and every-
> thing. So afterwards it's, it was so sad afterwards, I don't know. It's just so
> sad I'm not there when everything, she has teeth and she is walking and I'm
> not there. So, it was a bit sad (cries). So I'm thinking if I need so much the
> photos, I just needed to know how is she keeping and that's fine, because
> seeing the pictures of her, it's just too much for me.

As these excerpts and others illustrate, the first mothers' priority was to make sure that their child was in good hands. Those who received news that confirmed this was the case said how happy they were to learn of it. Such reassurance was an antidote to regret. As Mary, who had met the adopters and expected to receive news of her child, told me: 'For me there is nothing difficult about [the adoption] now. […] Because where you are, where you stay, where you live, where you sleep, you know that my baby is in good hands. That is really, really important.' Likewise, Cathy, who was receiving letters and pictures from the adoptive mother and the child, explicitly said she had no regrets. She was also pleased about the decision of the adoptive mother to tell the child about the adoption. Hoping the adopters would tell the children about their origins, first mothers and kin was a recurring theme in other interviews, too. Cathy's account further highlights the fact that the child also has ties connecting him to his family of origin, to his siblings and the rest of his kin.

> What she is doing I think is good because she told him from the start and not like when he is 21 and say oh by the way I'm not your mother. But I think she told him from the start and I like it. That your real mother is in South Africa and her name is Cathy and so on. And you've got brothers and sisters. And he put in the letters that he wrote me, he is keen to meet his brothers and sisters. So she's been doing the right job. I don't regret. I don't regret it one minute. (Cathy, first mother)

It is nevertheless completely up to the adopters whether or not they send any information to be given to the first mothers. If the adoptive family was not sending photographs as agreed, the first mothers were very disappointed. They thought they had been forgotten and were no longer part of the child's life. There was nothing much they could do about it, however. Molly was one of the disappointed mothers. She also pointed out how short the stipulated two-year-period is in reality:

> Ever since I haven't got any. […] So I don't know what's going on. Because they told me that I'm gonna get letters and pictures every after four months for period of two years. […] And then I mean, a two-year-period, that's nothing, I mean, look, the year's already gone. And then I'm only left some few months. And then they haven't done any. So sometimes when I think

about that, I just get angry. That why are they doing this to me? Why aren't they sending me pictures anymore? Have they forgotten about me, you know?

Like Simphiwe, Rose had not originally wanted permanent adoption. She expressed her wish to be in touch with the adoptive family more often, and was very unhappy about the lack of updates. This adoptive family had not kept their promise and had only sent information twice over the three years. Even the social worker said they were 'not good'. Consequently, Rose was reduced to worrying about the child without being able to influence the situation. She would have preferred other quicker ways of communicating in real time, such as by phone, which is generally not an option for first mothers:

> Most of the time I'm wondering how is she, I don't know how is she doing, all that. I'd like to communicate with them most of the time. [...] I would like to see them and maybe to speak to them. […] So I want to know something so maybe if because now there is a problem because I can't phone them just to find out. They said to me I can't. Like phone, they also can't phone me, I don't know why. […] They told me so, not allowed. I don't know, just to keep in contact. […] I can send letters but the phone is sometimes better, maybe you can just hear the voice.[…] cause the letters they take so long and the photos they take time to come, so I didn't receive like the photos for this year, only photos from last year.

By way of contrast, the first mothers who had more resources at their disposal (Chap. 6) were able to secure their rights more efficiently. They could choose to receive news and stay in touch with the child. Open adoption, meaning that first mothers remain in contact with the adopters post-adoption, was inherent in their decision to relinquish the child, and many said that without this option they would not have gone through with it. The social workers then had to find prospective adopters who were willing to comply with this. These first mothers had the resources and the power that goes with a good position to ensure that information was forthcoming. They were also able to choose parents who were open about possible future reunions between the child and the first mother. As noted, Cathy was lucky to get such adopters. For the first mothers who

had resources at the time of the adoption this was a choice they were able to make. A clear criterion for Olive, for instance, was how the adopters felt about possible contact with the first mother. She chose between two couples on the basis that one couple said 'they wouldn't let the child not want to know me,' whereas the other one 'didn't say anything about it'. She also wanted to meet the adopters, emphasising her need to know: 'I wanted to see the baby and I want to meet the parents. And I want to know.'

For Meg, likewise, having met the adoptive parents was very important. Knowing that she had secured good parents to raise her child and was able to communicate with them gave her peace of mind. As she said: 'The very first meeting gave me so much closure that I didn't worry any more. [...] because I knew that where he was and who he was with, he was taken good care of. So it calmed something inside of me.' Meg further made it clear that the willingness of these adopters to keep in contact was a decisive factor in choosing them. Here again, maintaining the connection between the child and the original family is stressed as a precondition for the adoption. Open adoption effectively shifted Meg's focus from past grievances to future reunions.

> If he had to go somewhere where I could not even sent him a letter, sent him a photo, it's gonna work on me and I was gonna come back here and want information of the parents. I was gonna really look for him because I mean some adoptive parents won't give out information, they won't send the birth mother photos and things. [...] And now that I know that I'm happy. It doesn't bother me. I'm just waiting for the day when he talks to me. And he's only three (laughter).

These first mothers were also able to take a more active role with the adopters in the future, as illustrated in Gugu's narrative. Like the others, she explicitly wanted an open adoption. She chose the adoptive parents, looking for a married couple. They had already adopted a child from South Africa and Gugu could see from the photographs that 'she's happy.' She emphasised the fact that she did not want to break all ties with the child. She was, instead, able to enter into an agreement that included the free flow of information between the two families as well as the possibility

of meeting later. Gugu's relatively powerful position allowed her to be confident that she could, in the future, suggest a meeting with the adoptive family:

> I really wanted this child to go to a person that would love him. And fortunately I got that. And I really appreciate, so that's why I decided not to do a closed adoption, to be open about it, so that those people can be free to send me letters, to give me progress. So that, when they come to South Africa, and then, I'll be able to say no, can I come and see the child. Just to see. It's not, and then when it's the right time, they will tell the child that this is your mother.

These first mothers' accounts of choosing the adoptive family are more reminiscent of the process as experienced by first mothers in the Global North. It was found, for example, that US first mothers in open adoption arrangements sought similarity between themselves and the adopters (Yngvesson 1997). Lebohang, who possessed both educational and social resources, described her adoption process similarly. She had just chosen an adoptive family abroad with which she could identify. She wanted to find 'someone who was similar to what I love and the things that I want to do in the future.' As she said, the profiles 'show you everything about them basically. So you can have an idea of what kind of people are going to be raising your child.' The fact that the adopters travelled a lot appeared to be important, implying the possibility of a reunion later on.

> The husband is an IC programmer, and the wife is doing law, she's an advocate or something. But something to do with law, because I also wanted to do law as my second choice. And they are Christians, so that was the most important thing. [...] They've been here in South Africa many times.

It seems that many were trying to reshape the exclusivist adoption system to be more like the culturally more familiar informal fostering that does not require the cutting of ties with the family of origin. The first mothers emphasised the importance of knowing how the child was and of not losing touch. What is unclear is the application of the two-year-rule. Those who were still receiving information and were extremely

happy about it, and had not yet reached the stipulated two years (Elsie, Mary, Hope, Natie), did not appear to be thinking that there would be an end to it: on the contrary, they talked about continuing. In fact, they did not necessarily realise that the contact would stop after two years. Margaret thought the sending of information would start when the baby was two years old, while Mary thought the information would keep coming every two years. These varying interpretations together with the underlying strong wish to remain in contact undermine the relevance of the rule.

Expecting the Child to Return

Whereas the adoptive parents' goal was to form a new, exclusive family unit, most of the first mothers emphasised the continuing maintenance of their bond with the child. One of the most striking themes in the interviews was the widespread expectation of the return of the child when of age (see also Roby and Matsumura 2002, 24). These first mothers still considered the children they had placed for adoption who were now living in another country part of their original families, and were certain that they would want to know them. There was a very strong wish and a belief that one day they would meet their child again, that it would return when it was of age (16 or 18) and had the right to choose. The future return of the child was mentioned by many of the first mothers who received letters and/or photographs through social workers, and by many of those who were still pregnant and had made adoption plans. Even though she had been raped, Lebohang also expressed a wish to meet the child later: 'I don't want to lose contact, I still want to know what's going to happen throughout the years, and hopefully one day he or she will understand and I will want to meet him.' Other comments included:

> I love the child, I want, when he was eighteen, God knows, maybe I will be alive. So when he meet me. (Mary)
>   I'm hoping that some time before I don't know when but that the child will come round and look for us. 'Cause I think that will happen. (Lucille)
>   When he has his own rights, he will come and look for us. (Meg)

There was a tendency among these first mothers to think of the child as still having a connection to their kin group. They envisioned having all their children 'under one roof', including the ones who had been adopted. Cathy, in fact, had a very good job compared to her situation at the time of the adoption seven years previously. She told me about her future hopes: 'And to have all my kids under one roof, including [the relinquished child]. I know that's possible, it will happen.' Likewise, Elsie commented without being prompted that the adopted child was part of her family. She wanted to include this child in her considerations for the future, preparing for his potential return.

> I hope that in five years from now I will be running my own business. Raising my child in a proper way. I will save, saving money for him, that even though he will come on the eighteen, when he's eighteen. I'll take him to the universities, and then graduate. Everything that he need and a good home. [...] Because I won't say I can't save anything for him because he's not with me. Still he is my blood, I must put something for him in the policies. (Elsie)

Gugu said that she wanted an open adoption because the child was still hers on some level. Instead of cutting all ties and forgetting, she wanted to be there for the child later. These comments show that the physical location of the child is not the decisive factor. Not living with it does not cancel out motherhood. The clean-break that is typical of Western adoption clearly did not happen in the minds of most of these first mothers. Adoption is thus not viewed as losing the child forever.

> At the end of the day, it's my child. And maybe ten, ten years, fifteen years down the life the child will want to come to South Africa, so it's going to be difficult to interact with the child if you just close everything. [...] I know there will be time that child would like to see his mother and then I will be available, and I will be ready that time. (Gugu)

The first mothers already envisioned the future return of the child, which raised the issue of telling their kinfolk about the adoption. Mary's and Hope's strategy was to tell them straightaway. Mary hoped the adopters would tell the child, and she would tell her family. Hope was likewise

planning to tell her family in Zimbabwe about the child. This way the child's place among its birth kin would be secured and it would be acknowledged, even if the first mother were no longer alive.

> I told them that when they saw that he was now grow up they must tell him everything. Everything. Even me, I'll tell my children everything that, even one day if I was dead or what if someone come and say it's my child, they must [know]. (Mary)
>   'Cause that baby, she will come maybe after eighteen years. She want to see me. So I think I must tell them that there's another baby. (Hope)

Others planned to let kin know about the adoption and about the child later. Cathy wanted to tell her mother when the child returned, so that she could then immediately introduce it to her. In a cultural environment in which adoption is seen as abandonment it is easier to reveal it to relatives when the child is present, so that they can see that it is thriving and thus had not been abandoned.

> When we'll meet then I'll tell her that this is my son. I don't want to like tell her now because […] I don't think she'll believe you, you just talking nonsense. I said to myself if I'm gonna tell them, he must he there so that I can say to them this is mine and this is what happened and why did I do it.

Most of these first mothers had other children in addition to the one who had been adopted, and they talked a lot about its siblings. Many told me that the child that remained with them was lonely and would love to have a brother/sister. Lerato, 31, who had relinquished her child five years previously, for instance, thought that the return of the adoptee and the forming of connections with him were even more important for her other child. She also suggested that the adoptive parents might find the idea of a sibling more acceptable and less threatening than the idea of another mother:

> I had a child first and then I gave up the second one actually. But this, the first one, all the time he is always asking me please mom can I please have a little brother and all the time and I don't know what to say to him because you know, I can't say to him yes you have a little brother but he is somewhere

out there, so I don't know what I must say to him but I think it's better maybe because he is still, he is also still young, maybe when he is grown up. […] Even if maybe they [the adopters] are afraid of me, thinking that maybe I'll do something that is not right, they can maybe be allowed to come to my place, maybe we can meet somewhere, and let the children know each other.

In some cases the first mothers told their other children before telling kin or family. Cathy had already told her children about the child who had been adopted, although no one else knew: 'I said to them please don't tell anyone but you've got a brother and he is staying far away from us but you gonna see him one day.' In Meg's case the child she had relinquished was still seen as part of the family, an absent member who was missed. Her other children in particular talked about him a lot. Meg told me that receiving the photographs was very important for them: the fact that one of their brothers was currently living elsewhere was openly talked about, and his return was anticipated. As grandparents often help to raise their grandchildren, it is not uncommon in this culture to have 'two moms and two daddies', and hence it was easier for Meg's children to understand that their brother also had another set of (adoptive) parents:

And my children they just want to know where is their brother. I just tell them no he is with his other mother and father because I explained to them they call my father and my mother my mommy and daddy, so I said see you have two mommies and daddies, he also has two moms and two daddies. So that's how they understood and they always ask me when are you going to fetch him and I say he will come, don't worry he will come. And they'll, when there's people around and they are looking at their album and they say there's my brother, there's my brother. They get excited when they see new photos of him as well.

The first mothers did not expect the return of the child to be without tensions, however, and how the child would take it was a common concern. They suspected that it would be angry with them and agonised about how to explain the adoption. Molly often thought about the future and was anxious about what to say her child. In Lucille's case the fact that she had other children and had had one of them adopted but had kept

the others, both older and younger, caused extra worry. Meg was in a similar situation but felt that she still had time to come up with a good explanation.

> Sometimes I just sit down and ask myself what if she comes back looking for me, what am I going to say to her. […] I owe her so much explanations and all that. […] I just hope that she's gonna understand, you know, everything, and not get mad at me. (Molly)
>
> Like my daughter, if she needs to find me or something, she would mostly feel that I rejected her, nee. Especially now that she has a brother and a sister, which is the same blood. And she is in-between there and it's like very hard for me, I don't know how will I handle this if it should come up. (Lucille)
>
> What do I tell him, if he comes back one day and wants to know why I gave him away but I have other two. But I have a lot of time to think about what I'm going to tell him because it's years now. (Meg)

While the idea of the child returning was kept alive and was comforting to the first mothers, the issues it raised were complex. The firm belief that the child would come back caused concern with regard to its feelings about the adoption and the first mother.

'I Just Want to Forget, I Just Want to Give Birth and Just Go'

Not every first mother wanted to maintain contact with the child or the adopters. Louisa, who had just given birth and had been badly deceived by the father of the child, expressed the explicit wish not to receive any information for the time being. Her social worker told me: 'At this stage she also doesn't want to receive photos and letters and she didn't want to see the baby but she knows that she can still in the future maybe if she wants to she can receive photos and letters.' Dina and Sibongele specifically stated that they did not want to maintain any connections. They were pregnant and were keeping the pregnancy and the adoption a secret from most of their family members and friends. They were both very focused on fulfilling their ambitions to succeed economically. Louisa and Dina, in turn, showed some hesitation and uncertainty. Dina was certain,

on the one hand, that she did not want to receive or to keep anything related to the baby after its birth: 'I don't want to meet them [adoptive parents]. But I don't want photos also.' On the other hand, she expressed doubt: 'I don't know but I ask [the social worker] to give me just three photos, so I can just when I'm feeling sad or when I'm feeling that I want to see now how this is, but I'm going to keep it in my memory box so that nobody can get to it.' It was important for her that no one would find out about the child.

Sibongele was determined to go through with the adoption and not to tell anyone. She did not want to meet the adoptive parents, nor did she want any information about the child afterwards: 'I just want to forget, I just want to give birth and just go.' She also specifically said she did not want to meet her child later on. Given what other first mothers had told me, I asked her whether she thought it would be difficult after the baby was born. Her reply was a laconic 'no'. Sibongele was the only one of my interviewees who perfectly fitted the adoption system's model of forgetting and moving on. She also exemplified the notion of adoption as an active, independent choice of first mothers. She clearly had options: rather than facing impossible trade-offs she could take the baby to be cared for by her extended family, but she chose not to. Sibongele's case thus serves as a reminder that the final decision on these matters should be the woman's, provided that she has been offered a range of real alternatives from which to choose. It also seemed that the adoption system was well equipped to take into account the concerns and interests of first mothers who are able to choose adoption, whereas those who do not have real alternatives are let down.

Linear Versus Circular Movement

Hollee McGinnis, herself an adoptee, captures the problematic nature of the current adoption system via the concepts of linearity and circularity. From the point of view of adoptees, the linear clean-break model that erases origins is a misrepresentation of reality. Many adoptees want to know about the circumstances of their adoption and some search for

their kin. Their experience points to a circular model of adoption that does not deny the past (McGinnis, cited in Högbacka 2014, 7–8).

Linearity and circularity also lie behind the narratives of social workers, adopters and first mothers. The different parties to the adoption had fundamentally different understandings of what it entailed. The adoption social workers and the adopters perceived it as a linear process in which the child was permanently transferred from one family to another: the new family completely replaced the old one, which at the end of the kinning process would cease to exist for the child and its adoptive family. The sought-after result of linear adoption is the 'forever child'. The first mothers, on the other hand, thought of a circular process in which the links between the child and its original kin would endure. The end result of circular adoption is the 'returning child'. It also seemed as if many of the first mothers were trying to reshape the system and to retain some of their rights. The first mothers who did remain in touch with the adopters and received information about the child were overwhelmingly happy about it. Instead of regretting the adoption, they found pleasure in the idea of future reunions. It is a cause for concern that, despite such fundamentally differing views, the adoption system only applies the exclusive linear model.

8

Contact Over Time

I love my child's mother like a sister. (Iiris, adoptive mother)

This chapter continues the exploration of encounters between first mothers and adopters, this time concentrating on the development of these connections over time. How is continuing contact managed? How do such encounters change adoptions, adoptive families and families of origin? Under what conditions could two mothers belong to the same family? I also give attention to the shifting contours of power. Starting from the experiences of adopters as the child grows, I go on to examine the cases of two adoptive families who have retained or regained contact with their children's first families in two other countries in the Global South. In the final two sections I present examples of long-term contact lasting over a number of years. In the first one a Finnish adopter discusses her continuing contact with a South African first mother. This case clearly shows how the 'two-mothers dilemma' can change over the years and even intensify. The narrative also gives glimpses of the concerns of first mothers. The perspective changes in the second case to that of a South African first mother who, together with her social worker, talks about her contact with the overseas adoptive family and her meeting with her

son several years after the adoption. This account highlights the concern of many first mothers about not severing the link and knowing more about the child's life. The social worker's comments give some idea of the concerns of adopters and their need to be protected in their parenthood.

Guilt, Compassion and Empathic Identification

The adopters frequently expressed empathy towards the first mothers, often mixed with guilt over the formation of their own parenthood through unjust global relations. As noted, compassion and guilt have similar roots: compassion is a reaction to another person's undeserved suffering, and can produce guilt if one realises one's own complicity in causing such suffering (Sayer 2011, 147–148). The adoptive parents were painfully aware of the fact that they could be parents only because somewhere else another person's situation was so desperate that they could not keep their child. Many of the parents I interviewed echoed what Siiri said: 'It has always bothered me that someone else's misfortune is my happiness.' Other adopters expressed compassion in the form of feeling sorry for mothers who were not able to keep their children. Johanna, for instance, exclaimed: 'What a pity she could not keep this lovely child.' Others felt for the unknown first mother who had no way of knowing what would become of her child. Echoing similar comments from other adopters, Rebekka stated: 'I wish they would somehow know that all is well with their child.' Although empathy did not usually lead to the questioning of the adoption system, one adoptive father, Paul, did express doubt. He had met families on his travels, and had seen parents with their daughters who looked just like his adoptive daughter. These encounters prayed on his mind and paved the way for ethical considerations as well as guilt:

> It was really hard psychologically to see those faces, those families […] In particular, as there have been articles about child trafficking there. […] And how terrible poverty is. It makes you wonder if you have done something wrong. Have we acquired her by force?

Being face to face with first mothers during the meetings easily prompted a dual response from the adopters. They wanted to help the first mother

but at the same time they wanted to become parents. This was pointed out by one of the South African social workers who had noticed the guilt experienced by adopters in these encounters: 'Some feel a little bit guilty when they meet the mom. They want to help. They want to, but they also want the child. So it's a mixed thing' (social worker, interview No. 2). The adopters gave similar accounts of guilt. Mia first described her own and the first parents' sadness: 'They both sat there in their white clothes. They were really good-looking. […] I just sort of felt like crying for them. […] as I saw their sadness.' She continued, admitting that she 'felt guilty' when meeting the first parents. Her spontaneous feeling was that she personally should assist the first parents:

> It did occur to me that why couldn't I give my adoption budget [to them] and rather help them live there. […] Why would I have to take their child? […] Such thoughts occur when one sees that it is so hard for them to part [with the child].

Anna described a similar sudden urge to help. She told me about her unexpected meeting with the first mother when she was fetching the child from the country of origin, which in this case was another country in the Global South. The first mother did not know the adopter would be present, either. Such an unmonitored encounter reveals the first mother's negative emotions, such as bitterness, maybe even hostility, towards adopters that appear to be totally missing from the arranged meetings in South Africa. The huge material gap between the two mothers is obvious, prompting guilt and a wish to assist the first mother, which is quickly dismissed on the grounds that only the (adoptive) family of the Global North can guarantee high-enough material living standards and 'a good life' for the child. It is even implied that poverty-stricken mothers in the Global South might not consider the interests of the child. Anna's account is also illustrative of the links between giving the child into the care of adoptive parents, distancing the first mother and naturalising adoption given that it was in the arms of the adoptive mother that the child 'immediately calmed down', thus making her appear as the more suitable mother.

> She saw the child, and she burst into tears. And then of course I started to cry as well. […] Then I asked them to tell the mother that I will love, we

will love [this child] and we will give him a good life and […] everything you can think of that he might need. […] That first meeting was, the atmosphere was, her attitude towards me […] Well, hate is too strong a word, but a certain bitterness maybe, which is understandable, she lives in extreme poverty and […] could not keep the child […] then she wanted to hold the child several times. And I felt like whose child is it […] And the child was screaming […] finally they gave him to me and he immediately calmed down […] I asked the officials whether it was possible that she would want him back. […] They said no because they are living in absolute poverty, that they didn't have any chance. […] I phoned my husband and said should we give money to the first mother so that the child could stay with her […] If it's only about money, maybe we could support the child to live with his first mother. […] He said don't be naïve. How could we be sure that the money went for him after all. (Anna, adoptive mother)

Anna's and Mia's experiences illustrate how their own motherhood depended on the plight of the first mother. The encounter brings to light the first mother's difficult situation, which usually remains hidden from adopters and which indicates the wider inequality between the Global North and South. Witnessing the first mother's despair led to guilt, which further tends to lead to disengagement and non-action (Khanna 2001, cited in Gray 2011, 211). No assistance was available to the first parents in either case, and the adoptions were processed as usual.

Feelings of empathy intensified, however, as more time elapsed and the child grew. At that stage the adopters felt more secure in their parenthood and there was more room for the other mother. They also understood the importance of this to their children. As the children matured and started to ask questions about their background, the adoptive parents wished they knew more about the family of origin (see also Scherman and Hawke 2010; Seligmann 2013, 48). Johanna's and Anniina's children had expressed extreme sadness over not knowing much about their first mothers. Both adopters were very sympathetic towards the first mothers and their predicament. Johanna thought about all the Christmas and other family festivities they would miss. She expressed the wish that 'my children could one day meet [their first parents]'. As this adoptive mother put the child to bed at night, her heart 'full of love and admiration for the child', she wondered 'how could anyone have

so much strength that she could leave [this child], how could she have enough strength and courage. […] And how much the mothers cry in their heart if you don't know where your children are.' Anniina described her feelings when her daughter was performing in a concert and played one of her own compositions: 'I was crying and laughing, as it sounded so incredibly wonderful. Her father was crying next to me. And at the same time I so wished that the mother could see her girl up there.' She later said that the older she got, the more she would have been prepared to 'share this child'.

Research has shown that meeting or being in contact with first mothers increases empathy towards them (Mendenhall et al. 2004, 176–178; Wolfgram 2008, 137–141). The adopters who met them described the first parents as 'wonderful people', 'really good-looking', 'nice looking', 'very young', 'very beautiful', 'smiling', 'positive', 'smart' and 'having a great sense of humour'. The adoptive mothers who met members of first families talked about them as somehow similar to them. Interacting with first parents was seen as happening within the family, and meeting them was described as 'natural'. As Susanna remarked: 'It was a very natural situation.' Similarly, adopters engaged in long-term contact with first families, even if they had not (yet) met, emphasised the 'naturalness' of this wider kin constellation. As Katariina said: 'Somehow it feels natural that the children have two mothers. […] I can't explain why all this feels so natural but it does. At home in dinner-table conversations the birth families are present all the time.' In these cases, the original kin were further talked about as relatives of the child and of the adoptive parents. Such family rhetoric and the use of kin idioms further placed the encounters firmly in a family setting: the first parents were like 'sisters' and 'brothers'. Iiris, who had met the family of origin and was in contact with the mother declared: 'I love my child's mother like a sister.' Mia, who had also met the family of origin, identified the first parents as similar to herself:

> Somehow I felt it straightaway, this connection, that we are connected now always, extending around the globe […] They were the kind of persons I'd like to have as my friends. […] The father reminded me of my brother. […] I felt that they were close to me. […] I felt we would all go back to Finland.

Nevertheless, the first mothers did not experience the adopters as sisters. As explained in Chap. 5, they were inclined to see themselves as inferior and the adopters as better parents, and hence described them as 'wonderful' and as being able to provide 'wonderful opportunities'. They were generally reticent about their meetings with the adopters, describing themselves as 'sad' and the adopters as 'happy'. Some, like Mary, realised that the adopters were not really interested in the first mother as their priority was the child: 'When I saw them, they are happy. They didn't want to talk so much, they just want the baby only.'

The identification of adoptive parents raises a number of critical issues. Emphasising family evokes the image of family relations that spring from sentiments of unconditional love and affection as well as obligations related to mutual help and loyalty, but are diametrically opposed to calculative market relations and global inequity. Framing adopters and first parents as part of the same family thus takes attention away from the unequal origins of the adoptive families and distances the adopters from exploitative global relations. Being 'sisters' is radically different from the feared image of 'taking someone's child'. The use of kin idioms has also been found to be common in the narratives of American intended parents about surrogate mothers (Pande 2009, 387–389), when families in the Global North talk about their maids or nannies from the Global South (Latvala 2009, 93–95), and in the discourse of receivers of donated organs regarding the donors (DasGupta and DasGupta 2010, 139–141). All these cases, like adoption, involve the intimate sphere. They are about family, reproduction and bodily integrity. At the same time, these personal transactions take place in highly unequal global contexts. The members of these imagined families are differentially placed within hierarchies of power and privilege. In emphasising warm personal relations kin idioms serve to downplay the associated gross inequality and guilt.

To refer to someone as like one's sister or brother is to acknowledge shared traits and sameness. The adopters' compassion was likewise built on perceived commonality, and similarity over difference was stressed throughout. Their own experiences of motherhood were projected onto first mothers in the Global South, who were perceived as being like mothers in the Global North. Other axes of power based on race,

class, nationality and geo-political position, however, also separate the two mothers (see also Jolly 2010). Related ideas of 'global sisterhood' have been criticised for glossing over such differences between women (Gupta 2006, 24). As noted, personal declarations of 'sisterhood' cannot abolish hierarchies (DasGupta and DasGupta 2010, 141). The expressed desire of the adoptive mother Mia to take the child and its first parents to Finland, while indicative of her compassion, is also illustrative of the limits of the relational approach in conditions of unequal power. The crucial difference between the two sets of parents is, of course, that they are not all going back to Finland: only adopters and children constructed as 'ours' are at liberty to move around the globe freely.

The adopters' expressions of compassion also carried traces of sentimentality as well as the risk of being linked with patronising charitable relations. Compassion involves a hierarchical relation that puts one party in the position of being able to be compassionate, but able to withdraw that compassion any time, whereas the other parties are positioned as in need of compassion (Gray 2011, 207–208). Sentimentality directs attention away from those whose lives are its object in stressing the pain of the privileged who have to witness such unhappy scenes. It portrays stories of structural violence in terms of overwhelming personal feelings, and in so doing risks equating the individual effects of social violence with causes that are impersonal (Berlant 1998, 641). Eventually, identifying with suffering sentimentality leads to relief for the privileged: they achieve a sense of better feeling, a better self (Berlant 1998, 656).

Nevertheless, it would be too cynical to dismiss the adoptive parents' compassionate reaching out towards the first mothers as pure expressions of guilt and sentimentality. Breda Gray (2011), following Martha Nussbaum, argues that empathic identification, in terms of understanding another person's suffering, can destabilise privilege and reveal the dynamics of power relations and in this manner unveil the mechanisms of the reproduction of inequality. According to this line of thinking, empathy is a prerequisite of social justice and solidarity in that it can motivate people to act. Such empathic identification should extend beyond hasty assumptions of sameness towards acknowledging difference. The precondition is that one understands one's own implication in unjust relations of power (see Gray 2011).

In the following I explore how empathic identification, compassion and continued contact could potentially change adoption with reference to two adoptive families that had been in direct ongoing contact with the respective first families for some years. These two families had adopted from two different countries in the Global South. Iiris and her family lived in the child's country of origin for several years, during which time they got to know its family and kin. As she told me: 'We often visited them and the mother visited us.' They have maintained contact since their return to Finland. The local social worker taught the first mother to use the computer, so they are 'often in contact via email or phone'. Iiris often sends emails and pictures of the children and their life here to the first mother, and they phone her every now and then. The adoptive father travels in the country of origin frequently and meets up with the first mother, the siblings of the adopted child and other kin members. The adoptive family hopes to travel to the country of origin annually or every other year, although they have not yet been back as a family. The child is still so young that, according to Iiris, she does not really understand the arrangement yet. 'She just happily calls the biological mother's name on the phone and says bye-bye. She recognises the mother from photos and calls her by her name.' Iiris stresses that the other mother is in no way a threat to her own motherhood, and rather feels they are like sisters. This account shows that adopters do not necessarily experience real-time communication such as email and phone calls as disturbing. However, in this case the first mother's role was rather passive. It was the adopters who initiated and decided upon the frequency of contact.

Katariina found the first mothers and other kin of her two adopted children through the Internet when the children were in their pre-teens, and now the whole family is in contact. The families of both Katariina and Iiris also have more widespread contact with the children's relatives. In the case of Iiris the adoptive grandmother and other relatives visited the birth country and 'they of course met with the "family" there'. Katariina's family are in contact with the children's mothers, uncles and cousins, and one grandmother is a Facebook friend with the adoptive mother and they exchange emails. The role of information technology is substantial. Facebook, Skype and email facilitate real-time and fast communication.

Iiris told me that they all had 'warm thoughts about the biological kin' and they also worried about the first mother's health and financial status. The adoptive father had just visited them and brought back good news: the mother was in good health and had a job. Iiris commented: 'I hope the first mother lives many years to come so that my daughter has time to have memories of her.' Katariina's family as a whole is happy about the connection. The children have expressed great joy and relief that the first mothers are well and have homes and even Internet connections. Katariina told me that the connection was very important to the children, who now as teenagers were able to see many of their own physical characteristics reflected in those of their kin. The adoptive parents regarded themselves as privileged to be granted such an opportunity.

Both adopters emphasised the importance of their contact for the first family. As Iiris remarked: 'Maintaining contact is entirely positive, as it is so important for the mother to receive news about the child and us all.' According to Katariina, her children's first mothers had been desperate to hear news about them. The first mother of her older child, for instance, had another child after she learned that the child she had placed for adoption was well. She said that without that knowledge a new pregnancy would have been out of the question. The first mother of the younger child had always wanted to send greetings to the child on its birthday, and was happy she was able to do so now. Both first mothers had shown their extended families the photographs the adoptive family sent. Both also told the adopters that they were not able to look for them because 'they didn't even know where the children had been placed.' Although the adoptive parents had sent letters and photographs to the children's home for first mothers, the first family lived too far away to go back there.

These examples indicate that contact and compassion can lead to the questioning of exclusive belonging, at least on some level. Both the children and the adoptive parents in these two as well as in other families that had met the first parent(s) talked about them. Sometimes this led to slight confusion as to which mother the child was referring to in particular instances. The adopters in these two cases also expressed concern about how the family of origin was coping, thereby re-centring the first mother. Otherwise, however, the first family remained detached from the life of the adoptive family. I now turn to two cases in which contact

was maintained for at least five years. My aim is to shed further light on the process of keeping in touch, on the potential role of the first mother within the adoptive family, and on how the participants might interpret such contact differently over time.

'My Child' Versus 'Our Child'

Aila met the first mother when she was fetching the child from South Africa and had been in contact for several years, mainly through letters mediated by local social workers. I interviewed her on several occasions during this period. The first time she described the meeting in very positive terms: 'It was a very positive experience to meet the mother, beautiful, and whatever good qualities there are in the child, they are clearly inherited from the mother. […] She was clearly a very intelligent person and wanted what was best for her child.' The first mother said in the meeting that she could not, at this stage, meet the child, although she was extremely sad that she had to part with it. Aila felt strong empathy with the first mother. There was even a large photograph of her on display in their Finnish home. Aila recalled the time when the photo dropped from its usual place and the child came running to her shouting: 'Mommy, mommy, African mother has fallen down, come quickly.' The connection was, in other words, part of the family's life and routine. Aila was certain that meeting the first mother and keeping in contact with her was a good thing, and that she had 'not yet discovered anything negative' about it. To my question of whether she regarded the other mother as a threat she replied: 'No, not at all.' Aila was also under the impression that the first mother would probably not be able to meet the child even at a later stage. The two mothers exchanged letters via the social worker.

Some years later there was a change in the intensity of the contact on the part of the first mother. She had a new job, Aila told me, and had started to save money to visit them in Finland. They had also exchanged email addresses because the first mother was now able to send messages from work, which she was doing almost daily, according to Aila. Aila found these developments increasingly worrying, and started to

feel threatened and very anxious about the turn of events. She was particularly worried about a possible visit from the first mother. The child must have overheard something because Aila said that he 'screamed in horror about someone coming to take him away from home'. She assured him that she would never let anyone take him away. This indeed seemed to be her fear: 'If she came, I would not leave my children alone for one second. At night I would sleep on the floor beside their bed. What if she intends to take him back?' She also told me about a further complication: the first mother suggested that instead of referring to the child as 'my child', could Aila possibly refer to it as 'our child'. This was too much for her. She said it was 'really awful'. On top of all this, Aila received a letter from the kindergarten about the child's upcoming enrolment in which the authorities had mistakenly used the child's former surname. She still remembered the shock: 'Is she here already taking him from me?'

Aila then contacted the social workers in the country of origin and forwarded the emails from the first mother to them. The social worker intervened and had a talk with the first mother. Aila also sent an email to the first mother telling her that her child was terrified of being taken away from its mother. The first mother then became silent, and stopped sending emails and letters. The two mothers have since gone back to exchanging letters via social workers, but not as often as before and the idea of 'our child' has been completely dropped.

Anxiety over adoptive parenthood is endemic in transnational adoption, and is not restricted to Aila. In fact, Aila was quite shocked at her own reactions: 'I would never have believed I would feel like that. […] It's terrible to catch oneself having such thoughts. And they were powerful emotions. At the moment I don't have any such thoughts that she would come and take him. But I think back then this was not clear even to her.' Aila's vision of the contact in the future is to give more say to the child: 'As the child grows and if he wants to, he can start drawing and writing. […] He can more and more choose the photos we send and decide more.' Her overall feeling about the contact was that it was advantageous. She also remained compassionate towards the first mother, in particular because her messages are now more closely monitored, even self-censored, and are not as frequent. As she told me:

> All in all, it is good that the connection is there, for him and for me. […]
> we know what the first mother looks like and know about her character.
> […] The best thing is that we can maintain the contact and that the mother
> is there, and the second best thing is that she is such a nice person. What is
> hard is facing her difficult emotions regarding [the adoption] in the emails.
> […] But her recent letters have been really balanced.

Aila's narrative implies that as long as the first mother does not come
too near, contact could be construed as positive. However, if the con-
tact is too intense while the children are small, things change and she
is viewed differently. This first mother's active use of email and her
wish for a more involved role were experienced as a threat. Exclusive
belonging shows its power even when the adoptive mother is empa-
thetic towards the first mother and the first mother receives informa-
tion. Despite the good intentions, however, the moment the other
mother took the initiative it was interpreted as the potential negation
of adoptive motherhood. The power to define the degree of openness
and the role given to first mothers, and hence the power to define
family, also resides with the parents from the Global North. Aila, and
not the first mother, decided on the contours of the family and on the
terms of the contact.

'I Feel as if Someone Is Just Looking After Them for Me'

Zandi's situation is unusual in that two of her children were adopted
abroad by the same family. I had a long interview with her in a cafeteria
in the presence of her social worker, whom Zandi now regarded as her
friend. Zandi was parenting her first-born child at home together with
her own mother and siblings. The adoptions occurred at a time when
she had problems with the children's fathers as well as a difficult life situ-
ation. She had met the adoptive family twice and received letters and
photographs via the social worker. The meetings took place when the
adopters fetched the first baby and then six years later when they came to
adopt the second one. Even the first meeting was nice for Zandi: 'It was

really good. The husband is really a nice person. I think he is the more quiet one, she is more outspoken, but he is a very stern man. So he has his hands on the boys. Even though he looks so soft. But she is also a feisty woman.' The social worker added: 'Lovely people, lovely people.' Zandi asked them 'everything' in the first meeting: 'I asked them when do they go to church? […] When do they eat there or is it cold there? Do they have their own rooms there? What do they do? How do they do it? What do they do for fun and stuff. I asked them everything. And then I was happier with them.' These comments again highlight the importance of finding out what kind of parents will be looking after one's child. Unlike some other first mothers, Zandi also had the confidence reinforced by her slightly better position to convey to the adopters what was on her mind.

The second meeting was described as more of a reunion among close friends or family. Both Zandi and her social worker felt that the situation resembled that of 'families that live overseas' and 'come to visit'. This second meeting at which Zandi was also reunited with the son she had relinquished was of particular importance to her. The boy was six at the time. They met in pleasant surroundings where the children could run around and there was space. It was very different from the staged five-minute encounters described in previous chapters. The social worker confirmed that it was a long meeting: it went on for about two and a half hours. The adopters and the social worker also talked about how to end the meeting, however. As the social worker said: 'We had a little discussion as to when we would bring it to a close, because we could see you [Zandi] were not.' Although the parents spoke some English, the children did not, but even without a common language, Zandi and the six-year-old were able to connect. The social worker told me: 'The day that they came she [Zandi] was running around as if she was a four-year-old girl running around. […] If you didn't know them, you'd think, oh, that must be Zandi's little boy.' Zandi appreciated the adoptive mother's gesture to fully include her and to convey this to the child. From Zandi's point of view, the meeting was a success:

And then she told him something in their language and then he like responded to her but the way I made it out to be was he asked: Is this my mom? But she has obviously prepared him and told him that I'm his mom.

> And he looked at me and he just came and sat on my lap. […] It was as if he wasn't away. Because he just came to me and I kissed him and I just lifted him because I just wanted to remember, when he was a baby. And then it all just comes back.

Zandi described her happiness at seeing her child again: 'It was wonderful to meet them again and see how they were and to see my son again.' The letters from the adopters afterwards strengthened her hopes for the future: 'In the letter they also say again that he is asking about me a lot. So that's good. […] He is going to want to come see me again. I know that. Just because we connected that day so well.' What was important to her was that the adoptive parents were telling the children about their family of origin. Other first mothers also emphasised this. Some used it as a family-selection criterion. As in the case of other adoptions in which contact was maintained and the first mothers were assured about the well-being of the child, there were no regrets from them. Zandi even acknowledged that she would not at the time have been able to look after the children:

> There wasn't something that I regret because I saw how wonderful he is doing and how much they love him. And they tell him about me and his brother. […] They are doing a good job because they don't hide him anything about me and he was told everything. […] They have just been so wonderful. There was always pictures. They were always right. It was really interaction. […] And now I'm waiting to see him grow up and be a good Christian. And they have done everything they said they would. So I feel at peace. […] Till today there is not a doubt that I did the right thing. […] I know they are happy and I know they are sorted out and I know that I couldn't have cared for them the way they are.

She continued: 'So one day, if they do come, I can proudly say: They are my kids. Because they are so happy with them, right? […] But I'll be ready for that. I'll just get everyone to see them. And the brothers will be very happy, too.' Here, as in Cathy's and Meg's narratives in previous chapters, it is the idea of the child returning one day that makes adoption more acceptable. Friends and family could then be told about it because the children were back. This is in marked contrast to the idea of the child

being forever lost to the mother. Maintaining contact after the adoption and the prospect of seeing the child here, too, mitigated the first mother's sadness. Zandi wanted an open adoption from the start: 'That is why I also wanted that because it's so important for me. And that is why I can sleep at night.' She talked at length about the merits of open adoption, which is positioned here vis-à-vis the stigmatised general notion of adoption as abandoning children to an unknown fate. Zandi wanted to be involved: 'I wanted it to be open because I wanted to know them. […] I wanted to have more than photos. In other words, I wanted to know. Listen, I wanted to really look after them. I wanted to know.' Here it is evident that adoption from the first mother's point of view is a way of caring for one's child.

Towards the end of the interview the social worker started to bring the conversation back to the merits of the adopters: 'They were meant to be there. It's such a lovely family. The boys belong there.' Zandi agreed with this but pointed out a further dimension or a qualification to the belonging of the boys to the adopters: the children also belonged to her in a sense. She referred to her need to build a relationship with the child: 'It's just that I would long to see him again. […] I feel as if someone is just looking after them for me.' This is rather different from the adopters' quest for a family as a haven founded on the exclusivity of the parental tie.

At the end of the interview Zandi expressed her wish to communicate with the adoptive family more directly via email. The social worker quickly replied that this would be 'inappropriate': the adoptive family might feel their position was becoming difficult because 'then you could for instance ask what are the boys having for dinner tonight.' This implies a need to protect the adoptive family from interference. The adopters might perceive email, which is quick and happens in real time, as bringing the first mother too close and thus detracting from their parenthood. Thus, even though the encounters between Zandi and the adoptive family were described as the coming together of a transnational family with kin in several countries, there are significant differences between the two families. The adoptive family has been granted all rights over the child and has the power to define the parameters of contact. Again, belonging is being negotiated. Although the adoption social worker, believing

that the overseas adoptive parents really were the best parents for these children, brought up the point about the children needing to be with the adopters, in Zandi's view they were just being looked after for her, thus blurring the boundaries between exclusive permanent adoption and more temporary (kin) care.

The cases reviewed in this chapter indicate that encounters between adopters and first mothers are fundamentally shaped by their unequal positioning vis-à-vis each other. For the more privileged party, the adopters, such encounters give rise to feelings of guilt leading to sentimental inertia, and to empathic identification that has the potential to foster connections and change. Empathic identification increases over time, yet is also affected by asymmetries of power. Aila's and Zandi's accounts reveal the differences in the perspectives of the two mothers and the limits of empathic identification. The meaning and intensity of contact varied with time, yet in both narratives the first mothers were at the mercy of the adopters and social workers.

9

Conclusion: Re-Kinning First Mothers

Although previous research on transnational adoption has identified important themes to explore, it has only touched in passing upon first mothers and the inequalities affecting their lives. In this book I have situated transnational adoption firmly within the Global North–South context, which in current adoption practices has largely remained hidden but has nevertheless exerted its influence. This context is characterised by stark resource and vital inequalities. Such inequalities structure adoptions from many countries in the Global South and currently feature prominently in those from Africa, which is commonly depicted as the latest 'source' of adoptable children.

As I have shown, resource and vital inequality make concepts developed within the Global North, such as choice, consent and permanence, frivolous. The principles of The Hague Convention do not work in conditions in which the majorities struggle below the subsistence level. It could be argued with good reason that first mothers are the least protected party in transnational adoption. There are powerful processes at work in current practices that systematically disconnect them from their children on every level. This concluding chapter examines the implications of these processes from four angles, also suggesting ways forward towards

changing the practices by re-centring first mothers. The perspectives are: decolonising transnational adoption, reproductive justice, power and the transnational family, and the interplay of demand and supply.

Decolonising Transnational Adoption

The Global North–South dimension has a bearing on what kind of family is envisioned as suitable. The family outlined in international treaties and embedded in adoption practices bears a strong resemblance to the family as understood in the Global North. International treaties have been drawn up under the leadership of powerful Global North actors, and they influence national legislation on adoption in the member states. The realities of life and the value systems of the Global South are very different from those of the Global North, which have nevertheless been taken as universal and imported into the Global South (Bhambra 2014; Penn 2009).

The contours of the Global North family type are discernible in the interviews with Finnish adoptive families, and the family that emerges differs significantly from the depictions of South African first mothers. The borders of this family are firm and restrictive, including only one set of parents and their children. Exclusivity organises child rearing into a specific intensive attachment form within the domesticity of the family home. Money and resources are needed to practise such parenting. The kind of family and parenting emerging from such family practices emphasise the value of stability and permanence within a closed circle of parent(s) and children living together. The role of fathers is highlighted and backed up by policies.

In contrast, the family emerging from the first mothers' accounts is formed generationally, not conjugally, and includes maternal kin, typically grandmothers, other kin and/or siblings. This family is not defined in terms of permanent cohabitation but can be dispersed within several households in rural and urban locations. Men are largely absent. Their withdrawal is both a continuation of behaviour patterns orchestrated by the oppressive policies of the apartheid state and a response to the harsh conditions of the new stratifications. The need to secure the survival

of oneself and one's family is the driving force for the majority. There are obligations towards a wider set of kin and not only one's children. Temporary separations between mothers and children are common and the care of children also takes place outside the domestic unit.

The conceptualisation of adoption follows from the family notions. The adopters define adoption in exclusive terms. The aim is to form a bounded new family unit, cutting prior ties. The explicit goal is to have a child for oneself forever. The kinning process that recreates adopters as parents is in many ways dependent on the de-kinning of previous parents. The first mothers, on the other hand, understand adoption more in terms of informal kinship care: ties are maintained and the separation is not permanent. The ones I interviewed made it clear that the clean-break was not what they preferred. Instead they wanted to remain in touch with the family that adopted their child and expected the child to return one day (Table 9.1).

As the interviews with the adoption social workers showed, the prevalent values in the adoption system include nuclear conjugality (heterosexual two-parent family), permanency (as opposed to 'temporal' solutions such as foster care) and exclusivity (the child is seen as needing to belong only to one family). In line with accepted practices, the adoption social workers strongly favoured nuclear families overseas. This view dismisses all other family types and parenting models as inadequate, depicting the child that is not looked after in a nuclear family as kinless and without proper care. These notions then inform the evaluation of suitable families

Table 9.1 Family and adoption from the perspectives of the adopters and first mothers

	Adopters	First mothers
Family form	Nuclear	Matriarchal extended
Family boundaries	Firm	Permeable
Domesticity	Bounded	Diffused
Child belongs to	Parents	Kin
Parenting	Intensive	Extended
Role of men	Visible	Absent
Resources	Abundant	Lacking for most
Adoption entails	Severing prior links	Maintaining connections
Aim of adoption	Forever child	Returning child
Organising principle	Exclusivity	Inclusivity

and lead to the devaluation of black South African families. The placing of children in Global North adoptive families appears as the preferable option, as care within the local extended family is not considered permanent and exclusive. Focusing the search for suitable alternative care for a child who cannot live with his or her first parent(s) only on the Global North family type based on presumed stability thus excludes many options and distorts the view of care alternatives in the Global South. Permanency and exclusivity further lead to the implementation of practices that gradually but firmly erase the first mother from the life of the child and its adopters. All connections between them are to be cut off eventually, so that the only remaining family will be the adoptive family. Consequently, the interests of adopters and the Global North are protected and safeguarded through legislation, conventions and practices.

Permanency and exclusivity, so strongly advocated by adopters, social workers and the adoption system, are problematic in the context of different understandings of family and adoption. Care within the extended family, which is so common among black South Africans, is viewed by the adoption system as the opposite of family. Adoption is understood as the permanent erasing of the first family, and not as the acknowledgement of such ties. Instead of routinely applying the family notions of the minority, the adoption system should indigenise its concepts. Indigenising family would broaden its contours to include the extended family. Indigenising adoption would take into account the need of first mothers to maintain contact with their children. Efforts would be made to reconsider the differences and similarities between adoption and fostering, and to apply a more locally based conception of family and abandonment in which temporary separations between mother and child are recognised and not penalised.

From Choice to Reproductive Justice

Transnational adoption is understood as an individualised choice of both adopters and first mothers. In the case of first mothers the focus has been on presumed choice, which is inherent in international treaties such as The Hague Convention that emphasise informed, voluntary and freely

given consent. It is also discernible in the narratives of adoption social workers and adopters who frame adoption as chosen by first mothers. Social workers aim at empowering first mothers to take 'the adoption option', based on their personal judgments that are not influenced by the extended families. Adopters legitimise adoption by referring to the first mothers' decision. This ideology of agency implies free individuals who are in a position to weigh different alternatives and then choose from among them.

The frequent remarks of first mothers indicating a decisive absence of choice reveal the hollowness of these assumptions. A close look at their decision-making shows that external pressures in the form of material constraints played a huge role and many routes were blocked. They were trapped in a dead-end: survival or keeping the child, not both. It is also clear from the adoption social workers' accounts that in most cases only permanent adoption is available to impoverished first mothers, who approach the social services in the hope of some kind of assistance. Many wish for a temporary solution that would allow them time to improve their financial and material situations. No assistance or support towards keeping the child is available, however, and there are no interim options for short-term care. Material lack thus paradoxically makes these women too poor to be offered assistance or temporary placement options, while justifying the permanent removal of their children. The contrast between the majority of first mothers and those with more resources and more options only highlights the plight of the majority. It also reveals the links between agency and resources. Agency is underpinned by power and is impossible to exercise in the absence of privileges such as freedom from basic material need. The first mothers in better positions could choose adoption precisely because the option of keeping the child was also available. Those in difficult circumstances searched for options, and when they found none placed the child for adoption. The real-life trade-offs effectively curbed these mothers' so-called choices and led to coerced separations.

The problem with choice in contexts characterised by vital inequality is that it is only relevant when there is an adequate range of options. As has been pointed out, the choice frame is Global North-centric, the assumption being that all women have the necessary resources to make a

choice (Chrisler 2012, 1). In focusing on individual women it also privatises the issues and obscures the larger social contexts that frame women's choices (Gaard 2010, 113). Empowerment understood as enhancing the capacity to make choices focuses on the 'self-optimizing individual' but does not take into account the constraints affecting the ability to exercise such choice (Cornwall and Rivas 2015). Robin West (2014) further highlights the problematic nature of choice-based thinking. Even though she writes in the context of abortion rights, her arguments can be extended to transnational adoption. West shows how even justified legal change can legitimate broader injustices (West 2014, 28–34). Although necessary, The Hague Convention's attempts to curb illegalities in adoption practices, such as fraud, child trafficking and the coercion of first mothers, legitimate broader inequalities related to unjust global relations. If no fraud is present, adoptions are just by definition. What are not addressed are the circumstances making the option of raising the child impossible. West also points out how 'consent cleans or purifies that to which consent is given' (West 2014, 30). The Hague Convention and adoption practices put a lot of emphasis on the 'freely given consent' of first parents. If consent is given, then it is the woman's own choice and makes the adoption clean and legitimate. At the same time, it legitimates the oppressive circumstances that make it difficult for the poor to raise a family. It also legitimates the system of global inequality and total lack of support for poor women wishing to keep their children. As shown in my interviews with first mothers, their choices take the form of impossible trade-offs juxtaposing parenting and survival with regard to themselves, their other children and their kin. The legitimising rhetoric of choice thus conceals this darker side of adoption. Instead, as my interviews with social workers showed, the framework of choice leads to the tacit acceptance of poverty as a legitimate reason for adoption.

There is an urgent need for transnational adoption to move away from the rhetoric of choice towards a more broadly conceived framework of reproductive justice, which has been defined as 'the human right to have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and healthy environments' (SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective). Significantly, reproductive justice is about access and not about choice, thereby focusing on issues connected to broader social

justice and the need to analyse power systems, oppression and inequalities that prevent it. Reproductive justice in the context of transnational adoption would give first mothers a real alternative enabling them to keep their children, which at the moment is totally lacking. It would ensure support in the form of affordable accommodation, income-earning opportunities, and childcare assistance. Given the extreme poverty levels in many countries of origin and their struggle to provide for all their citizens, reproductive justice based on global solidarity must stress the responsibility of countries of destination to participate in assistance programmes.

Dangers inherent in such assistance include the possible dependence relations between the two ends. Institutions and children's homes in the sending countries may feel obliged to facilitate a certain number of transnational adoptions to ensure continuing assistance from receiving countries. Aid and adoptions in this context should be kept completely separate (Cantwell 2014, 77–78). Cantwell and others propose that the focus should change from supporting institutions to prevention, and to strengthening local welfare structures and existing kinship care through bilateral and multilateral international agreements well before the question of adoption arises (Cantwell, cited in Högbacka 2014). Others point out that adoption and the question of assistance to poor women and children in order to prevent abandonment are and indeed should be connected. Emphasising the connection would help to ensure that receiving countries in the Global North see adoption from a broader perspective (see Yngvesson 2010, 77–85). One way of arranging such assistance in countries plagued by vital inequality would be to channel part of the costs of transnational adoption into providing a cash supplement to first mothers who wanted to keep their children (see Smolin 2007). Although the details of such aid packages remain to be worked out, it is clear that financial aspects are inherently present in the relinquishment of children for transnational adoption in any case. They arise because for so many women reasons linked to survival dominate and sometimes constitute the only reason for placing a child for adoption. Financial assistance would give first mothers an interim option to keep the child. It would also enable the arrangement of temporary care to be offered before the permanent removal of the child for adoption.

At the same time, reproductive justice implies the right not to have children. The argument presented here is not one of imposing compulsory motherhood. Not all women giving birth wish to raise the child (see Latchford 2012). It is thus conceivable that even if offered material assistance, some first mothers may choose to place the child for adoption. Moreover, some women are so desperate that they try to induce late abortion or give birth alone and leave the baby in an unsafe place, and one way of reaching them would be to improve access to legal and safe early abortion. In both cases, however, the framework of reproductive justice would stipulate that all options have to be feasible. Before continuing with the adoption or abortion plan, the adoption system would have to ensure that a lack of material resources was not the driving force. The right to not raise the child depends on the prior right to keep it. Reproductive justice thus extends the focus from having children in the familiar context of adoptive families to include the first mothers.

Power and the Transnational Family

The opposite of the exclusive adoptive family as a free-standing unit with no strings attached, which is the view put forward by the adoption system, is the transnational family with its members spread across several countries. The transnational family maintains active connections among far-away kin and remains involved. In transnational adoption such connections occur in the Global North–South context and are structured by unequal power. Adoptions thus involve relations not only between adopters and first mothers but also between the Global North and the Global South. Pratt (1992) conceptualises such relations in terms of contact zones, which she defines as 'social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination – like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today' (Pratt 1992, 4). This highlights the continuing importance of the Global North–South perspective and the fact that this meeting or coming together does not take place on an equal footing. Emphasis is placed on the potential conflicts of views among the different parties and on the power relations between them.

By implication, we do not all constitute 'one, single global society', as Archer posits (see Chap. 1). Her theory of agency is embedded in this wider framework. The fact that her research only includes the relatively privileged in the Global North impinges on her theory, leading her to overemphasise agency and the voluntary aspect, and to downplay the effects of structural constraints and systemic violence. There is thus serious doubt as to the universality of sociological theories and concepts. A similar integrationist frame is detectable in the international treaties, policies and guidelines that regulate transnational adoption. The Hague Convention, for instance, is based on the assumption of equal influence and participation for all. Power relations are not taken up. The whole tendency of the adoption system to write out first mothers and conceive of the adoption process as sending free-standing kinless children anonymously and defining abandonment in ways that exclude first mothers reproduces dominant power relations and further disconnects first mothers from their children. Focusing attention on issues of power is important because '(t)he denial of the existence of power relations is, after all, a means by which power relations are kept in place' (Ahmed 2000a, 58).

The unequal relation between the Global North and the Global South also structures time. Time, in effect, is not universal, but is permeated and twisted by power, and this has an effect on maintaining or severing connections. Time for the privileged is 'longer', because they can turn their attention to issues they deem important without having to worry about ensuring basic necessities. They can accomplish more within the same time scale. In contrast, time for those living under conditions of vital inequality is 'shortened'. Constant worry about survival issues and the struggle to secure life's basic essentials leave them no energy or time for other activities. Time for them slips away: they are robbed of it. Examples of this include the time frame used for 'releasing' children for adoption. The adoption system regards children who have not been in contact with their parents for three months as abandoned. Social workers frequently complained about this wishing to make children available for adoption more rapidly. Likewise, they expressed the view that the two-month period during which first mothers can reconsider their consent was 'long'. The goal of the adoption system is to conduct adoptions as

rapidly as possible. It was also thought that the two-year period of sending information to first mothers was 'long'.

The issue looks completely different from the perspective of the first mothers. Two months is an extremely short time in which to find a job or to improve one's material situation in order to keep the baby, as Lily's heart-breaking narrative in Chap. 5 illustrates. Likewise, three months can fly by and years can be just like months. There were several examples of this in the interviews. In the light of these differences, what the system and social workers regard as abandonment involving no contact for 'a long time' represents for the first mothers an attempt to fix life's difficulties 'quickly' 'in a short time' after arranging temporary care for the child. One morning a first mother may 'wake up and two years is gone', during which she has not managed to do anything because all her effort has gone into trying to fix one practical problem, as one of them explained (Lerato in Chap. 7). She suggested that this may be why many first mothers do not manage to return promptly to make inquiries about the child or to come back briefly to see if there were letters from the adoptive family. Another first mother pointed out how short the two-year period for receiving letters and photographs from the adopters is in reality. These differences and the distorting effects of power further add to the difficulties in maintaining contact.

The contact-zone perspective further emphasises 'how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other' (Pratt 1992, 7). Contact zones are relational. My interviews with adopters and first mothers showed how the unequal encounter constituted the responses of both parties. The adopters' feelings of entitlement were formed vis-à-vis the deprived others and similarly, the first mothers' perceptions of the adopters as better parents were formed in the context of an imbalance of wealth and power. The so-called better and inferior parents came into being from this hierarchical relation (see also Ferguson 2006, 66–68). It would appear that structural forms of power influenced not only their situations but also their subjectivity: they started to feel superior or inferior. This embodiment of power in individual subjectivity fosters the reproduction of such power relations. The subjective responses effectively recreated the division between the superior Northern and the inferior Southern parents, and thus also maintained the Global North–South divide. The higher

position and sense of entitlement fostered fear and guilt in the adopters. These feelings have been shown to lead to paralysis, passivity and non-action, thus maintaining the status quo (Khanna 2001, cited in Gray 2011, 211) and, again, the North–South divide. Encounters under these conditions will be coloured by such power effects.

The two families that constitute the transnational adoptive family thus occupy very different positions in the world system. Adopters have the backing of the affluent Global North, whereas first mothers have less power and have to cope with the precariousness of life in the Global South. The tendency of the official adoption system to ease out first mothers reinforces the image of the adoptive family as the child's only family. First mothers do not forget and move on, however. Open adoption had a very positive effect on them, and most wanted information. As shown in the empirical chapters, the first mothers were able to come to terms with the adoption when the ties were not cut and they received news about the child, and when relations with the adopters were deemed good. Many of those who were in contact with the adopters and had reason to expect reunions in the future gave similar accounts in which they emphasised that they had no regrets and that there was no longer anything difficult about the adoption. It is the idea of the child returning one day that gives them peace of mind and 'erases' the adoption. Research conducted among first mothers in the Global North points towards the clear benefits to all of open adoption that retains ties among first mothers, adoptees and adoptive parents (Berge et al. 2007; Ge et al. 2008; Grotevant et al. 2013; Henney et al. 2007; Neil 2010). Empathic identification on the part of adopters in these encounters had the potential to destabilise the hierarchy between the two to a certain extent. The first mother was talked about and not forgotten. The unequal positions of the two families were made visible, which also created solidarity and worry about how the first families were coping.

Yet, the simple inclusion of first mothers is not enough. Not everyone's concerns automatically carry the same weight. The Global North has the legal and economic power and the cultural hegemony to define what it deems to be proper family relations and parenting models. The adoption model implies the exclusive adoptive family. As shown in Chap. 8, the effects of power are evident in terms of whose notion of family is applied

and who in particular instances decides on the terms of contact. The first mothers' efforts to take a more active role in their communication with the adoptive family were often stymied by a lack of power and rights. To counter such effects, transnational adoption should lean towards the transnational family, but reinforced with first-parent rights. Such practices would acknowledge the role of the first family and take into account the effects of power on the actions of first mothers and adopters. Open adoption that allows the maintenance of connections and does not fade out the first mother should, in the future, replace the current practice of exclusive adoption.

The Interplay of Demand and Supply

Transnational adoption currently operates as a market guided to a certain extent by the impersonal laws of supply and demand, which are out of sync. The demand for adoptable, in other words, young (and healthy) children remains high and exceeds the supply. This has led to competition among receiving countries, adoption agencies and adoptive parents. As my interviews with adopters illustrate (Chap. 3), the ensuing 'market talk' does not leave any room for first mothers. On the contrary, they are left out of the picture as attention is focused on the 'obstacles' to adopting.

Such conditions cause pressure to reduce the gap between demand and supply by increasing the supply of children that are among the most desirable. Social workers and adoption agencies in Finland as well as in other receiving countries are constantly surveying the global field in search of new contacts. There was also a discernible desire among some South African adoption social workers to increase the number of adoptable children by reaching out to more potential first mothers and advocating adoption instead of abortion. Some first mothers consequently faced a situation in which it was difficult to change their minds about relinquishing the child: in most cases, only 'adoption-minded' women were allowed to stay in the homes for pregnant women in crisis.

The simultaneous existence of a huge supply of children in need complicates the picture, however. This population comprises older children,

children with health-related special needs, street children, many of whom are orphaned, and children in institutions. There is some overlap in terms of children who are considered adoptable, but in other ways it is a separate population. Reports from countries such as Ukraine (Cantwell 2003, 72) and Colombia (Hoelgaard 1998, 217) refer to difficulties in finding as many healthy infants as requested by potential adoptive parents. According to some estimates, an increase in adoptions involving young children may coincide with an increase in the number of children in institutions. In Belarus, for instance, transnational adoptions of children under the age of three increased by 160 per cent, whereas the number of children under the age of three in institutions increased by 170 per cent (A Decade of Transition 2001, 106). Adoptions of young children thus do not necessarily reduce their numbers in institutions, which is indicative of the different origins of these two child populations. Conflating the two and advocating an unregulated increase in the number of adoptions, or demanding 'the expeditious release of children' for adoption (Varnis 2001, 46), could result in concerted efforts to find adoptable children, in which case many first mothers could end up losing their children.

On the other hand, keeping the two populations totally separate and hence advocating a complete ban on adoptions could deprive many children of a chance to have a family. There will always be children who, for whatever reason, cannot live with their first parent(s) or kin and who remain without alternative care options. The outcomes for such children are extremely bleak (Courtney and Piliavin 1998, cited in Butler-Sweet 2014, 223). Adoption may be an option for them, but only after other care alternatives and any chances of remaining in the family of origin have been exhausted. This book does not advocate the abolishing of transnational adoption: the point is to radically improve it, given the high level of inequality the system currently sustains. There is a need to strengthen the rights of first mothers at every stage. Reproductive justice and the right to raise one's child as well as attention to the effects of unequal power in the maintaining of contacts are preconditions for more just adoptions. In contexts of vital inequality first mothers must initially be offered assistance to keep their children. Thus, instead of perpetuating inequality, transnational adoption has the potential to make interventions, which would require solidarity from the affluent North.

My intention in sharpening the focus on first mothers was to draw attention to the complexities of both the demand and the supply sides of adoption and to produce a counter-narrative to the much better-known story of the adoptive family. Finally, I hope to have made visible the suffering that exists in the shadows of the Global North–South divide and in the system we have created.

Appendix: Characteristics of the Interviewed Adopters and First Mothers

Adopters (in alphabetical order)[a]		
Pseudonym	Marital status	Adoption continent
Aila	Single	Africa
Anna	Married	Asia, Latin America
Anniina	Married	Africa
Benjamin	Married	Asia
Eeva	Single	Asia, Eastern Europe
Elina	Married	Africa
Iiris	Married	Africa
Helena	Married	Latin America, Africa
Jenni and Paul	Married	Asia
Johanna	Married	Africa
Julia	Married	Eastern Europe
Katariina	Married	Latin America
Kerttu and Miko	Married	Asia
Liisa	Married	Asia
Linda	Married	Latin America
Martta	Married	Africa
Mia	Single	Africa
Monika	Married	Asia
Noora	Married	Africa
Paula and Timo	Married	Asia
Pete	Married	Asia
Piia and Sami	Married	Africa

Adopters (in alphabetical order)[a]

Pseudonym	Marital status	Adoption continent
Rebekka	Married	Asia
Selma and Max	Married	Africa
Siiri	Single	Asia
Susanna	Married	Africa
Tanja and Daniel	Married	Asia, Africa
Tiina	Single	Africa
Ursula and Hans	Married	Africa
Veera	Single	Africa

[a]Due to the small number of transnational adoptive families in Finland, it is not possible to include more details here without compromising anonymity

First mothers (in alphabetical order)

Pseudonym	Age	Adoption status	Number of other children
First mothers in difficult situations			
Agnes	18	Pregnant	–
Bontle	18	Child adopted a month earlier	1
Cathy	30	Child adopted 7 years earlier	3
Cindy	22	Child adopted a year earlier	–
Elsie	27	Child adopted a year earlier	1
Flora	23	Has signed consent form	1
Hope	20	Child adopted a week earlier	1
Lerato	31	Child adopted 5 years earlier	1
Lily	37	Has not yet signed consent form	2
Louisa	25	Has signed consent form	1
Lucille	38	Child adopted 12 years earlier	5
Margaret	33	Has signed consent form	4
Mary	34	Child adopted a month earlier	3
Miriam	25	Child adopted more than a year earlier	1
Molly	20	Child adopted a year earlier	–
Natie	27	Child adopted a year earlier	2
Noluphiwo	15	Pregnant	–
Pam	14	Pregnant	–
Petunia	24	Has signed consent form	1
Rose	43	Child adopted 3 years earlier	3
Rosina	22	Child adopted 8 months earlier	1
Simphiwe	29	Child adopted 2 years earlier	1
Yanelisa	16	Pregnant	–
Xara	19	Pregnant	–

First mothers with more resources

Alice	23	Child adopted 6 months earlier	–
Dina	19	Pregnant	–
Gugu	34	Child adopted 1.5 years earlier	1
Lebohang	19	Pregnant	–
Meg	22	Child adopted 3 years earlier	2
Olive	26	Has signed consent form	–
Sibongele	20	Pregnant	2
Zandi	Late 20s	Children adopted 8 years and 3 years earlier	1
Keeping the baby			
Edith	19	Pregnant/would prefer temporary care	–
Sindiswa	26	Is keeping her baby	–
Vuyo	16	Is keeping her baby	–

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