The reunion of lost child and birth parent has a long and deep history in Western literary culture. The motif is used by Shakespeare to bring about narrative closure in his late play, *The Winter’s Tale* and it persists across genres, from Pixar’s *Finding Nemo* to Margaret Atwood’s blockbusting *Testaments*. Normative treatments of the trope evoke the sacred, with the return to birth parent (and most frequently, the birth mother) depicted as a restoration of harmony, of what was broken becoming whole again. As Marianne Novy (“Reading” 28) points out, the reunion story plays a similar structuring role in adoption literature as marriage does in the romance genre, which is to say, it operates as a resolution device, after which the plot must abruptly end in order to preserve the fantasy. The quest for reunion is currently enjoying a popular resurgence due, in part, to the newly accessible online search tools and the commercialization of DNA activation kits. Readers in the UK, the Netherlands, and the US will be well aware of the prevalence of television documentaries that represent the search for participants’ “long lost family” or ask of celebrities (and, by implication, the audience) “who do you think you are?” In the schema of these documentaries, DNA holds the promise of alpha and omega—it seduces us to believe that discovery will put an end to ontological doubt, providing the ultimate answer to questions of identity. This is no coincidence, given the sponsorship arrangements for the television programs. The UK version of ‘Long Lost Family’ is sponsored by Ancestry, which, according to its Facebook page is “the world’s largest online family history resource with approximately 2.7 million paying subscribers across all its websites”. The company also offers a DNA tracing service.
The mother and child reunion is the subject of Ravinder Barn and Nushra Mansuri’s analysis of the BBC film Searching for Mum, in their contribution to Derek Kirton’s excellent new (2020) edited collection of essays, Adoption Experiences and the Tracing and Narration of Family Genealogies. Barn and Mansuri’s paper is methodologically intriguing. The authors use the documentary film as visual and textual empirical resource rather than as an illustrative cultural artifact. Given the ubiquity of television documentary treatments of the reunion quest in the primetime scheduling of many television networks currently, a deeper engagement with the form from a critical genealogy and kinship perspective is timely. By regarding the documentary itself as a piece of empirical evidence, the authors call attention to the shaping narratives behind the apparently transparent form. More scholarship is needed to consider, not just the ways that the internal stories of these documentaries are constructed, but the inter-relationship between public understandings of adoption and the effect that such documentaries are having on culture and the stories we tell ourselves.

Such questions and tensions run through this enlightening collection of essays. Derek Kirton says in his preface that when he issued the call for the special issue, he hoped for “articles addressing, from different vantage points and theoretical perspectives, the key issues of identity, search, and reunion; openness and closure within adoption; and, in turn, how all these intersect with life course journeys and aspects of social identity” (ix). He certainly achieved his aim. A deconstructive energy runs through the collection. Multiple perspectives are juxtaposed with each other, sometimes amplifying the perspectives represented, sometimes contradicting each other. The result is an energetic and thoughtful collection of points of view which are at points entertaining, sometimes moving, informative, and challenging in the best sense. Kirton manages to achieve this with skillful editing, allowing the various methodological, disciplinary, and theoretical viewpoints to coexist, without trying to corral any of them into a unified, single stance.
The collection begins with a human story, elegantly told. Sally Hoyle’s memoir of giving her baby up for adoption as a teenage mother in the 1960s England is compelling and beautifully written. With brutal honesty she presents violence of the social practices of the time, including the way that very young women—teenagers like her—were understood simply and devastatingly as “bad girls.” Although Hoyle’s memoir is a classic lost-and-found memoir arranged around a return-to-origins narrative, in her hands, the trope is not trite or sentimental—she does not flinch from the portrayal of the tensions and challenges of reunion. At the end of her daughter’s first visit to Australia to meet her, she writes, “I ask her for permission to hug her goodbye and she assents, but she is stiff as a board, and I feel as if I have overstepped the mark” (13). It is a long way from the sensational, sentimental TV versions of the same subject. If the reunion-as-romance trope ends with the equivalence of a fantasy wedding, as Marianne Novy suggests, this memoir provides us with a realistic portrayal of a long-term marriage—one that involves negotiation, compromise, shared vulnerability—and laughter. It’s a stunning piece of writing and if they haven’t done so already, somebody should give her a book deal. Kirton’s decision to put life writing first powerfully reminds us that, in the midst of the theoretical and methodological approaches which are to follow, it is the human story that is important.

Stories of adoption are also central to the writing of Sarah Richards and her work with girls adopted from China and their families. Richards asked the girls in her study to represent their thoughts and feelings about their identities and their adoptions in speech and in drawings. She calls our attention to the powerful role that temporality plays in the grammar of adoption, and the way that the conventional use of the verb to be in its present form (“I am adopted”) suggests a perpetual suspension in the space time at the point of transition for the girls. “These stories can be perceived as a starting point to move beyond not a constant presence as adoption is commonly perceived,” she argues, challenging us to rethink verb tenses in order to release
adopted people into a more agentic engagement with being here, now. “I was adopted” should perhaps be the linguistic term that we allow these (children) and others to claim” (107).

This challenge to the reliance on easy, lazy narratives about, and vocabularies of, adoption runs throughout the book. Gary Clapton’s account of the reunion story suggests a hopeful way of understanding the hitherto under-researched area of long-term outcomes of reunion between birth parents and children. In his work, which follows the outcomes of reunions between birth children and parents in Scotland, the reunion is represented as complicated but at its kernel containing the possibility of hope and repair. He calls for a fundamental rethinking of simplistic characterization of family: “A binary approach to the kinship of primary family (adoptive) and secondary family (birth) seems an inadequate characterisation” and that “ties of a more horizontal nature seem to be forming rather than any hierarchy” (42). In particular he challenges the binary framing of the adopted/birth family genealogy arguing that both can coexist with everyone included—an argument that the Scottish poet Jackie Kay has elsewhere made to describe the what she sees as the liberating plurality of growing up with two sets of parents: “if you can manage to combine those, then you can accept that, and . . . that is actually a great richness” (173). 2001. An openness to plurality characterizes some of the participants in Fiona Tasker et al.’s study, which queries whether families receive or “adopt” embryos in embryo donation. They found that some families are able to imagine different family maps—that incorporate the genetic backgrounds of the embryos—more easily than others.

Sally Sales’s account of the undocumented but troubling relationship between class and adoption makes a useful contribution to the research literature. Adoption, particularly when applied to children from social care, has long been predicated on a version of the liberation narrative with adoption understood as an intervention that offers children a new start in a completely fresh set of improved circumstances. In this arrangement, where attachment still
represents the dominant organizing narrative, there is little space for understanding how the
classed positions of birth families, foster carers, prospective adopters, and the children
themselves can impact the way that parenting activities are understood. In Sales’s work,
popular notions of “good parenting” and middle-class mores were found to be dangerously
elided in the respondents’ answers, and class elevation was seen as a de facto good thing. The
pernicious and complex effects of class on adoption is also the strong theme in the two pieces
of writing reviewed by Marianne Novy—Jeremy Harding and Lori Jakiela’s search memoirs—
in her essay, “Class, Shame, and Identity in Memoirs about Difficult Same-Race Adoptions.”
Both writers find out that the adoption was, in very specific ways, aimed at improving parents’
lives. Judging by the evidence of Sales’s small-scale study and the memoirs reviewed by
Marianne Novy, class remains a structuring narrative in the adoption process and one that
would bear further scrutiny.

The potential and limitations of technology and artificial intelligence systems as
organizing function in identity construction features strongly in both Rosemarie Peña’s and
Sandra Patton-Imani’s contributions, and both seem to offer new insights into the relationship
between the auto/biographical search and the technological superstructures that facilitate and
limit that identity work. Rosemarie Peña is one of the first scholars belonging to the historical
Black German-US adoptee cohort that emerged in the wake of World War II, when “historians
approximate that in the two decades following the War as many as seven thousand Black
German children were adopted to the U.S.” (65). The rich primary source material relating to
search and reunion activities of Black Germans adopted to the United States is the subject of
the study. An archive of conversations and newsletters in a traditional mail repository, which
was replaced by a Yahoo group in 2000, provides insights into the search and reunion activities
of such adoptees. Peña reflects on the way that the community has grown up around the original
discussion group. She cites Silvia Posocco’s concept of enfleshment to describe how the
group’s interaction with the Internet allows lives and identities to come into being through the community of practice: “Black German adoptees are and have been participating in their own enfleshment by virtue of the digital footprint each adoptee creates when they initiate their searches or share their adoption stories online” (71). They are in fact “writing themselves into the public memory” (71)—a wonderful idea.

A less liberating view of the possibilities of the Internet and its technologies is portrayed by Sandra Patton-Imani in her essay that, for me, is the most striking contribution in a very strong collection. She calls our attention to how online genealogy portals are perpetuating and proliferating reductive models of family in the ways that they shape and circumscribe online searches. She chronicles her own experience as an adopted person searching for family history in what she describes as feminist interdisciplinary self-reflexive ethnographic research. Patton-Imani uses her own family tree deftly to illustrate and exemplify the way that power works. The study starkly calls into question our general compliance with the framing of identity and genealogy through the dominant categories of “race” and legitimacy. WikiTree.com’s lofty aim of providing a family tree for all of us is undermined, Patton-Imani soon discovered, by its inability, indeed refusal, to allow for more than one tree to emerge for each participant at the same time: adoptees need to choose between either their biological or adopted parents, designating one or the other as legitimate family. The binary around the “real” and the “unreal,” rejected by so many adoptees, is thus upheld and powerfully perpetuated as a fundamental technology in the construction of identity. As Patton-Imani argues, “The structure of family tree online programs literally enforces a normative public family story. The gaps between the genealogical template and the lived experience of family are useful for thinking about ways that ‘difference’ from this norm is regulated and erased, further entrenching this view of family and ‘natural’ and ‘normal’” (89).
That Kirton allows this to work, with its clear assertion that “‘Real’ genealogy is not about ‘biology and blood’ but ‘enculturation and stories’” (88) alongside the other essays in the collection that take the ideas of DNA as shared history and Sants’s notion of genealogical bewilderment seriously is a credit to his skills as an editor. Patton-Imani’s overarching question—how does one search for those who are erased by history?—is an important one for all of us, in any field of study. All the contributions to this impressive collection seek to refuse the process of erasure in one way or another, and in doing so, make important contributions to the field.

Works Cited

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