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► **To cite this version:**

Mylène Hernandez. Making sense of an irregular adoption. Subjective trajectories of four French adoptees born in Romania in the 1980s and 1990s. *Childhood*, 2022, pp.090756822210824. 10.1177/09075682221082402. hal-03622600

**HAL Id: hal-03622600**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03622600v1>**

Submitted on 19 May 2022

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# Making sense of an irregular adoption. Subjective trajectories of four French adoptees born in Romania in the 1980s and 1990s

Childhood

2022, Vol. 0(0) 1–16

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DOI: 10.1177/09075682221082402

[journals.sagepub.com/home/chd](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/chd)**Mylène Hernandez** 

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## Abstract

This article presents the results of qualitative research conducted with 20 adoptees, specifically the experiences of four French adoptees from Romania, who discovered significant irregularities in their adoptions. In the form of four ethnographic cases followed by a discussion, it describes the adoptees' bewilderment at their pre-adoptive trajectories and discusses the absence of collective frameworks and narratives in France through which they could apprehend their individual trajectories.

## Keywords

Romania, natalist policy, ethnography, International adoption, anthropology of kinship, irregular adoption, intercountry adoption, subjective trajectory

The data presented here are the result of qualitative and narrative research conducted with 20 French or Belgian adoptees, born in Haiti, Vietnam, Guatemala, Chile, Latvia, Lithuania, Brazil, or France, between 1977 and 2002<sup>1</sup>. The study initially intended to document the relationship of adoptees to their birth siblings. It also aimed to analyze the role played by the latter in the construction of adoptees' self-narratives about their origins. The scientific perspective developed was that of anthropology of kinship, with particular attention to practices: in other words, the ordinary exercise of kinship (in this case

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siblingship) was as important here as the norms and representations of the latter. In concrete terms, the survey documented the trajectories of people who were themselves investigating their pre-adoptive trajectories; several in-depth interviews were thus conducted with each of them in 2019 and 2020. In addition, their adoption files as well as their family photos or videos, or their letters or messages exchanged with members of their families of origin were consulted. At the end of the investigation, the issue of irregular adoption had clearly emerged as a significant element of the study. In this case, out of the 20 interviews conducted, 12 mentioned irregularities. Four countries were involved: Guatemala, Vietnam, Haiti, and Romania. However, half of the stories of irregular adoptions collected concerned Romania and took place between 1982 and 1995.

This article explores more specifically the experiences of French adoptees born in Romania, in particular their dismay when confronted with their pre-adoptive trajectories.

## Images and causes

In 1990, in the aftermath of a revolution that had just taken place “live,” unbearable images of institutionalized Romanian children appeared in the Western media. In a few months, in a post-Cold War context marked by the rejection of communism, oriented by the affirmation of a new liberal world order based on the triumph of international law, the emotion aroused by these images mobilized public opinion all the more as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) had just been ratified (in November 1989), which established the principle of the best interests of the child and conveyed a vision of the latter as a vulnerable, universal being and a subject of individual rights (Collard and Leblic, 2009). In this context, due to its intense media coverage, the cause of Romanian children acquired such legitimacy that the fate of these children became an issue not only of foreign policy in post-communist Romania but also more globally of international relations (Denéchère and Droux, 2015; Denéchère and Scutaru, 2010). But if the acquired legitimacy of this cause is largely due to the media construction process of which it was the object, it is also due to the fact that it was from the outset closely articulated (in this process) to another cause, that of international adoption (ICA). As early as 1989, it is the “thorny question” of ICA that determined journalists to evoke Romanian children (Scutaru, 2015: 96). We discovered their existence, but in an indirect way, through the prism of the suffering of the French-adopting couples who were waiting for them<sup>2</sup>. In a few months, international adoption of Romanian children imposed itself as a humanitarian measure, after the Western public opinion discovered with horror the considerable number of institutionalized children contaminated by HIV or the fate reserved to the so-called “irrecoverable” children<sup>3</sup>. At the beginning of the 1990s, “Romania became almost synonymous with intercountry adoption” (Dickens, 2002: 76). Especially since, faced with pro-ICA external pressure from its new allies, Romanian authorities liberalized adoption (Neagu, 2015).

Today, 1990s Romania is regularly invoked to illustrate the evolution of ICA from a form of international charity to a market practice (Roby and Ife, 2009). The massive influx of couples or individuals coming to adopt one or more children, and through them the influx of foreign currency, has favored the opening of a large-scale market for children

(OHCHR, 2016; UNICEF, 1998). These wealthy Westerners arrived in a country devastated by poverty, which was just freeing itself from a deeply oppressive political regime, where practices of child commodification and corruption pre-existed, and which also had, in its state institutions or more broadly within its borders, hundreds of thousands of children whose births were a result of the totalitarian natalist policy of the Ceausescu regime and their aftershocks felt long after the 1989 Revolution. Neither orphans nor abandoned, institutionalized or not, lost in the meanders of a bloodless child welfare system, abducted or sold, these children have become—for a considerable proportion of them—exportable goods. As the private market for adoption developed without any regulation, corruption spread rapidly, exchange of money or goods for children becoming commonplace. Between January 1990 and July 1991, while Romania underwent a “lawless period” regarding ICA, it became the major supplier of children worldwide with an estimated 10,000 children sent for adoption (Selman, 2008).

Over time, the cause of Romanian children has become an extremely complex political object, polarizing divergent interests and principles, mobilizing many actors or being the source of sharp tensions. Since the end of the 1980s, this question has not ceased to “haunt” Romania. But then again, until recently, the cause of Romanian children has remained in the shadow of that of ICA. Indeed, although as early as 1991 the government then in place recognized the ongoing transfer of children out of the country as a “national tragedy,” although Romania was one of the first countries to ratify the UNCRC (1990) and the 1993 Hague Convention (1994), the various policies implemented between 1991 and 2004 intended to reform the child protection system (CPS), in particular by regulating the use of ICA and its abuses, have proved ineffective. On the contrary, these policies shaped a legal frame which reinforced the predominance of private adoption agencies, contributed to the growth of ICA, but did not eradicate irregular practices (Dickens, 2002; Post, 2007). As part of its accession to the European Union (EU), under pressure from the Commission, the then Romanian government eventually established a moratorium on ICA in 2004. To become a member State, indeed Romania had to reform its CPS and ban ICA. EU’s position then was that Romania had to reform its legislation in order to be in line with the European practices on ICA, according to which Member States do not render children available for ICA (Iusmen, 2013). But given that 40% of all Romanian children adopted internationally were adopted in EU member receiving countries, the Commission’s position was met with significant resistance. Subsequently, torn by internal conflicts over children’s rights policy, promoting a liberal ideology on adoption, and finally under pressure from pro-adoption lobbyists, after 2007, UE asked Romania to reopen ICA, in contradiction with the position defended until then (2013). However, due to the new laws enacted in child protection (272/2004) and adoption (273/2004) ICA has become virtually impossible in Romania since 2005 (Popescu et al., 2020; Jacoby et al., 2009).

Three or four decades after the transfer of thousands of Romanian children to the main receiving countries, their fate no longer polarizes the attention of international public opinion. Adopted, they have ceased to be a humanitarian cause. As adults, they have ceased to be a political issue. Over-mediatization has given way, particularly in France, to a certain indifference. This article discusses four stories of irregular adoptions and, through them, the context that made them possible. More than that, it examines the

difficulty of four French adoptees born in Romania to think of themselves as the objects of an irregular adoption. It questions the way in which, paradoxically, certain issues of kinship in France resist any process of collective politicization.

## **Abducted, commodified, and adopted**

### *Laetitia (b. 1980), Julie (b. 1977)*

Laetitia and Julie<sup>4</sup> were abducted and put up for adoption while institutionalized in child welfare institutions under Ceausescu regime. Described as so-called “children of the decree,” they are also the children of a crumbling socio-economic context and of the reorganization of child protection institutions with determining consequences on their future. Indeed, one of the adopted measures broadened the “category of children with defaulting parents”; this legal framework has, in many situations, effectively deprived parents of their rights toward their children or made them unable to exercise these rights (Légaut, 2019: 70–71).

Soon after her 18th birthday, following a harsh confrontation with her mother and grandfather, Laetitia wrests from them the end of a secret that had paralyzed her for years. She was adopted. This is the reason why her French ID card bears the mention “« born in [Bucarest]”. Before she could bring herself to confront her relatives, Laetitia “rifled” through her family home and found documents. She discovered her birth name and surname, “how much [she had] cost,” a legal document, the contact information for a pediatrician, and a psychologist in Romania. These are the rare elements from her adoption record that were not destroyed by her grandfather. This crisis, added to the confession she obtained regarding her origin, made Laetitia realize the extent of a machinery of secrecy of which she was the central spoke. For her, “it hurt significantly,” the feelings of “betrayal” and “deception” were sharp. A concern emerged, however, the “fear that [her] relatives would cease to love [her] because she doesn’t have the same identity anymore”.

Two years later, motivated by the need to know about her pre-adoptive history and to be able to “build [herself]” from the basis of a “true story,” she left for Romania. Since she was beginning an investigation with few elements at her disposal, Laetitia sought out the psychologist and the pediatrician of the institution that had treated her adoption. The two women had kept a close connection with her grandfather and her mother for a few years. In Bucarest, the meeting was friendly, Laetitia was welcomed “with open arms,” when she touched on the reasons for her trip, however, things became tense. When she asked to read her adoption file, she was told the archives of the “orphanage” were destroyed in a fire a few years earlier. When she expressed her wish to know the identity of her birth mother, she was faced with a virulent diatribe about the woman described as: “[having been] quite happy to be rid of [her]”. Both women were categorical: “Let sleeping dogs lie.” Laetitia returned to France profoundly unsettled by her stay in Romania. The ubiquitous poverty, the numerous stray children in the streets as well as the exchanges with her interlocutors contributed to instill doubt in her mind and reinforce her visceral fear to be rejected by her birth mother. She did not know which procedures to initiate nor who she should contact to

find the information she lacked. In 2000, social media and the internet were still far from being the social and information resources they would later become.

Fifteen years later, Laetitia sent a request to national authorities in charge of child welfare and adoption. None of the procedures she had undertaken thus far had led to any results. Through the organization, Laetitia hoped to finally contact members of her family of origin. Two years after sending her request, Laetitia learned that her birth mother was alive and agreed to get in touch but also that she had a brother and two sisters. In November of 2017, they started to exchange via social media; however, Laetitia was still worried. She frequently called upon the services of a translator to send or decipher messages in Romanian, she was afraid of misunderstandings, but her greatest fear was that this “family” would turn out not to be hers. Even though her administrative file has had eventually been recovered from the archives of Romanian social services, she had not yet obtained a copy or had a chance to peruse it.

Eight months after their first exchanges, 17 years after her first proceedings, Laetitia returned to Romania, gathered her adoption file, and looked to better understand her pre-adoptive trajectory. With the help of a translator, she interrogated the conditions of her “abandonment” and uncovered a reality far removed from the official narrative. She also discovered that her family of origin had been mourning her for the past three decades. Magda, her mother, never abandoned her but rather left her temporarily in the care of an institution for children as was the norm under Ceausescu for young mothers without any family support who had to work to survive. It is under the care of this very institution that Laetitia disappeared.

Born in 1980, she spent the first 6 months of her life with her mother who then committed her to a nursery for social and medical reasons. Magda lived in a situation of extreme poverty, she barely managed to feed her daughter and care for her. She was 18 years old at the time, working night shifts and living with her sister, 10 years younger than her, in their grandmother’s home. Laetitia’s “biological father” quickly backed away and refused to recognize his daughter. For nearly a year after having committed her daughter, Magda regularly visited her or brought her home for short stays.<sup>5</sup> Despite her situation, she paid monthly fees to the institution. One day as she came to visit her daughter, Magda was told that a contagious disease had made the rounds in the nursery and that the children had been placed in quarantine. Visits were suspended and would stay that way for several weeks, until eventually Magda was told that her daughter has passed away. Around that time, Laetitia was adopted and left for France. She was a little over 2 years old. These are the facts which Laetitia learned from Magda, her adoption file confirming every point. The file included no act of abandonment but rather handwritten documents in which Magda asked for support in order to protect her daughter, receipts of the mandatory fees she had to pay, forms describing her situation, and unambiguously designating her as the mother of her child, but also various documents emanating from the administration of the nursery erasing the legal parental link between Magda and her child on one hand, and on the other, indicating that Laetitia had been assigned to a French adoptive single mother.

The story of Julie is largely identical and begins with her mother, Bianca, a seventeen-year-old factory worker who gave birth to a child in 1977. Like Laetitia’s mother, Bianca

did not have access to any means of contraception. Decree 770, passed in 1966, made abortion illegal. Sex-ed was inexistent, access to contraception was impossible outside of the black market, and was reserved to the least economically and socially vulnerable women. The trajectories of Bianca and Magda and of their daughters after them bring into light the tragic and absurd relations between the official discourse of the regime about “political demography,” the institution of a state natalist doctrine and the abhorrent living conditions experienced by tens of thousands of women and children under Ceausescu but also after the end of the dictatorship (Kligman, 1992, 1995). In Ceausescu’s Romania, “the ‘marriage’ between demographic concerns and nationalist politics turned women’s bodies into instruments to be used in the service of the state” (1995: 234). Decree 770, and the even more coercive measures adopted during the previous two decades, deeply and lastingly affected women but more broadly, affected sexuality, conjugality, the relationship to one’s body, intimacy, and family relationships of the entire population. In a totalitarian perspective, “the child and even the fetus [have become] state property as have the means of (re)production” (Légaut 2019 : 24). The regime had “etatized” and exploited to the extreme the reproductive work of women (Verdery, 1996).

Julie was born in this context. From a young single woman, without the support of her family, and with a partner who left her. She had no other choice than to temporarily commit her daughter to a nursery so she could work and insure her survival. Following a similar sequence of events than previously described, Bianca visited her daughter regularly until the day she was prevented to do so. After a few months, under threat by the director of the nursery, she was forced to sign an act of abandonment, allowing the adoption of Julie. Unlike Laetitia who was adopted in 1982 when she was 2 years old, Julie was six when she was adopted in 1984. She spent the first 6 years of her life in a nursery. If the reasons for the length of her stay in the institution remain largely unclear, the way she was put up for adoption is at the crux of the triple demographic, socio-economic, and political context: (1) of an influx of undesired children, produced by the natalist policies and funneled to a few scant and disorganized institutions; (2) of the pervasive scarcity giving way to the plunder by the employees of goods and foods appropriated for the children of the institutions but also to the commodification of the same children; (3) of children being put up for ICA following a market logic (2009, 2019).

At the turn of the 1990s, Julie had become a French child, conflicted by “things within [her] that were unclear,” “[her] history” according to her own words “blew up in [her] face” while French television stations played on a loop images of institutionalized Romanian children. Even though Julie knew she was an adopted child, she had strongly interiorized that adoption was still a “taboo” subject in 1990s France and that her own parents, traumatized by their trip to Romania, had trouble talking to her about her adoption. She was also terrified at the idea of being abandoned once again, which she believed could happen if she started asking questions. While she experienced the Revolution almost as it happened, the “obsession” within her takes the form of “returning to Romania” and “understanding”. When she was 16 years old, in 1993, she left for Romania as part of a humanitarian trip. She took the opportunity to visit her orphanage of origin in search for information about her birth mother. The former director of the institution who had kept a correspondence with her parents for several years agreed to



receive her and confirmed the death of her birth mother. She had supposedly died a few years after Julie's adoption. Although she could not explain why, Julie did not trust the director's story.

In the year 2000, at 23 years old, Julie embarked on a second humanitarian trip. The question of "[her] origins" had become a painful one; despite her previous trip having been a partially liberating experience, she nevertheless still felt "in search of answers" and increasingly "withdrawn" and haunted. One day, accompanied by members of the humanitarian team, their path led them near the village where Julie was born. Someone in the group offered to stop there. A few hours later, Julie was standing in front of Bianca—who still ignored her identity. Interrogated by the French social workers, Bianca told them about the conditions under which she had to abandon her daughter (whom she thought dead) 20 years earlier. She talked about the information she managed to gather about her. She even learned the name and former address of Julie's adoptive parents. Julie was in a state of total shock, as was Bianca when she understood who she was facing. For several weeks, Julie was wracked by violent spells of vertigo, she felt lost in a thick cognitive, psychic, and emotional "fog". When she returned to France, worried about the possible reaction of her parents, Julie stayed quiet about her findings for 6 months. Like Laetitia, she was terrified to "disappoint" them, that they should stop loving her or abandon her. Stifled by feelings of guilt, she felt as if she somehow "betrayed" her adoptive parents by finding her birth mother.

### *Alexandre (b. 1988) and Yoann (b. 1990)*

As mentioned earlier, after the 1989 Revolution, Romania underwent a lawless period regarding ICA. Although child institutions opened their doors, the number of adoptable children proved insufficient in the face of the exploding demand in rich countries. In this context, the commerce of children, especially newborns, surged. For the most socially and economically vulnerable women, the transition from a state-controlled economy to a market economy "[contributed] to the continued exploitation of their reproductive labor" (Kligman, 1992: 406). The trajectories of Alexandre and Yoann show the modalities of this exploitation within kinship and not only in the state institutions.

Alexandre was born in jail from a mother incarcerated for misdemeanors. Twenty-eight years later, he learned that his mother was barely 16 years old when she gave birth to him and, furthermore, that 2 years earlier, her own mother had put her out on the street. His mother, Ada, was born in 1972, being herself a child of the decree. Alexandre lived in a nursery, most likely for a period of 2 years, but nobody seems to be able to corroborate this. In June of 1990, he was placed under the guardianship of his grandmother who, at the same time, signed his act of abandonment without informing Ada—something which the law of 1970 allowed. However, legal documents related to the adoption of Alexandre established by Romanian authorities mention that his mother "abandoned" him. One month later, Alexandre arrived in France.

His commitment to investigate his pre-adoptive history, and more particularly to find his brother and his mother, appeared early in Alexandre's trajectory. As young as 6 years old, he remembers wanting to find "[his] mother," then, at twelve, "[his] brother," two



photographs of whom he found in his “adoption file” which he “stole” in his father’s office. Similarly to himself, the child who is a few years older than him was placed in a nursery. Alexandre only began his investigations at the age of 27, after a succession of violent clashes with his parents that severed their bonds, several attempts at running away from home, and many stays in juvenile homes, psychiatric centers, and rehab facilities. Started in 2015 via social networks, his investigations soon gave way to a trip in Romania 6 months later which Alexandre seems to describe as an initiatory journey. Although he experienced a sharp euphoria and the exhilarating feeling of being received as a “young king wherever [he went],” he nonetheless experienced moments of bewilderment and intense fear, feeling as if he was losing his sense of self. He discovered a sad and chaotic reality: an alcoholic mother, whom everyone described as “a liar”; a sister whom she was abusing; a young disabled brother under the care of his sister; a grandmother scorned by everyone; everywhere, he heard grievances about his mother. Ada was ostracized from the community without him understanding why.

The outline of his pre-adoptive history, which he attempts to piece together, is closely linked to his elder brother’s trajectory which he learned about while talking to his brother’s father (Alexandre and Matyas are not born from the same father). Matyas, while still an infant, was sold by his maternal grandmother to a Romania family then taken back by his father, taken again by his grandmother, he was eventually sold and finally “legally” abandoned by her. Similarly to Alexandre, he was promptly adopted, in 1990, but in Belgium. In order to discourage Ada’s intentions of finding her sons after her release from prison, Ada’s mother had pretended that the boys were dead. Back in France, Alexandre “collapsed,” unable to know “what to do” with these new bonds and the possibility of these relations which he broke off completely for several months.

Yoann, for his part, is born in the post-Revolution chaos, when women and children from gypsy minorities, to which he belonged, were subjected to intensive exploitation. During this period, gypsy children were sold for amounts of money as high as \$10,000 (Denéchère and Scutaru, 2010). In practice, private adoptions were faster than the official bureaucratic procedures. Presumably unregulated, these procedures were more expensive but offered a wide array of children, especially infants. They functioned through a series of corrupt middle-men, men and women approaching single women or gypsy women before or after they had given birth. If some of them accepted to sell their children, others were forced to, usually by relatives, in a context where they had no agency over neither their reproductive capacities nor their social and material living conditions. The forms of coercion exerted on these women in order for them to abandon their child often involved the more or less informed and willing participation of adoptive parents (Kligman, 1992: 414–416). Yoann, for example, ensnared in inextricable conflicts of loyalty toward his adoptive parents and irrepressible impulses of rejection toward his birth mother, depicted several scenes of coercion without seemingly realizing their violence or the social, economic, and gender asymmetries at play, or at the least, without being able to clearly utter his unease regarding them.<sup>6</sup>

The third of five siblings, he was born in 1990 from a 20 years old mother who had her first child at the age of 15. The oldest of the five, Vlad was abandoned, according to his mother, because he displayed signs of a physical disability, which nobody in his extended

family would confirm to him when Yoann traveled to Romania in 2019. Six months earlier, Romanian social services had put Yoann in touch with his sister who had emigrated to France, he also met his mother, Daria, and his youngest brother who came to meet him. He was 28 years old at the time. If the relations with his sister, mother, and brother were, from Yoann's point of view, immediately "passionate," they were nonetheless immediately marred with conflict. At the center of these conflicts was the money they asked him for but also, Yoann's pre-adoptive history and the reasons for his adoption for which he obtained no clear explanation.

Yoann knows that he was placed in a nursery very soon after his birth, similar to Vlad, which was where his adoptive parents chose him. A few months earlier, they had been touched by a TV segment about "the misery of Ceausescu's orphans," and had taken the necessary steps to adopt a child before leaving for Romania. However, they could not adopt the child they wanted as he was neither orphaned nor abandoned. Yoann recounted the situation a first time, in turn from the point of view of his father, his birth mother, and, finally, his adoptive mother.

– [Yoann acts as his father:]: "When we chose you, he says, it was something, in our minds, you were our kid. Nobody could stand between you and us. That's why it was really hard, my father explained, [at the orphanage] when you choose your child, you take his in your arms and you tell yourself 'maybe it'll turn out the mother won't want to give him up, but I'm already attached to him and I already want him'." It's very complicated because my parents had to ask the permission to my [birth] mother who did not agree. [...]

– How did it go?

– To be honest, my parents used their money. They paid a lawyer. My parents were more affluent so, obviously, hiring a lawyer was no problem, so when things didn't go their way through the official channels... [...] At first, my parents went to the small village where my [birth] parents still live and they tried to negotiate with my mom, saying: "Look at the way you live. Let us take your son." And my mother didn't want to. [...] My mother clearly told me she didn't want to. [...] She wanted to take me back later on. So, at some point, my [adoptive] mother told me: "It's a bit selfish but when you choose a child and you are more affluent, we told ourselves 'we're going to pressure her, we'll hire a lawyer'." The lawyer went there with the police and he told her: "Sign here or there will be trouble." Of course, when your mother is twenty years old, can't even read, can't write, and a lawyer shows up with the police, of course she's going to sign. She was terrified. Because my parents' lawyer told her: "We're going to take your other kid away from you and place him [...]: "Can't you see the way you people live?! This place is a slum. Tomorrow, I'll give the judge a call and we'll take your kid away [...]." So my mother was so afraid she would lose her other child that she agreed to sign.

When I met Yoann for a second interview, 8 months later, he was coming back from a trip to Romania that upset him. He was deeply angry, to the point of breaking ties with his sister and mother by birth. In Romania, he discovered that nobody from his family knew

his existence, but he mostly perceived that people were uneasy and troubled when he questioned them. Yoann also understood that nobody knew what became of Vlad, if he died or if he was adopted. His brother and him were the only two children among the eldest to have been “sold” according to him. Finally, what little information Yoann obtained about his history was revealed to him by his sister’s husband: he is supposedly a “bastard” (his own words) and that is the reason why he was placed and taken away from the man who was, until then, described as his “biological father”. This situation recalls those described by Kligman who illustrated the injunctions women were subjected to by their fathers or partners to abandon children born from previous unions or extra-marital relations (1992: 413).<sup>7</sup> Given the fragmented nature of the information gathered by Yoann on the conditions of his “abandonment” but also about the conditions of Vlad’s institutionalization, we can wonder if his own mother was not subjected to similar injunctions. Was Daria indeed forced to commit her first child, possibly born from a previous relation, then a second child, born out of wedlock while her husband was serving a prison sentence of several months? Was she pushed to institutionalize and sell her children seen as illegitimate? Finally, was she exploited by another man during her husband’s absence, which documents gathered by the social workers seem to suggest? Several narratives seem plausible. Whatever the case may be, Daria seemed particularly frightened and evasive during her conversations with Yoann. He repeated it in anger—“She monetized her kids. She sold her children.”—thus effacing the oppressive power exercised by his adoptive parents in the transaction of which he was the object. Yoann, and the language used by his parents, seemed to suggest that buying a child was more morally acceptable than selling it.

In any case, like my [adoptive] mother says: “We had to pay her. Don’t think we didn’t. We had to spend money.” At first, [my biological mother] said: “Yes, sure, you can have him.” Then, the next day, she was saying: “No, no, I changed my mind, you can’t have him.” Eventually, my [adoptive] father had to tell her: “– All right, how much for him? You want money?” [Daria answered:] “– Yes, that’s it.” So there you have it.

## **Crisis of intelligibility**

### *An experience both private and public*

The trajectories described above show in which measure ICA, from a perspective of a critical study of adoption, and in so far as it is an issue pertaining to kinship, “is always both ‘the private’ and the outcome of a lot of very public processes” (Briggs, 2018: 12). They also show in which measure they are collective stories. Indeed, they are not isolated or exceptional trajectories, but trajectories that are shared by thousands of individuals and are the result of specific social conditions. However, my research highlights the difficulty of the respondents I interviewed to grasp the collective dimension of their personal history, sometimes because of the lack of relevant socio-historical elements or because of the difficulty to mobilize them in relation to their own experience. But, also, because they more generally opt for a biogenetic and/or psychological reading of their history by

anchoring their pre-adoptive trajectory solely in their relationship with their birth mother outside of any contextualization. What emerges from the testimonies collected is the respondents' difficulty in qualifying their adoption as "irregular". Although there are significant irregularities in their adoptions, they struggle to consider themselves as victims of an "abuse of process" or of a "sale of children"—to use [Brown and Roby's terminology \(2016\)](#). Yet an irregular adoption is defined as "an adoption resulting from abuses, such as abduction, the sale of, traffic in, and other illegal or illicit activities against children" ([HCCH, 2008](#): 16). Julie, after 14 years of conflicting relations with her birth mother, is to this day the only one to consider that she was (in her terms) a victim of "child trafficking" and that she was "stolen" from her mother. Laetitia, for her part, uses expressions that tend to euphemize the irregularity dimension of her adoption and from time-to-time questions the veracity of her birth mother's word. Alexandre and Yoann discovered deeply complex family situations, marked by intra-family violence, alcoholism, and of course poverty. Alexandre, while expressing his "hatred" toward his maternal grandmother at birth for putting him up for adoption, did not use the term "irregularity". Yoann directed his anger, for his part, sometimes toward his adoptive parents and sometimes toward his birth mother. If he described the coercion exerted on the latter by his parents, and also vehemently criticized the transaction that she would have accepted, he did not really speak about irregular adoption either.

### *Victims, victims of what?*

In light of these trajectories, several explanations can be put forward to explain their common difficulty in apprehending the dimension of irregularity of their adoptions.

First, the legality under French law of their adoption does not facilitate the questioning of the procedure even if it is established that irregular adoptions "always imply illegal acts prior to the adoption order being made, but may or may not imply illegality in the granting of the order itself" ([Baglietto et al., 2016](#): 10). Next, recognizing oneself as a victim may seem odd when one has not directly experienced exploitation, even if one has been transferred for profit or if financial incentives have been used to obtain the consent of the birth parents ([Brown and Roby, 2016](#)). Moreover, adoption of Romanian children born in the 1980s and 1990s has become an unquestionable humanitarian gesture in public opinion, in various media and political spheres, and even more so in the family intimacies, questioning the conditions under which one was adopted can lead to contesting the altruistic dimension of the parents' adoptive gesture. Yoann's history, for example, brings into light the blindness or complacency of certain adopting parents but also the efficiency of humanitarian rhetoric at the time in invisibilizing the criminal character of these transfers of children.<sup>8</sup>

Lastly, adoptees are often referred to the extreme singularity of their experiences in the public or media spheres where their narratives of "search for origins" fascinate. However, my ethnographic study shows the solitude which reinforces and is induced by this hyper singularization of adoptees' trajectories. It is indeed striking to measure the solitude of the respondents during the different stages of their searches. This isolation is observable before, during but also after their research; even more so when adoptees discover serious

irregularities in the modalities of their adoption. Laetitia and Julie committed themselves on their own to fastidious investigations for very long stretches of time. They had to face, several decades after having been adopted, to the manipulations of people who took advantage of them when they were only children. Terrified at the thought of losing the love of their adoptive parents, they mostly remained silent about interrogations raised by their discoveries. Alexandre lifts the veil on a family situation deeply marred by the violence of his mother but also the mistreatment which she was also subject to. Yoann could not get the explanations he expected from his birth mother who was visibly terrified and unable to testify about the conditions in which she had to abandon him.

All these elements, already quite complex, have other direct and indirect consequences. They may prevent the recognition of abuses of process that are also suffered by other persons involved in the adoption procedure; namely, the adoptive parents and the birth parents. While acknowledging one's adoptive parents as victims is generally acceptable, doing so for one's birth parents, especially one's birth mother, is already a much more complex path<sup>9</sup>. Yet, as Brown and Roby have argued, adoption-related trafficking occurs perhaps much more frequently with birth parents as the victims, particularly birth mothers, than with the adopted children as the victims. They advocate using the term "birth mother trafficking" to identify these situations (2016). But, generally speaking, the experiences of birth mothers, when they are able to communicate them, remain abstract, sometimes inaudible. Julie, for instance, after having found her mother was angry at her for 14 years before she could admit that she was not responsible for her "abandonment". Once again, if they do not acquaint themselves further with Romania's history while at the same time still confronting themselves with the consequences of its natalist policies, some respondents do not fully perceive their totalitarian character, the clutching grasp they exerted on bodies, sexuality, conjugality, professional trajectories, or health of their biological mothers. It is however this historical, social, economic, and political context that made their birth and their commodification possible. It determines their pre-adoptive history. It is therefore by mobilizing and articulating the elements of their personal and collective history that some of the respondents (such as Julie) managed to shed the myth of their biological mother's choice to abandon them (Patton, 2000).

### *In the absence of collective political narratives on irregular adoption*

Irregular adoption has received increased attention in recent years. Social scientists and international organizations have been documenting the "grey zones" of ICA (Boéchat and Fuentes, 2012). But if its irregularities are now more visible, it is largely due to the activist work undertaken in few countries traumatized by practices of child commodification and crimes against humanity. For example, in Argentina, Spain, and Chile, countries confronted with the appropriation of children of disappeared detainees and political opponents, and with violent forms of identity suppression, political narratives relating to the "right to identity" or the "right to know one's origins" have emerged and spread in public opinion (Salvo Agolia and Alfaro Monsalve, 2019; San Román and Rotabi, 2019; Villalta, 2010; Marre, 2009). In France, a quite different context from those mentioned, no comparable movement has been observed. Irregular adoption is not constituted yet as a

social issue. Despite the media coverage of irregular adoption cases and the fascination they arouse, despite the visibility offered by social networks, despite the recent filing of a complaint against an adoption agency by adoptees of Malian origin, French adoptees who were adopted in irregular conditions do not have collective political narratives through which to grasp their trajectories and to go beyond their individual and familial experiences.

The Argentine, Spanish, and Chilean examples show how collectives of people have created theoretical and practical frameworks to document and understand the effects of irregular adoption (domestic and international), and to obtain legal recognition for the harms suffered. In particular, social scientists have observed, in these contexts, the collective strategies deployed to politicize kinship ties and origins (Gesteira, 2014a; 2014b). In France, even though there are many associations of adopted persons, on the one hand, the voice of victims of irregular processes remains little heard and on the other hand questions of kinship seem to resist any politicization and collective redefinition<sup>10</sup>. Thus, what in the countries mentioned is now expressed and defined in terms of rights, in France continues to be defined mainly in terms of needs<sup>11</sup>. The adoptive experience and the kinship relationships it implies are mainly analyzed and/or interpreted as individual psychological issues. In practice, the ethnographic data collected confirm that the non-politicization and psychologization of adoptive experiences reinforce the isolation of adoptees and their difficulties in considering the irregularities of which they have been victims.

## Conclusion

The perspective argued in this text is that a deep comprehension and a subjective ownership of the conditions which made their adoptive trajectories possible by the individuals born and adopted in Romania in the 1980s and 1990s, pertain to the practice of reparation—complementary, of course, to other practices (such as collective or individual legal action, activism, and peer sharing). The anthropological approach offers the possibility to put in perspective private issues in light of collective issues. It offers a space for speech where singular narratives can be uttered and heard, where counternarratives can take shape and substitute themselves to pre-existing narratives—whether these narratives are administrative, legal, familial, journalistic, or sometimes even historical. The usefulness of the anthropological approach, both in a perspective of a critical study of adoption and reparation, resides in the fact that it can contribute to a fair reallocation of responsibilities pertaining to practices of child appropriations in Romania and to alleviate the suffering they have engendered.

Given the complexity of the adoptive situations described, which refer to the conditions in which the persons were born and the conditions in which they were adopted, it is necessary to apprehend concomitantly the effects of a specific natalist policy and the effects of massive and deregulated adoption practices in a given period. Thus, in addition to the investigation initiated, it seems relevant to undertake in-depth research. In practice, it is about collecting the testimonies of these adoptees and systematically gathering their experiences on a large scale in order to “make their own stories historical” (Ceniza Choy,

2013). But it is also about collecting the testimonies of their adoptive parents, of their parents and siblings by birth, and jointly analyzing these different registers of experience and discourse—which is the purpose of my next research.

### Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Agence Nationale de la Recherche.

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### Notes

1. As part of a postdoctoral contract at the French National Centre for Scientific Research (ANR ORIGINES).
2. The transfer of Romanian children abroad for adoption was a component of Ceausescu's foreign policy toward the West. In 1987, Ceausescu interrupted the ongoing procedures (Denéchère, 2013).
3. Categorization used under Ceausescu to designate institutionalized children with physical, cognitive, and/or psychic disabilities.
4. All information that could identify the subjects of this study has been altered.
5. A common practice in a country where institutionalization was common place for children due to the natalist policies carried out: "institutionalization did not mean the severing of family ties" (Légaut, 2009: 82).
6. Yet it was rather clear that he was not ignoring them.
7. In a context where physical violence toward women was largely accepted.
8. In the words of Kim: "hegemonic narratives of rescue and opportunity" (2010: 8).
9. My research shows that birth siblings should also be considered as victims—a future contribution will explore this issue.
10. However, we are certainly at the dawn of a paradigm shift due to debates within some associations.
11. If the need of adopted persons to know their origins is admitted, and if there exists in France a legal framework recognizing this right (as foreseen by the international conventions on adoption and children's rights), the entities supposed to facilitate its exercise remain ineffective, and adoptees have little recourse to them.

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