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Race and the Violence of Love:
Family and Nation in U.S. Adoptions from Asia

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Ethnic Studies

by

Kit Myers

Committee in charge:

Professor Yen Le Espiritu, Chair
Professor Denise Ferreira da Silva, Co-Chair
Professor Rosemary Marangoly George
Professor Natalia Molina
Professor K. Wayne Yang

2013
The dissertation of Kit Myers is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Co-Chair

______________________________________________________
Chair

University of California, San Diego

2013
DEDICATION

For my adoptive and birth families.
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VITA

2006 B.S., Ethnic Studies & Journalism, University of Oregon
2009 M.A., Ethnic Studies, University of California, San Diego
2008-2009 Teaching Assistant, Department of Ethnic Studies, University of California, San Diego
2010-2011 Teaching Assistant, Thurgood Marshall College Writing Program, University of California, San Diego
2009-2010 Summer Graduate Teaching Fellowship, University of California, San Diego
2011 Lecturer, Department of Ethnic Studies, University of California, San Diego
2011-2012 Barbara & Paul Saltman Excellent Teaching Award for Graduate Students, University of California, San Diego
2012 Ph.D., Ethnic Studies, University of California, San Diego

PUBLICATIONS

(Forthcoming) “‘Real’ Families: Love and Violence in New Media Adoption Discourse,” Critical Discourse Studies. Winter 2014.


FIELDS OF STUDY

Critical ethnic studies; Adoption and family studies; Asian American studies; History; Race and law
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Race and the Violence of Love:
Family and Nation in U.S. Adoptions from Asia

by

Kit Myers

Doctor of Philosophy in Ethnic Studies

University of California, San Diego, 2013

Professor Yen Le Espiritu, Chair
Professor Denise Ferreira da Silva, Co-Chair

My dissertation is about the violence of love in transnational/racial adoptive family-making. I define adoption and any statement affirming adoption as “love”—or more specifically a loving act, statement, or possibility—that operates at the personal and familial; agency and industry; and legal and trans/national levels. But I also show how past and present transnational/racial adoptions from Asia to the United States are imbricated in hidden or unmarked structural-historical, representational, and traumatic violence. My project answers the questions: How is “love” defined and employed by the
various actors—adoptive parents, adoption agencies, and the state—who are involved in transnational/racial adoptions? What role does racial difference play in adoptive family-making? How is adoption a “violent” act? More specifically, how are constructions of il/legible and il/legitimate families shaped by adoption discourse, structures, and practices in the United States? Each chapter of Race and the Violence of Love examines a different site of knowledge production about the transnational/racial adoptive family. Through archival, legal, new media, and ethnographic methods, I analyze positive adoption language and social scientific studies; legal discourse and practice; popular adoption discourse through blogs and their comments; and birth culture and adoptee summer camps.

I make two claims to position how the “violence of love” relates to and functions in adoptive family-making: 1) Adoption professionals and social scientists, government officials, the public, and adoptive parents have imagined and applied the concept of love in personal, symbolic, and (neo)liberal legal ways that transgressed normative biological, same-race, and same-nation kinship. These forms of love have been used to normalize transnational/racial adoption as a form of freedom from violence and “in the best interest,” where U.S. adoptive families and the United States are the better family and nation in relation to the birth family and nation (or what I call “opposite” future) for the child in need. 2) Such adoption representations and practices, however, are simultaneously and differently attached to intersecting and overlapping forms of structural-historical, representation, and traumatic violence that happen before, after, and outside of transnational/racial adoption. In other words, Race and the Violence of Love interrogates the configuration of the adoptive family as transgressive and non-normative
but also the site for which racial and gendered subjects and global geographies as well as the idea of normative families and motherhood are simultaneously reconsolidated. The implications of this research include embracing adoption and family as non-normative and considering the generative possibilities of examining the violence of love within adoptive-family in relation to other sites of family and the “home” that exist such as childhood, marriage, im/migration, domestic work, nursing, and surrogacy.
INTRODUCTION

But love is not merely an interpersonal event, nor is it merely the site at which politics has its effects. Love is a political event.
—Elizabeth Povinelli, Empire of Love

Today I believe in the possibility of love; that is why I endeavor to trace its imperfections, its perversions.
—Franz Fanon, Black Skin White Mask

The representation and practice of transnational/racial adoption have become increasingly popular sites of inquiry and critique in the context of liberal multiculturalism and a supposedly post-racial America, where boundaries of blood, race, culture, and nation can be “transgressed.” It is an alternative (non-biological) form of family-making that is steeped in the concept of love. At the same time, transnational/racial adoption is a highly political process imbricated in a global-historical web of meaning, structures, and practice. This interrelatedness points to Povinelli’s quote above. Love cannot exist solely at the interpersonal level. Indeed, transnational/racial adoptions show how the loving act of adoption carries and engenders more than a new adoptive family. Transnational/racial adoption points to the dynamics of how identity, subjectivity, and family are shaped by race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation. Transnational/racial adoption can also be a site for transgression and transformation of these social categories and systems that constitute and shape adoption, gesturing toward “new geographies of kinship” and a “new global family.” Yet, there is strong understanding that transnational/racial adoptions

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1 I use the term transnational/racial adoption to denote U.S.-Asia adoptions, which I explain in my methods section.
simultaneously reproduce those hierarchical normative meanings and structures. Hence, my dissertation contributes another layer of discernment by examining different types of adoption knowledge production—such as adoption language, scientific studies, legal discourse, and adoptee pedagogy—to outline how transnational/racial adoption is situated as complex means of family formation.

The general sentiment within adoption discourse is that adoption practices have experienced a revolution in the last part of the twentieth century, moving from secrecy to openness; stigma to acceptance; white children only to children of all colors; and replacing old habits with new ones. Although there had been some poor practices beforehand, they appear to have improved. Buttressing this linear, teleological narrative of adoption is supporters’ optimistic belief that transnational/racial adoption is a loving act for which the overall good of providing a permanent home to a child in need exceeds any potential or actual harm. Yet critics of transnational/racial adoption indicate a host of reasons why the revolution thesis is abundantly problematic, pointing to the ways in which imperialism, paternalism, capitalistic exploitation, and corruption drive this uneven movement of bodies and stratification of global relationships. Further, many adoptees also experience issues of identity, belonging, and longing for the past and/or birth family. Critical scholars also use transnational/racial adoption as a productive lens to examine the cultural economy and geo-political relationships of adoption. However, they have

3 Pertman, Adoption Nation, 2000. One article in The New York Times highlights the recent changes: “[A]doption has evolved from a secretive, closed process weighed down by dark stigmas and painful misconceptions into an infinitely more transparent experience…. Where once children hid their adoption from friends, if they even knew of it, adopted children today can belong to play groups made up entirely of adopted children. They can buy storybooks about being adoption, go to summer camps for children adopted from particular foreign countries…. In some cities, like New York, San Francisco and Boston, playgrounds are peppered with parents of various races and nationalities chasing children of other races.” Esther B. Fein, “Secrecy and Stigma No Longer Clouding Adoptions” The New York Times, October 25, 1998, pg. 1. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.
sometimes removed themselves from having a stake in the material outcome of adoption, claiming that their interest lies mainly in its utility as an example of a larger phenomenon.\textsuperscript{4} I contend that while proponents oftentimes discounted the violent aspects of adoption, critiques of transnational/racial adoption, though generative, seemed to miss the complexity of lived experiences and the love and joy that adoption created for the majority of adoptees and adoptive families.

In addition to the beleaguered and reductionist frame of Asian transnational/racial adoptions as either undeniably good or inherently problematic, there is the fact that in many ways, adoption is still stigmatized.\textsuperscript{5} The growth in transnational/racial adoption has only made this reality even more visible for adoptees and adoptive families. Misconceptions, stigmatization, and negative attitudes about adoption in general, and transnational/racial adoption in particular—that they are “less than,” “second choice,” and violate or do not match traditional (racial) family structures—have produced a “symbolic crisis” and “battleground” for adoptive parents and families.\textsuperscript{6} Indeed, this applied to my own experiences as a transnational/racial adoptee growing up in rural Oregon. I had a difficult time trying to reconcile my own experiences of being loved and feeling “less than”—such that I have to justify my belonging and family structure—on

\textsuperscript{4} Eng states that he does “not want to be construed as either an advocate or adversary of transnational adoption.” Instead he uses transnational adoption to contemplate the “ethics of multiculturalism” and the “new global family.” Eng, \textit{The Feeling of Kinship}, 97. See also Cheng, \textit{Sentimental Journey}, 2007. This “problem” a common theme that has arisen in many academic conferences in which a scholar, whose primary work is not on adoption, inevitably gets put onto an adoption panel.

\textsuperscript{5}\textit{Adoption in America}, Ed. Carp, 2002: 2 and Pertman, \textit{Adoption Nation}. Many scholars have underscored news and entertainment media’s role in not just reflecting but also developing and reinforcing negative perceptions about adoption, \textit{National Adoption Attitudes Survey}, 2002; Creedy, “Community must Unite if Perception of Adoption is to Change,” 2001; Fisher, “Still ‘Not quite as Good as having Your Own’?” 2003; Kline, Karel, and Chatterjee, “Covering Adoption,” 2006; Waggenspack, “The Symbolic Crisis of Adoption,” 1998.

\textsuperscript{6} Waggenspack, “The Symbolic Crisis of Adoption” and Suter, Reyes, and Ballard, “Adoptive Parents’ Framing of Laypersons’ Conception of Family,” 2011.
top of the larger and highly uneven cultural, economic, and political relationships that produced adoptive families, including my own. At stake then is the oversimplification of transnational/racial adoption that champions it without critique or condemns it beyond repair. Thus my research draws from critical ethnic and adoption studies that have charted how American liberalism and Cold War politics and practices of anti-Communism, imperialism, war, and militarism engendered new types of adoption and racial formations. It contributes to these fields by spotlighting the discursive, ideological, and structural aspects of transnational/racial adoption. Moreover, it differs from previous critical studies that condemn it beyond repair by also examining the lived experiences and familial relationships of adoptees and adoptive families. Together, my considerations of the discursive, ideological and structural as well as the lived and familial help me to examine the unequal representations, structures, and relationships that are fastened to and (re)produced by adoption.

My dissertation explores how race, love, and violence converge in family-making with specific regard to transnational/racial adoption. By situating my research within the broad, interdisciplinary fields of critical ethnic and adoption studies, I attend to the complexity of family-making and lived experiences while also critiquing the discourse and structure of adoption. Fanon’s quote in the epigraph is important because it suggests that love is so powerful that we must interrogate love and not take it for granted. My interest in love lies in its possibilities yet overlapping relationship with violence. This dissertation then takes seriously Fanon’s belief in and analytical affinity of love. I

reframe transnational/racial adoption as both a loving and violent act that happens at personal, institutional, and national levels. Thus, I developed the framework of the “violence of love”—meaning that love is constantly operating in transnational/racial adoption but that various types of violence are simultaneously and differently attached to it—as a critical lens to complicate adoptive family-making. Specifically, this framework examines the configuration of the adoptive family as non-normative but also the site for which racial and gendered subjects and geographies as well as the idea of normative families and motherhood are simultaneously reconsolidated.

The following questions drive this project: How is “love” defined and employed by the various actors—adoptive parents, adoption agencies, and the state—who are involved in transnational/racial adoptions? What role does racial difference play in adoptive family-making? How is adoption a “violent” act? More specifically, how were constructions of il/legible and il/legitimate families shaped by adoption discourse, structures, and practices in the United States? My questions prioritize race, love,

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9 While distinctive in their own rights, I generally understand and employ race and gender as intersecting and relational social constructions that emerge in specific social, cultural, legal, historical, global contexts. While not biological essences, their meanings are often ascribed to biology in “arbitrary” ways (for the purposes of maintaining power it is not arbitrary). They are formed through social processes of racialization and gendering in which race and gender produce group assignment, separation, and ranking. (Although Silva argues that subjects emerge as racial and thus cannot be “racialized.”) Race and gender, as social constructs, are constantly made, remade, and transformed. Thus, they are the intelligible effects of discourse that are sedimented in modern representation and social institutions in ubiquitous and invisible ways. Importantly, the constructions of race and gender produces stratification, where whiteness and males are privileged, allocating unevenly power, prestige, rewards, resources, and life chances. See Omi and Winant, Racial Formations, 1994; Silva, Toward a Global Idea of Race; Lorber, Paradoxes of Gender, 1995; Butler, Gender Trouble, 1990. A critical racial and gender analysis allows me, among other things, to interrogate representations, structures, and contexts that claim to be race or gender neutral but are in fact operate based on these ideas. I also do not interpret these social categories as separate formation but as intersecting such that race, gender, sexuality, nation and other social categories interact to shape multiple and simultaneous dimensions of experience, identity, and inequality. See Collins, “Toward a New Vision,” 2003 and Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins,” 1995.
violence, adoption, and family formation, but the configurations of subjectivity—in particular motherhood and orphan/adoptive—and nation are also vital in my inquiry and argument.

Hence, my dissertation foregrounds both the structural and ideological aspects of transnational/racial adoption and how adoptive families understand and negotiate their familial relationships. I frame transnational/racial adoption as a loving act and possibility by adoptive families, adoption agencies, and the state, where these actors imagined and employed individual, institutional, and legal liberal love that both contested and reproduced notions of the ideal (normative) family. I ground my study of adoption and family-making in Asia-U.S. transnational/racial adoption. Indeed, such adoptions during the mid-twentieth century challenged and expanded the pool of “adoptable” children and the very meaning of family for the American nation-state, adoption agencies, and white adoptive families. Yet, I show how these past and present adoptions are imbricated in—by virtue of emerging from as well as effacing and engendering after the fact—symbolic and material racial violence. For example, the violence that precedes the “event” of adoption—such as that of war and imperialism, global capitalism, and structural forms of racial and gendered oppression—is important to consider because it in fact produces the “need” for adoption. I also consider the ways in which violence can be generated after adoption by the adoptive family or even the adoptee, either discursively in representation or through specific practices such as encouraged assimilation, rejection of the past, and/or embracement of superficial notions of culture.

Through archival, legal, new media, and ethnographic analysis, I examine adoption language, scientific studies, laws, blogs, summer camps, and interviews to
explore the socio-cultural, political-economic, and global-historical formations of family, subjectivity, and nation. My dissertation makes two claims: First, I argue that white adoptive parents, along with adoption and state agencies, imagined and applied the concept of love in private and institutional ways that aimed to transcend race and the stigmatization of adoptive families. For white couples, transnational/racial adoption constituted a way to create a family (beyond normative biological kinship structures), and for the nation-state, these adoptions represented a “post-racial” liberal democracy and a “better future.” Second, I contend that efforts to promote such families in a positive manner as “normal,” “legitimate,” and “just as good,” or even “better than” biological ones are not just loving acts but also imbricated in a violence that effaces the past and provokes yet ignores new types of violence in the present. These liberal humanistic representations and practices pertaining to Asia-U.S. transnational/racial adoption are shaped by and interact with neoliberal policies as well as global-historical formations of race and gender. In particular, I argue that the configuration of these adoptions and families are interlaced with three types of violence (which I also explain more in depth below): structural-historical violence by the state and other institutions and organizations related to adoption, representational (or symbolic) violence references adoption discourse and imagery that attempt to fix meaning, and traumatic violence that can exist sporadically in everyday life and is connected to “unknowable” and “unspeakable” pasts. The confluence of individual acts, adoption knowledge production, and structural practices by adoptive parents, adoption professionals, and the state has engendered violent effects in their attempts to normalize and narrowly define motherhood and family.
They also simultaneously have reinscribed the uneven and racialized hierarchy of the United States vis-à-vis Asian nations.

The dichotomous adoption debate mystifies a fundamental belief put forth by legal scholar Patricia Williams and social theorist Avery Gordon that *life is complicated*. Although transnational/racial adoption supposedly exists on a teleological trajectory, adoptive parents and the public continue to dismiss the past and possible meaningful connections to birth family, which reproduces (or at least attempts to) the adoptive family within the ideal norm. This move reinscribes the family and nation, endangering the being and coexistence of adoptees, birth parents, and adoptive parents along with their respective and overlapping families/communitys. Not only is the past foreclosed from being brought into the present but possibilities for the future are also prohibited. Thus the last part of my dissertation considers alternative ways of imagining adoption. For example, I look at the adoptee community, adoptee identity, and adoptive family that materialize in a new type of adoption summer camp. This *sui generis* camp employs a critical adoptee pedagogy, which works to, as trauma theorist Jenny Edkins suggests, “encircle”\(^\text{10}\) the violence of love and engage the complexity of adoption by giving space for adoptees to imagine non-normative family formations.

This project believes that rather than holding on to an ideal conception of the nuclear adoptive family as solely a thing of love we need to recognize and engage the violence. Adoption is inherently a violent process, one in which the problem of violence cannot be “solved.” But acknowledging, confronting, and encircling violence is a strategy that allows the past to exist and intermingle with the present and future so that its

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\(^{10}\) Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, 2003: 15, 57.
disavowal through negation, foreclosure, and engulfment are not the first and only options. Again, what is at stake for my project is not the need to decipher whether transnational/racial adoptions are “good” or “bad” but to analyze how race, love, and violence have mutually constituted the fortification of racial subjects, geo-political spaces, and family formation.

**Historical Background: The United States and Asia**

Although adoption in the United States formally began in the mid-19th century when Massachusetts enacted the first adoption related law in 1851, the history of transracial and transnational adoptions in the United States begins with post-World War II and especially the 1950s. Similar to other social institutions and areas of society, adoption for children of color was segregated or completely ignored. The New York State Charities Aid Association expanded its adoption services to African American children in 1939. Within the next decade, adoption practices shifted to more generally address all children in need of families and homes. In 1948, *Child Welfare*, a prominent journal for social workers, declared: “We find over the country a growing conviction, translated into practice, that the color of a child’s skin, the texture of his hair, or the slant of his eyes in no way affects his basic needs or the relation of his welfare to that of the total community.”

Transnational/racial adoption from Asia began in the 1950s in the context of American liberalism, post-war prosperity and domesticity, and Cold War politics with

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11 Although, as Briggs and Marre note, transnational adoptions in Europe began in the 1930s and 1940s when countries took in children affected by the Nazis and Franco. Briggs and Marre, *International Adoption*, 2009: 3. This does not include the informal “adoption” via indentured labor and boarding schools that Native American so many children experienced.

12 *Adoption in America*, Ed. Carp, 14.
Asia. Thus it emerged from war and the unequal geographies of power that produced a gendered history of military violence. Earlier attempts to help children affected by war were rebuffed. In 1939, a congressional effort to allow for the fostering and adoption of 20,000 children from Germany and German-occupied areas never made it out of committee. The Displaced Persons Act, passed in 1948, was the first successful bill, which permitted 4,065 “orphans” to enter the United States. By this time, the United States had developed a military presence in South Korea, setting in motion the largest overseas adoption program in the world. In the years following the Armistice Agreement of the Korean War in 1953, mostly white American families adopted illegitimate mixed-race “G.I. babies” (also known as Amerasians) and Korean children. In 1955, Congress passed the “Relief of certain Korean war orphans” bill, a private law commonly known as the “Holt Bill.” This law allowed Harry and Bertha Holt, two Oregon residents inspired by the evangelical Christian organization World Vision, to adopt six Korean children in addition to the two that they were adopting through the broad Refugee Relief Act. Bertha Holt garnered national media attention for her quick and strong lobbying effort to Congress that eventually led to the passage of the bill. A year later, the Holts established the Holt Adoption Program. That same year Pearl S.

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13 Briggs and Marre, *International Adoption; Eng, Feeling of Kinship; Kim, Adopted Territory; and Pate, Genealogies of Korean Adoption*, 2011.
14 This was in large part because anti-Semitism, fearing that the “refu-Jew” children would take “American” jobs. Briggs and Marre, *International Adoption*, 4.
15 SooJin Pate argues that the emergence of Korean adoptions must be resituated to the moment of U.S. military occupation in 1945 rather than seen as an unfortunate effect of the Korean War. Pate, *Genealogies of Korean Adoption*.
Buck’s Welcome House opened to overseas adoption for “Eurasian” and “Amerasian” children as well.\textsuperscript{17} Their efforts influenced other families across the nation to participate in the previously nonexistent and taboo practice of adopting across racial and national lines. The passage of this bill, coupled with the sanctioned increase of transnational/racial adoptions from Asia, suggests a strategic shift in the conceptualization of the “American family.”\textsuperscript{18} Korean adoptions rapidly expanded in the 1970s, paving the way for other types of transnational/racial adoptions.\textsuperscript{19}

Near the end of the Vietnam War, the South Vietnamese, international troops, and aid organizations were trying to evacuate before the imminent fall/liberation of Saigon. On April 2, 1975, in the midst of U.S. military and aid evacuation, President Gerald Ford implemented “Operation Babylift” to rescue some of the estimated one million “orphans” out of Vietnam.\textsuperscript{20} International aid organizations in Vietnam, such as Holt International Children’s Services, Friends of Children of Viet Nam, Friends For All Children, Catholic Relief Service, International Social Services, International Orphans, and the Pearl S. Buck Foundation helped to evacuate nearly 2,000 children to the United States and 600 children to Canada, Europe, and Australia.\textsuperscript{21} Both Korean and Vietnamese adoptions were considered controversial because of their unregulated nature, and the orphan status of children was often in question, especially for Operation Babylift. Moreover, many critics were unsure whether the children would be better off living in the United States as

\begin{footnotes}
\item[19] Kim, \textit{Adopted Territory}, 4.
\item[21] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
opposed to being raised in their country of birth. The continuation of overseas adoptions from Korea for supposedly “economic orphans” after the “moment of crisis” has made many critics postulate that they are used as a “quick fix” “surrogate welfare system” that simultaneously decreases state responsibility and increases the influx of foreign capital. Korean adoptions have declined since 1989, when the Korean government declared that it would eventually halt overseas adoptions. By 1994, the focus had shifted to decreasing transnational adoptions in favor of promoting domestic adoptions. Yet, today it still has one of the highest per capita totals, and Korean adoptees represent 10 percent of the Korean American population.

Adoptions from China began in significant numbers in the early 1990s, when the Chinese government began creating an infrastructure that would facilitate these adoptions. While some have critiqued the move as a capitalistic effort to export its children for profit, the increase in capital was again a way to fund and rebuild child welfare institutions and orphanages. The dramatic increase was also in large part due to the 1991 national adoption law. It restricted adoptions to parents who were childless and over the age of 35 years old, which was used to prevent families from using adoption as a loophole to the one-child policy. While this law was revised in 1999, China still sent

22 Kim, *Ends of Empire*, 203; Briggs and Marre, *International Adoption*, 7; Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 20-21. Harry Holt, a pioneer of adoptions from Korea, was opposed by professional social workers for his unregulated and unorthodox placement methods, which only required that the adoptive parents be Christian.

23 Children who were economic orphans were relinquished because of high poverty and lack of social services. Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 24-25, 32-34.

24 Peter Hayes and Hyang-Eun Kim, “Openness in Korean Adoptions, 2008: 54. This focus on domestic adoption and increase in numbers and public visibility turns upside down the belief that Asian societies do not care for these abandoned children. Additionally, their article shows how social practices for adoption are slowly becoming more open to emphasize less the symbolic idea of family line.


thousands of children overseas. U.S. families have adopted more than 81,000 children from China, making it the largest sending country by constituting 26.5 percent of all transnational adoptions during that time period. For a long time China has been perceived positively in the transnational/racial adoption industry with a strong record of transparency and an uncorrupt supply of healthy infants. This was in contrast to countries such as Cambodia, Guatemala, India, Nepal, or Vietnam, which have been riddled with scandal and placed on temporary or permanent moratorium within the last twenty years because of known or suspected abuses and corruption. What has emerged is a representation of China as efficient and safe but this also buttresses the image of China as a cold, patriarchal, and human rights violating Communist nation. To be sure, representations of China, Cambodia, Korea, India, and Vietnam follow a similar racial and cultural logic as spaces of poverty, immorality, ineptness, cultural backwardness, and/or Communism. I contend in chapter two that the existing racial representations situate Asian families and nations as opposite from their Western counterparts, which signifies and reaffirms American families and Western nations as the better future and in the best interest of the child.

Transnational/racial adoptions from Asia by white parents continue to outnumber other forms of transracial and transnational adoptions. Their popularity corresponded

27 Ibid., 388-90.
28 From 1992-2011 the top sending countries after China (81,219) are Russia (60,369; 19.7 percent), Guatemala (33,672; 11.0 percent), South Korea (30,680; 10.0 percent), Ethiopia (11,930; 3.9 percent), Ukraine (9,566; 3.1 percent), India (7652; 2.5 percent), and Vietnam (7,630; 2.5 percent). Compiled by me. See {{772 The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute 2013}} and {{672 U.S. Department of State 2013}}. Additionally, at least 10,000 children from China have been adopted by other countries since 1992.
30 Indeed, the representation of China in intercountry adoption discourse significantly overlaps with the configuration of Asian immigrants as the hardworking model minority and deviant threat. See Lee, Orientals, 1999.
with the success of the adoptees’ rights movement, which demanded adoptees access to their personal history through open adoption records which consequently pushed for open adoptions. In the last twenty years more than 306,000 children have been adopted internationally by American parents; 45 percent are from Asian countries. They have also provided a way for heterosexual and increasingly gay and lesbian couples as well as singles to form their own families in a way that reaffirms conventional structures of family. This rapid growth in transnational/racial adoption also increased in social visibility that is now reflected in commercials, television shows, and films. Despite the recent decline in U.S. transnational adoptions from over 23,000 in 2004, to 9,300 in 2011, the United States still adopts more than three times the number of other top receiving countries such as France (3,019) and Italy (3,106). Additionally, the symbolic significance of Asian transnational/racial adoptions is greater than annual or even aggregate numbers suggest. It is from this demographic and historical context that I use Asian transnational/racial adoptions to think about race, specifically “Asian” vis-à-vis the “West,” as a global-historical formation that informs the ways we think about, discuss, and practice such adoptions.

Adoption Studies: Color-blind Love, (Neo)liberalism, and Freedom

31 Confidentiality began in the 1910s and 1920s and meant that adoption records were no longer public but only available to parties of interest (birth parents, adoptee, and adoptive parents). Sealing records, which became standard practice by World War II, is the practice of creating “new” original birth certificates and sealing all birth records so that even adoptees do not have access. By the 1970s, the adoptee rights’ movement began, and in 1998, Oregon was the first state to pass an Open Records law. Adoption in America, Ed. Carp, 2; Herman, Kinship by Design, 62-64; Pertman, Adoption Nation, 42; Kim, Adopted Territory, 26.
32 Eng, Feeling of Kinship, 94. Gay and lesbian couples are allowed to adopt in one-third of European Union countries and South Africa. Briggs and Marre, International Adoption, 19.
34 Dorow, Transnational Adoption, 10 and Herman, Kinship by Design, 5.
Adoption studies is a field that is difficult to outline because it is an interdisciplinary subject of study. Rapid increase in transnational/racial adoption since the 1980s and 1990s has led to the proliferation of non-academic literature on Korea and China adoptions and transnational/racial adoptions in general including children’s books, “how-to” manuals, and personal memoirs by adoptive parents. Multiple generations of transnational/racial adoptees, especially Korean adoptees, have also come of age in the last fifteen years and have registered their own experiences through memoirs and documentary film. * Recently perspectives and stories of birth mothers have also been added to adoption literature. In academic discourse, psychology and social work have a long history in adoption literature through their “outcome studies” on adopted children, adoptive parents, and, to a lesser degree, birth parents. Legal scholarship has also had a large influence on the transnational/racial adoption debate because adoption is governed by federal and varying state laws but also guided by the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption. In addition, disciplinary and interdisciplinary scholarship has found transnational adoption as a productive site to engage adoption specific issues and

35 In addition, some of the transnational/racial adoption literature overlaps with domestic transracial adoption literature.
* There are numerous other adoption documentaries that have been made by adoptive parents, various media outlets, and adoption organizations. They range from repeating the dominant narratives of adoption as rescue to challenging the fixity and historicity of adoption. See for example, Stuck, 2013 and Somewhere Between, 2013.
38 Han, Dreaming a World, 2010 and Xinran, Message from an Unknown Chinese Mother, 2012.
larger questions such as race, gender, family, and the nation; culture and identity; belonging and queer diasporas; and imperialism, Cold War politics, and biopolitics.39

My discussion of adoption studies focuses on how transnational/racial adoption has represented and served the projects of liberalism and neoliberalism in order to show the ways in which these philosophies and structures are connected to the violence of love in adoptive family formation. Recent scholars have provided insightful critiques that demystify how liberalism and neoliberalism allow, reproduce, or depend on inequality. Chandan Reddy argues, with his conceptualization of “freedom with violence,” that emancipation granted by the state is always connected to naturalized state-sanctioned violence, and Elizabeth Povinelli adds that liberalism is the normative horizon for freedom and equality, where it stands as the perceptible limit for what can and should be done to produce “just” outcomes.40 For domestic transracial adoption, liberalism reveals itself through color-blind ideology, which has become the normative limit for which adoption becomes the primary social solution to the large foster care population of mostly black and Latino children. A color-blind individualistic approach posits that (transracial) adoption is about “individual choice”41 and “making a family,” which should not be concerned with race or “group rights.”42 Many legal and social work scholars who strongly support domestic transracial adoption have embraced “liberal” color-blind

39 See Briggs, Somebody’s Children; Herman, Kinship by Design; Adoption in America, Ed. Carp; Melosh, Strangers and Kin; Berebitsky, Like Our Very Own, 2000; Dorow, Transnational Adoption; Kim, Adopted Territory; Outsiders Within, Eds. Trenka, Oparah, and Shin, 2006; Tuan & Shiao, Choosing Ethnicity, Negotiating Race, 2011; Klein, Cold War Orientalism; Eng, Feeling of Kinship, Kim, Ends of Empire.
41 Kennedy, Interracial Intimacies, 2003: 435. Also see Bartholet, “Correspondence: Private Race Preferences in Family Formation” 1998 and Simon and Altstein, Adoption Across Borders, 150.
42 See Peter Hayes, “Transracial adoption: Politics and Ideology,” 1993. Hayes argues that critiques against domestic transracial adoption are based on the ideology that group rights are greater than individual rights (305).
individualism, which emerged in the 1990s and continues to this present moment, especially at the legal and policy levels.\textsuperscript{43}

This policy was significantly bolstered by social scientific research studies, mainly in the fields of psychology and social work, which stated that transnational/racial adoptions do no harm. Research “experts” using individualized “outcome studies” on both domestic and transnational transracial adoptions have focused on the adjustment and integration of adoptees during the post-adoption stage by gauging the healthiness of self-esteem and whether or not adoptees possess a “positive ethno-racial identity.” These studies, in addition to their many methodological limits, primarily interpret race as a biological fact and a static, independent variable. Nevertheless, they have helped to create a dominant narrative that adoptees develop normal behavior, high self-esteem, and strong ethno-racial identity when compared to same-race adoptions, which has given fuel to advocate for and justify color-blind adoption policies.\textsuperscript{44} Rita J. Simon argues that two and a half decades’ worth of studies show that such adoptions do not produce harm and are “unequivocally” in the children’s “best interest.”\textsuperscript{45} Supporters who evoke the power of “personal commitment” and love minimize adoptee issues of racial difference, alienation, and racism faced.\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{43} Liberal is in quotes because color-blindness draws on liberal legal developments such as the Fourteenth Amendment and Brown v. Board of Education but it employs race neutrality in way that perpetuates racial inequality. See Gotanda, “A Critique of ‘Our Constitution is Color-blind,’” 1991 and Bonilla-Silva, \textit{Racism Without Racists}, 2009.

\textsuperscript{44} Bartholet, “Commentary,” 2006: 315; Haugaard, “Research and Policy on Transnational Adoption,” 2000; Kennedy, \textit{Interracial Intimacies}; and Simon and Altstein, \textit{Adoption Across Borders}. Even the academic journal, \textit{Adoption Quarterly}, despite its claim to cross disciplines, stays largely within traditional social science, where race is a static variable that is either significant or not.


\textsuperscript{46} Bartholet, “International Adoption: A Child’s Story,” 2007; “[W]hat parentless children need most of all is not someone who looks like them but someone who loves them.” In another example, Adam Pertman, leading expert and director of the Evans B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, says that “virtually
Supporters like Simon argue that race does not (and should not) matter because the overall good of transnational/racial adoption far exceeds the harm of not doing anything.\(^{47}\) Additionally, it has the added benefit of eroding racism. Morrison opens with an epigraph by his father who suggests, “The quickest cure for racism would be to have everyone in the country adopt a child of another race. No matter what your beliefs, when you hold a four-day old infant, love him, and care for him, you don’t see skin color, you see a little person that is very much in need of your love.”\(^{48}\) Following his father’s argument, Morrison claims that transracial adoption would help alleviate racism according to the social contact theory, which states that integration of races will benefit society by decreasing conscious and unconscious racism.\(^{49}\)

Yet critical scholars of domestic transracial adoption deconstruct the liberal color-blind individualistic position by pointing to the contradictions that exist between and within the cooperative relationship between liberalism and neoliberalism. Several scholars have contributed to the critique of neoliberalism as an assembly of domestic and global processes that has dismantled the social welfare state and redistributed forms of equality. Neoliberalism promotes the advancement of open economic borders with free, privatized, and deregulated markets for global corporatism under the guise that it, along with liberalism, helps to create universal subjects of democracy and freedom. While neoliberalism professes to be color-blind and in favor of freedom and meritocracy, it

\(^{47}\) Doing “nothing” of course is not what critics of transracial and transnational adoptions suggest.


depends on the stratification and obfuscation of social categories such as race, gender, class, sexuality, citizenship, and nation. At the domestic level it favors individual freedom and personal responsibility. This is epitomized in the 1996 welfare reform, which operates on the assumption that poor people, who are disproportionately of color, did not want to work and that greater personal responsibility through oftentimes more low-paying work (many people on welfare already had jobs, but they did not provide livable wages) in which they would gain their “freedom.” Neoliberalism also manages the reproduction of the heteronormative white family through the promotion of marriage as a means for greater access to social services and legal immigration entry into the United States.

Neoliberalism appears specifically in the case of domestic (and transnational) transracial adoption through the “liberal” adoption laws that Congress passed in the 1990s, alongside welfare and immigration reform. For example, the Multiethnic Placement Act of 1994, and the Interethnic Adoption Provision of 1996, prohibited the delaying or denial of child placement into a foster or adoptive home based on the race of the child or the prospective parents. The two laws ingrained color-blind ideology into adoption law. The Adoption Tax Credit of 1996 offers a tax credit, not just a tax

53 In 1996, Congress passed the “Illegal Immigrant Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act.” Among other things, they expanded the definition of aggravated felony and criteria for crimes of moral turpitude to include many minor, nonviolent offenses. Based on the myths of immigrant hyper-criminality and overconsuming unearned social services, this law was designed to reduce crime, facilitate deportations, and decrease public welfare payments. Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996, Pub. L. No. 104-208, 110 Stat. 3009-546.
deduction, for qualifying adoption expenses, which has increased from its initial $5,000 amount to $12,650 in 2012.\textsuperscript{54} Lastly, the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, puts time limits on efforts to reunify biological families and elevates adoption as a permanent placement option. Together these laws, under notions of liberalism, were enacted to ensure the “best interest of children” and provide them with permanent, safe, stable, and loving homes. Critical scholars, however, argue in nuanced ways that race and color are embedded in society at the individual, ideological, and institutional levels and thus must not be ignored when considering child placement.\textsuperscript{55} They critique these “race-neutral” adoption laws as neoliberal efforts that privilege white heteronormative families over poor and single parents and families of color. Such laws are problematically seen by adoption supporters as a social solution instead of addressing issues of poverty and racism that separate families of color or prevent parents of color from adopting children in foster care. Doing little to support mothers and families of color, these policies instead facilitate further state intervention at every social or child service “decision point,” which works to move children of color from poor families—who are stereotyped as locked in an intrinsically pathological culture of poverty—to white middle-class families who can “redeem” them.\textsuperscript{56}

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\textsuperscript{56} One study, between 1994 to 2000, showed black and Latino toddlers who were hospitalized for fractured were five times more likely to be evaluated and three times more likely to be reported to child protective services than white toddlers. Roberts, “Adoption Myths and Racial Realities in the United States,” 2006: 51. Also see Briggs, “Orphaning the Children on Welfare” 2006: 76; Ortiz and Briggs, “The Culture of Poverty, Crack Babies, and Welfare Cheats,” 2003; Collins, “Producing the Mothers
Similarly, liberalism and neoliberalism function together within Asian transnational/ racial adoption. Critical adoption scholars disrupt American liberalism and the politics of inclusion in their critiques of humanitarian rescue from war and dire poverty as an effacement of U.S. neocolonial and military involvement. For example, Lisa Cartwright, Eleana Kim, and SooJin Pate argue in different contexts that the humanitarian orphan is a highly mediated, sentimentalized, and militarized figure. They contend that the humanitarian discourse often missed the political-economic conditions that are a root cause of abandonment and the ideological production of the orphan as something abject that must be saved. The production of the adoptee and adoptive family requires liberalism to participate in historical amnesia through foreclosing and negating the global-historical context of U.S. involvement in the Korean and Vietnam wars. Christina Klein and Arissa Oh show that the political and social commitments of the U.S. nation-state, its middlebrow culture, and Christian Americanists to transnational/racial adoption was built on a fictive familial intimacy based on a relationship of love between the U.S. and Asia that portrayed the ability of the U.S. to transcend the boundaries of race, nation, and culture. They argue that this liberal gesture of inclusion into the U.S. national body politic, however, was necessarily premised and founded on

± In a brash move, former California Governor Pete Wilson encouraged welfare mothers to place their children for adoption if they were unable to afford or raise them. Tamar Lewin, “U.S. Is Divided on Adoption, Survey of Attitude Asserts,” New York Times. 9 Nov. 1997. pg. 1.16.


58 Kim, Adopted Territory; Pate, Genealogies of Korean Adoption; and Cartwright, “Images of ‘Waiting Children.’” 2005.

characterizations of the U.S. as morally, economically, and politically superior to China and Korea. Transnational/racial adoption was based on notions of extreme poverty and the moral duty to rescue children along with the overshadowing presence of communism in both situations.\footnote{Klein, \textit{Cold War Orientalism}.}

supply, demand, and coercion or trickery, where lines between adoption and trafficking are blurred and crossed.\textsuperscript{64} The demand is so high that illegal operations have developed,\textsuperscript{65} and the practice is so convoluted that not only are agencies, lawyers, and intermediaries making large profits but so are the people and publishers who write how-to manuals on transnational adoption, which all approach and/or encroach the lines of ethicality.\textsuperscript{66}

Nevertheless, for supporters, transnational/racial adoption provides a clear and loving alternative for the millions of orphans to escape from a doomed life of poverty, of living in the street, barely surviving the trauma of institutional care, or becoming one of the thousands who die each year. Supporters argue that there is little evidence to claims of baby-buying as a significant problem, and that such exploitation is “aberrational.”\textsuperscript{67} The “isolated” incidents of abuse are fueled by “exaggeration and rumors,” especially by “negative” media attention such as newspaper covering stories of scandals, which function only to trigger the closing of the pipeline of adoptable children.\textsuperscript{68} The orphan, in this scenario, is “stuck” as the victim of government regulation.\textsuperscript{69} According to Elizabeth Bartholet, Harvard law professor and one of the most vocal champions of transnational/racial adoption, critics self-righteously condemn and focus solely on what

\textsuperscript{65} Park Nelson, “Shopping for Children in the International Market,” 89.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid. 94-96.
\textsuperscript{67} Bartholet, “International Adoption,” 375.
\textsuperscript{68} Myers, “Preserving the Best Interests of the World's Children,” 813-4 and Bartholet, “International Adoption.” See also McKinney, “International Adoption and the Hague Convention,” 2007. As Laura McKinney states, “The successes of intercountry adoption should not be overshadowed by sensational media coverage of its occasional failures.”
\textsuperscript{69} \textit{Stuck} is a new documentary on the “damaging” effects that regulation has created for waiting orphans and families who want to adopt internationally. \textit{Stuck}. Dir. Thaddaeus Scheel. 2013.
goes wrong and not what typically goes right. In short, the combination of love, liberalism, and neoliberalism in regards to transnational/racial adoption is what enables freedom for orphans and children in Asian countries.

Adoptive parents and adoption proponents also adopt a liberal humanist celebration of culture. This perspective posits that transnational/racial adoptions have improved from their questionable past, where mostly white parents with Korean and Vietnamese children had attempted to retain their white racial and nuclear makeup through deracination, assimilation, and the erasure of heritage and the child’s past. Having learned from their predecessors, adoptive parents today engage rather than ignore these important issues; they take their children to cultural festivals and cultural camps; adoptees befriend children from similar backgrounds with the help of play dates and social networking web sites; more adoptive parents are relocating to more diverse neighborhoods as opposed to isolated rural and suburban areas; and some adoptees have traveled back to visit their country of birth and a small portion have met their birth parents.

Thus color-blind adoption policies are paired with liberal multicultural adoption practices. Lisa Lowe notes that the United States instrumentally deploys the concept of the “cultural” to reconcile inequalities and injustices that the economic and political terrains cannot resolve. Celebrated cultural difference that is aesthetic and non-

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threatening separates and hides the history of violence against “non-Americans.” The imagination that the United States is a melting pot of immigrants, for example, is a well rehearsed genesis myth that imagines the nation as composed of intrepid immigrants. Completely effaced in this melting pot story, or the newer version of multicultural patchwork, are the experiences of people who have come to the United States against their own volition. Liberal multiculturalism, in essence, is a new “universalism” that superficially integrates difference and culture, often operating merely as tokenized actions and moments of inclusion. Its embracement of cultural difference for transnational/racial adoption supposedly demonstrates progress of adoption, but it fails to address broader social and material conditions for not just individuals who are adopted but those who are not adopted; for example birth parents, children left behind, or migrants who are denied entry into the United States, what Ann Anagnost calls the “ghostly doubles” of adoptees. David Eng also makes this point, that the enjoyment of rights to have a family is haunted by queer and diasporic subjects; for example, “unacknowledged lovers, illegal immigrants, indentured laborers, infants left behind” who are at the “margins of globalization” and without “legal claims to family, home, citizenship, or nation.” Consequently, the multicultural move flattens and decontextualizes differences and contradictions by employing pluralism, which supposedly equalizes and democratizes U.S. cultural terrain because of its “inclusive”

74 This would include slaves, trafficked laborers and sex workers, refugees, and adoptees. Additionally, this myth ignores the ways in which indigenous communities are erased.
76 Eng, Feeling of Kinship, 101.
and “proportional” representation but in reality hides and/or “forgets” historical, political, economic violences.\textsuperscript{77}

The issue at hand with the literature from adoption advocates is that it often takes transnational/racial adoption out of its global-historical context and placed into what I call the “local-present” context. This configuration disregards race, presuming it to be insignificant and mystifying the way in which power operates unevenly across subjects, families, and nations. In particular, it privileges love as the guiding principle for successful adoption policy and practice, which enables such adoptions to be individualized (in that they are exclusive from society, i.e. they do not affect and are not affected by society) and flattened or simplified to the extent that they emerge only from a local space (e.g. foster care or orphanages) and a particular time (e.g. in a time of “need” for the child, birth mother, or adoptive parents). Posited as individual, apolitical, and antihistorical, this linear narrative of adoption marks the beginning of an adoptee’s subjectivity as the moment of the adoption, where the middle and end are intricately tied to the adoptive family.\textsuperscript{78}

In sum, my review follows and contributes to critiques of transnational/racial adoption by claiming that the strategic deracination and individualization of freedom and love, brought by liberalism and neoliberalism, efface adoption’s global-historical context.

\textsuperscript{77} Goldberg discusses this too, saying that in the U.S., Brazil, and South Africa commitment to colorblindness is a reiteration to the commitment of whiteness because it silences discussion about everyday racism; it forgets how historical racisms (such as colonialism) affect us today; and it displaces racism solely to the private sphere. Goldberg, \textit{The Racial State}, 2002: 221. Similarly, Howard Winant argues race has taken on new, “cleaned-up” forms of racial ideologies such as color-blindness, multiculturalism, race neutrality, and post-raciality. Winant, \textit{The World is a Ghetto}, 2001: 2, xiv. Guinier and Torres also articulate strong arguments against color-blind ideology, suggesting it is impossible to be color-blind in such a color conscious world. Guinier and Torres, \textit{The Miner’s Canary}, 2003: 42.

\textsuperscript{78} See Myers, “Love and Violence in Transracial/national Adoption,” 2009 in which I contend that adoption discourse individualizes and dehistoricizes transnational/racial adoption.
These accounts of adoption miss the ways in which adoption emerges from, ignores, and
enacts further types of structural-historical, symbolic, and traumatic racial violence. This
review expands our understanding of transnational/racial adoption from a largely
individual, flattened process that supporters articulate to one highly influenced and
affected by racial, gendered, and classed social and political structures. Such adoptions
only address a small group and immediate needs, overlooking and even exacerbating the
underlying “need” for adoption or the high number of orphaned/abandoned children.79 As
the editors of Outsiders Within state, “[T]he real alternative is found in welfare policies
that support poor mothers of color rather than penalizing them, criminal justice policies
that strengthen and heal communities rather than destroying them, and international
policies that prioritize human security over profits.”80 In chapter two I elaborate on how
love, liberalism, and neoliberalism in domestic and international law help reproduce
normative representations of families and nations that signify “opposite futures” for the
orphan, one of freedom and the other of poverty and death.

The Ideal Adoptive Family

While informal adoption has existed for thousands of years, formal, or legal,
adoption in the United States is a modern institution that has historically been stigmatized
as abnormal, inferior, illegitimate, and second-choice, and different.81 Family/kinship and

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79 Wallace, “International Adoption,” 723.
80 Outsiders Within, Ed. Trenka et al. Or as Bergquist argues, we need to question and deconstruct the
inherent hegemonic assumptions transnational/racial adoption as a system that has prioritized parents
and receiving nations over the best interest of the child.” Bergquist, “International Asian Adoption,”
2004. See also Cultures of Transnational Adoption, Ed. Volkman; Briggs, “Making American
Families” and Somebody’s Children; Carter-Black, “Transracial Adoption and Foster Care Placement,”
81 Adoption in America, Ed. Carp; Creedy, “Community must Unite if Perception of Adoption is to
Change”; Fisher, “Still ‘Not quite as Good as having Your Own’?” 2003; Kline et al., “Covering
Adoption”; Waggenspack, “The Symbolic Crises of Adoption.”
adoption are seen as binaries of blood versus fiction\textsuperscript{82} and real/true versus symbolic/constructed. Indeed, adoption is still characterized as legal fiction because the law has to terminate the rights of the birth parents, confer new ones to the adoptive parents, and create a new birth certificate and identity for the child. Thus, at a certain level, any form of adoption could be considered a transgressive act and possibility of love because it challenges the definition of “legitimate” family, which has historically privileged the heterobiological traditional family as constituted and validated by blood ties or descent. In his discussion of the “adoption revolution,” Adam Pertman explains that these foundational pillars of the American family (heteronormative and nuclear) are beginning to give. Single parenting has tripled since the early 1990s, and adoption is no longer monopolized by heterosexual couples and confined to previous notions of the “ideal” family.\textsuperscript{83}

At the same time, however, I contend that many straight \textit{and} gay adoptive families attempt to negate the non-normative structure of adoption by mimicking heteronormativity, i.e. the white middle-class nuclear family, as a means to make their families more legitimate and legible to society.\textsuperscript{84} As Ann Anagnost notes, “[T]he position of parent, for white middle-class subjects, has become increasingly marked as a measure of value, self-worth, and citizenship in ways that began analysis of its specific formations in the context of late-twentieth-century capitalism, which, not incidentally, fuel the desire for adoption as a necessary ‘completion’ for becoming a fully realized subject in

\textsuperscript{82} Fictive kinship usually refers to kinship that is neither by blood nor marriage.

\textsuperscript{83} Pertman, \textit{Adoption Nation}, 238, 290-1.

\textsuperscript{84} See Eng, \textit{Feeling of Kinship} and Dorow and Swiffen, “Blood and Desire,” 364.
American life [emphasis mine].” In the case of transnational/racial adoption, the vast physical distance between the birth country and new home makes reconnection seemingly impossible—and thus that of the possibility of birth parents making any future claims to the adopted child or vice versa. But what are the costs for this desire and move to reject the complex familial structure of adoption?

I turn to a discussion of family because the adoptive family (and knowledge about it) is my primary object of analysis, aside from subject and nation formation. Specifically, I explore how the racial and “love” inform both family formation and transnational/racial adoption. Although adoption expands notions of family from solely blood kinship to adoptive kinship, I contend that transnational/racial adoption discourse and practices—along with state intervention and management—more often than not problematically maintain the nuclear component while reinscribing racial and cultural difference. In other words, adoption’s continued second-tier status, and the insecurity it produces, in relation to the heterobiological family has placed adoptive parents, adoptees, and birth parents in a particular bind that requires violence in order to reaffirm, validate, and legitimate the self, the (multicultural adoptive) family, and the nation on top of the symbolic violence produced by the reification of racial difference.

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86 Of course, transnational/racial adoption is not the only way in which the family changed during the mid-twentieth century. Some of the other changes that have affect the family include the understanding of the social constructions of gender and sexuality along with the changing norms and openness of certain practices, such as rise in divorce, the delay of marriage, the increase in cohabitation, the dislocation of childbirth and marriage, gender roles and egalitarianism, and women’s increased participation in labor and education, has modified how we think about family. In some ways, these changes have been described as the normalization of diversity. Siegetsleitner, “Family, Forms of,” 2006 and Scott, “Family,” 2004.
The nuclear family is the main constitutive element that distinguishes the traditional family from the modern family in Western societies.\textsuperscript{87} This nuclear, modern family was produced by the emergence of capitalism, which liberated the individual and engendered the rise of individuality, “cultural egoism,” and sentiment.\textsuperscript{88} The traditional family, which was closely tied to community, had a functionalist (re)productive role of transmitting property, social status, and lineage from generation to generation. The modern family, however, was characterized by the increased role of expressed sentiment in the family setting.\textsuperscript{89} Indeed, the nuclear family was made possible by capitalism, individuality, and the emotional influence on sexuality, mothering, and domesticity. This formulation of family helped dislodge the powerful clutch of the community and peer groups that had dominated functionalist traditional families.

While early studies of family examined it based on blood and size,\textsuperscript{90} Mark Poster argues for a critical theory of the family that questions how the family is a primary, independent configuration that influences economic, political, and social structures,

\textsuperscript{87} In his study of the modern family, social historian Edward Shorter, claimed that history was heavily biased toward the upper middle class or aristocratic families, but he wanted to center the “average person.” Additionally, his main site of analysis is France, but he also includes data and makes generalizations about Europe and North America as well. Shorter, \textit{Making of the Modern Family}, 1975.
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., 258.
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., 55.
\textsuperscript{90} Poster, \textit{Critical Theory of the Family}, 1978: xi. Poster critiques Shorter’s contradictory assumption that on the one hand the shift from traditional to modern was socially structured and enabled by the force of capitalism, but on the other, the shift was because of natural desire and the “wish to be free.” He also criticizes Shorter for his dismissal of the aristocracy and failure to convey class distinctions and provide a meaning to the recent crisis of the modern nuclear family (xiii-xv). Poster also notably critiques Freud’s overemphasis on the nuclear-Oedipal family and essentially reducing the family to the individual to the extent that the family is not its own independent formation that both mediates and is mediate by social, economic, and political structures. Ibid., 39-41. He also attacks Marx and Engels’ historical materialist formulation of the family that ties it to a linear economic history for which the family becomes a corrupt tool of capitalism.
specifically at the level of emotions, behaviors, and attitudes. Expanding on the notion that family influences society, I am interested in how loving adoptive family relations can exact symbolic and traumatic effects at personal, ideological, and structural levels. In addition, Poster does not examine the ways in which the state governs family structures and relations. For this, I follow Michel Foucault’s exegesis on the family and state.

Foucault’s theory of governmentality further develops his concept of biopower, where sexuality is a target of power to manage life and population. Governmentality emerges from the 18th century problems of large-scale population (man as human species) and economy (circulation of wealth). Before these problems the family was employed as a model for how to govern the state, but as the population increased the family was unrepresentative of the diverse aggregate. This shifted the family from being a model to a segment of instrumentality. Here, family becomes a site of biopolitical policing as a means to develop, control, and strengthen the nation. State apparatuses and non-governmental institutions worked together to play varying roles in “policing” family

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91 Ibid., 140, 161.
92 Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 25. Biopower, as Foucault explains it, is the “positive influence on life from the sovereign” to multiply life through administration and optimization. At stake was the existence of the population. Ibid., 136-7. It was a partial shift away from the classic form of sovereign power that has the “right to take life or let live” to biopower, which is the power to “‘make’ live and ‘let’ die.” Foucault, *Society Must be Defended*, 2003: 241.
93 As a modality of power, governmentality was concerned with tactical and calculated analyses of arrangement, management, and optimization of population as poly-variate data sets, that is population, climate, wealth, space, circulation, life, and death. Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 2007: 70-1, 98.
94 Here Foucault discusses the downward and upward continuity of how the relationship between government and family. In the former, the state is an example for the family on how it ought to govern the domestic sphere; for the latter, governance of the self and family represent examples of how the state ought to govern itself. Ibid., 94.
95 Ibid. 105
development, morality, and sexuality. Thus, the family became an “object of direct management,” where governing happened through the family.96

The notions of “governmentality” and “policing” are useful for my dissertation because they help illuminate the ways in which adoption and family are techno-political objects of management by the state and the adoption related institutions to form “ideal” families. Indeed Barbara Melosh claims that the “second chance” of adoption is “undeniably and unabashedly a form of sexual containment—of policing traditional boundaries of respectability by reaffirming the ideal (as well as the ‘deal’) of conjugal relations.”97 Critical scholars have recently reconceptualized the traditional family ideal as the heteronormative family, which operate based on overlapping notions of gender, race, sexuality, class, and nation. Thus, a broad definition of the traditional family ideal, or heteronormative family, comprises the elements of whiteness, middle-class status, heterosexual marriage, biological reproduction, and a nuclear and patriarchal familial order. In this sense, heteronormativity depends on sexual, patriarchal, and racial hierarchies, which has enabled those in power to name the “enemies” of the heteropatriarchy, such as families of color, poor families, single mothers, gays and lesbians, and divorced families, as also “enemies” of the “ideal” nation-state.98

While the transnational/racial adoptive family appears on the surface to disrupt this heteronormative ideal, critical adoptions scholars have shown that this often not the case. While transnational/racial adoptions inherently challenge the biological

97 Melosh, Strangers and Kin, 108.
reproductive aspect of the heteronormative family, they can reproduce notions of “American,” white, and nuclear family.\textsuperscript{99} For example, encouraging adoptees to assimilate into “American” culture and “claim” the identity and privileges of whiteness as well as maintaining the nuclear family through de facto “closed adoptions” all work to reinscribe the heteronormative family.\textsuperscript{100} Even in the cases where adoptive families embrace cultural difference, the inclusion of difference can be done in ways that reify racial difference. Thus, the white multicultural nuclear adoptive family can apprehend “positive” aspects of culture while discarding parts that are culturally contaminating without ever having to worry about the threat of birth parents disrupting the legitimacy of their normative family.\textsuperscript{101} Moreover, the celebration and inclusion of cultural difference in “new” family formations such transnational/racial adoptions easily work as an instrument to hide structural-historical violence. For instance, this liberal inclusion of children and expansion of families obfuscates the ways in which the borders are closed for other “bad” neoliberal subjects, who do not have the privilege of being an adoptable orphan.\textsuperscript{102}

\textsuperscript{99} I highlight “can” to emphasize that some parents and families consciously work to disrupt these normative concepts and practices.

\textsuperscript{100} See Briggs, “Making American Families,” 2005; Eng, \textit{Feeling of Kinship}; and Jerng, \textit{Claiming Others}.

\textsuperscript{101} This process can be related to the early nineteenth century American desire to be a “rugged individual” and acquire “manly” traits. It is also found in the common historical and literary trope of “going native,” where the white protagonists joins natives and learns their ways in which he out does the native.

\textsuperscript{102} Chandan Reddy provides another example in the 1986 Family Reunification Act, which granted gay Pakistani immigrants asylum if they met certain condition. This legal dispensation achieved its desired capitalistic, liberal-democratic, and regulatory effects to increase cheap labor; project of benevolence as the means for family reunification; as well as decrease economic welfare responsibility by putting the burden on family sponsors. This is also tied to the increasing implementation of patriarchal and heterosexual mandates for gaining family or welfare support. Thus, despite beliefs that neoliberalism is mainly an economic model and that it has diminished the role of the state in the lives of individuals, Reddy argues that the it is informed by the state’s employment of the racial and sexual to help determine and regulate how and in which directions resources, capital, and bodies flow. Reddy, “Asian Diasporas, Neoliberalism, and Family,” 2005: 110.
This multicultural moment of transnational/racial adoption brings liberalism and neoliberalism together, and it is at this point that neoliberal governmentality (economic, political, juridical) institutes the heteronormative adoptive family. My research unravels the mystification of the multicultural adoptive family and the role it plays in effacing and producing violence. For example, one aspect that I explore in particular is how the specter of the birth mother disrupts the claim to a “normative” family. Thus, while I center the adoptive family as my object of analysis, its relationship to the birth family both symbolically and materially, is vital to understanding how adoptive family formation can be violent.

Anthropologist Louise Lamphere urges researchers not to treat heteronormative kinship as an ideal or universal type but as one possible configuration among a plurality. Yet, Dorow and Swiffen warn that the move from blood, which has been the foundation of kinship studies, to choice does not necessarily destabilize hegemonic notions of family and kinship. Thus, rather than completely ignoring heterobiological and nuclear family, I suggest that we must demystify its re-formulation and existence by situating it within the global-historical context. From this review of the family, I have outlined how the family is not, despite its attempt, a fixed category but is derived from a set of discourses and imaginaries as well as individual, institutional, and state practices, where it can be a site of transgression yet also a site of regulation, management, and reinscription of normative ideals.

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104 Ibid., 565.
The Violence of Love and the Global-historical

Love is hypervisible in transnational/racial adoption because adoption is seen as a “loving” act and institution in the “best interest of children,” illustrating our common humanity rather than presupposed differences and identities. Ensonced in the preamble of the 1993 Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption is the declaration that children “should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding.” Hence, I define adoption and any statement affirming adoption as “love,” or more specifically a loving act, statement, or possibility. It operates at the personal and familial; agency and industry; and legal and national levels. Moreover, adoption is imagined as a form of rescue for the child, who can escape “racialized” cultural, familial, social, and economic violence. In the context of transnational/racial adoption from Asia, this means the violence of patriarchy, poverty, and destitute institutional care. I critique this simplified account of love because it employs a narrow understanding of violence, where “marked” or “visible” violence only occurs before and outside the adoptive family and U.S. nation-state. Instead, I argue that transnational/racial adoption discourse and practice promote individual familial and liberal colorblind love that contests and maintains normative familial and national structures. These “loving” approaches to adoption by individual, familial, institutional, and state actors produce new family structures beyond biological, same-race, and same-nation kinship. But they also ignore or attempt to erase racial difference through assimilation, colorblind, and multicultural practices. By ignoring and hiding racial difference, these practices also efface the violence of adoption (structural racism as well the trauma of loss and separation) and
engender new types of representational violence by reinscribing normative definitions of family and of an uneven U.S.-Asia relationship.

Breaking away from common tropes of love and “marked” violence makes possible a closer look at the “unmarked” violence of adoption. I define violence by using three interrelated categories: First, I use *structural-historical violence* to encompass violence generated by the state, institutions, organizations, and political-economic structures related to adoption.¹⁰⁵ The U.S. nation-state for example has enacted violence through imperialism, war, militarism, and asymmetrical geopolitical relationships with Asia. It and the adoption industry have also been complicit with the way in which global capitalism has fueled corruption and child trafficking. Organizations that support adoption and the state have also been instrumental in crafting legislation that has deleterious and violent outcomes for birth mothers and families of color while elevating the status of white adoptive parents. The second type is *representational violence*, interchangeable with symbolic violence, which references adoption discourse and imagery. This type of violence occurs when there is an attempt to essentialize or fix meaning; for example, the effort to maintain a (hetero)normative definition of family.¹⁰⁶ The third main category is *traumatic violence* that emanates from past experiences, which is oftentimes “unknowable” and “unspeakable” yet reappears in our lives.¹⁰⁷ In the case of transnational/racial adoptees this could include separation from one’s birth family,

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¹⁰⁷ Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*. 
culture, and past; surviving harsh institutional settings; or moments of extreme racial alienation or discrimination. Certainly, these types of violence overlap. For example, representational violence can be an individual incident in which a stranger discredits gay and lesbian adoption because of the way in which it draws from and reifies homophobic discourse, but it can also intersect with structural-historical violence by highlighting how many states have passed laws prohibiting gay and lesbian couples from adopting or even participating as foster care parents.\(^{108}\)

These three types of violence are also connected by their *racial* and *productive* inflections. Denise Silva argues that the racial and cultural, as forms of scientific knowledge and representation (rather than race which was based on blood), institute symbolic violence. This has generated the global-historical, rather than socio-historical, context, which Silva contends is the more accurate way to understand racial representations and subjugation. The global-historical context ascertains historicity as a failed teleological project. In the global-historical, globality (i.e., exteriority and spatiality) operates with historicity (i.e., interiority and temporality) to determine being and meaning.\(^{109}\) Together, they resolve the ways in which subjects emerge in ‘irreducible and unsublatable’ difference as either the ‘Transparent racial ‘I’/Subject (who is self-determined) or the affectable racial Other, who can be excluded and/or annihilated.\(^{110}\)

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\(^{109}\) Globality is not necessarily about globalization, nor does it require empirical evidence from a representative cross-section of the globe. Rather, globality has more to do with representation, the domain of the symbolic, that is, how globality maps racial and cultural particularities onto certain bodies, consciousnesses, cultures, and regions that are signified and represented differently. Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*.

\(^{110}\) Denise Silva argues that scientific endeavors and texts reproduced the scene of engulfment where the racial as a strategy of engulfment instituted globality. The strategy engulfment attempts to formulate
This is to say that structural-historical, representational, and traumatic violence are all informed by and cannot be understood as apart from the racial global-historical context. The problem with most articulations of violence and trauma concerning transnational/racial adoption is that they limit the violence to an individual experience that only occurs prior to the “act” of adoption and originate solely from within community of birth, never from external factors. When the conceptualizations of violence include post-adoption moments, those violent moments are presented as discrete and resolvable such as adoptive parents helping their children cope with (individual) racism. Bringing these three distinct yet overlapping categories of violence together within a global-historical context allows me to examine transnational/racial adoption in a critical way that moves beyond these prevalent tropes in adoption discourse and representation. In this way, violence is not an event or moment in history but an ongoing condition and/or structure.

My dissertation shows that the narrative of love in adoption discourse and practice both emerges from and produces these forms of violence. This process, which I call “the violence of love,” operates as my main framework to unsettle the idea that love and adoption cleanly resolve the conditions of poverty, homelessness, and family. Instead the framework—in addition to the global-historical context—engages the crucial nexus of race, love, and violence to illuminate the intersections of structural policies, discourse, and complex lives of transnational/racial adoption. Thus the goal of this project is not to

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111 Given that this context institutes various forms of violence that not only destroys but generates and solidifies representations, Silva names it productive violence.

111 Given that this context institutes various forms of violence that not only destroys but generates and solidifies representations, Silva names it productive violence.
negate love but rather to think about the ways in which inclusion and love—through representations, expressions, and institutional policies about adoption—are violent processes that precede and follow the acts of adoption and family formation. In doing so, I show how adoption is both a loving and violent process for those connected to but also outside of adoption.

**Methods**

This dissertation centers the adoptive family as my main object of analysis. It also demonstrates how nation and subjectivity are inextricably linked to adoptive family formation. In each chapter, I operationalize my framework of the violence of love to examine the different sites of knowledge production (social work, social scientific, legal, popular, and adoptee pedagogy) in adoption discourse and practice. I employ interdisciplinary methods that use social theory; discourse analysis of historical, legal, and new media sources; and traditional ethnography. I utilize the violence of love as a way of reading that contests (neo)liberalism and hegemonic and racialized notions of family. Such a reading opens up disavowed histories and demystifies racial and gendered logics that exist with transnational/racial adoptive history and family-making.

I employ the concept of discourse similar to how it is used in critical ethnic and cultural studies—as a group of statements and system of representation that is historically and culturally specific. Discourse is a collection and circulation of knowledge that stems from a range of texts and institutions that distinguishes and governs how we come to understand meaning relationally and as ‘truth.’ Therefore, as a parameter of knowledge it influences how we think and act. Discursive analysis enables me to identify important details such as points where power is located, who is producing knowledge about
adoption, and what is at stake. While discourse is an instrument and effect of power, it can also be a site of resistance because power not only exists in the state, institutions, or the law but is pervasive everywhere. Additionally, the contestation over meaning within a particular discourse indicates that meaning is never absolutely fixed. Hence, I investigate the ways in which the transnational/racial adoptive family is made within discourse and representation and how this has material consequences.\textsuperscript{112}

Chapters one, two, and three constitute critical historical, legal, and discursive analysis. I understand historical archives in both the “traditional” sense, where the archive is a place of knowledge retrieval, but also in its alternative significance as a site of knowledge production and power relations.\textsuperscript{113} Therefore, history is a contention between the master narrative of historicity—i.e. history as linear, recorded, and teleological—and alternative narratives. Pursuing a critical historical project means that one attends to and makes visible people and places without history or excluded from history by defining what is absent or erased without documenting or substituting one history for another.\textsuperscript{114} Critical history reads “official” or hegemonic narratives “against the grain”\textsuperscript{115} by interrogating the discontinuities, multiple perspectives and incompleteness. History is both historical and global in its emergence, where “time is pluralized” and history is the process of “weaving together” complex and coexisting

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Thus, critical history is genealogical. Rather than seeking to locate “true” recorded meaning, genealogical history is a nonlinear linking of fragmented points or pasts which have no “origin” but do have connections. Reading against the grain enables me to identify how meaning is fixed and difference is established and reproduced to help form subjects, families, and the nations.

I also situate the law as a generative archival site of inquiry. Chandan Reddy notes that the law is not a passive archive “of record.” Instead he considers law “as record,” a mode of record keeping to preserve the liberal narrative of universality and an indicator for the future. As a fundamental institution, law influences various aspects of social, economic political life, and, in particular, the family. Moreover, law is important not only for what it “stores” and how it produces knowledge but for the ways it is always actively made and remade, producing mechanisms of regulation and management as well as reinscribing or creating new meaning. In the case of adoption, it terminates familial relationships and then creates new identities and families. While it claims to be universal, impartial, and colorblind, I read it as a site of uneven application, where the law disproportionately intervenes into certain families (of color), while protecting the rights and privacy of others. In tracing congressional records related to domestic and transnational transracial adoption, I seek to identify the contradictions and discontinuities of how race, families, and nation are conveyed and archived as an explanation for the present and future.

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117 Indeed, genealogy opposes the search for origins because origins assumes things have essence and are pure when in fact that “[things] have no essence or that their essence was fabricated.” Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” 142.
Critical history also involves finding new archival sites that challenge the “fixity and materiality” of traditional archives.\textsuperscript{119} In chapters three and four, I utilize the internet as an online archive of knowledge circulation and production, which is simultaneously a new, “democratic” public sphere and archival space. This also means that the “contributors” who offer material to the archive are different, yet they, like traditional archivists, are shaped by race, gender, class, and national identity.\textsuperscript{120} The chapters explore popular adoption discourse and birth culture pedagogy that is archived online as displaying both “spontaneous” and highly mediated forms of adoption knowledge. Lastly, I conducted interviews so that adoptees would not only be an object of analysis but so they might also be a subject of knowledge and expertise. I consider their lived experiences as transnational/racial adoptees and their deep familiarity with the summer camps for adoptees as necessary in order to reflect about adoptive family-making and pedagogical practices that occur at these camps. In doing my research, however, I am not attempting to articulate an absolute truth about transnational/racial adoptive experience and history. Instead, I understand my sources and ultimately my mediated narrative of them to be a “sliver of a sliver of a sliver” of the genealogy of transnational/racial adoption and family-making.\textsuperscript{121} I do believe that it is an important sliver, one worth exploring.

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\item \textsuperscript{119} Burton, “Archive Fever, Archive Stories [Introduction],” 2006: 2-3.
\item \textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 9.
\item \textsuperscript{121} Verne Harris notes that historical methods through archival research only allows us to seem a tiny fraction of what has happened because archivists cannot preserve “every record.” Further, records can be destroyed or left out, and despite the best efforts many records cannot be preserved indefinitely. Thus, archives only “offer researchers a sliver of a sliver of a sliver.” Harris, “The Archival Sliver,” 2002: 64-65.
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One of the key struggles I had in writing this dissertation was contending with the absent presence of the birth mother. None of my research materials contained birth parents, and birth mothers in particular, as agents and subjects who love and have desires. They appeared as the displaceable, the afterthought, or the object of violence. Their voices and experiences would have certainly added another layer of complexity to my analysis of adoption and family-making. While I’m interested in examining adoptive family formation through the adoptee and adoptive parents, I also engage with the birth mother’s ghostly presence—not as an absent presence, which we tend to forget, ignore, or hide, but as a present absence. A present absence approach discloses and acknowledges the beings that cannot be materially present but who often visit or haunt our daily lives, thoughts, desires, and dreams.

**Note on Terminology**

*Transnational/racial adoption versus Intercountry adoption.* Rather than use the more common designation of intercountry adoption, which is employed by the State Department and the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption, I use, for the most part, the term transnational/racial adoption instead to denote U.S. adoptions from Asia. The former, along with the other common term of international adoption, conveys a linear one-way, American(or Euro)-centric assimilative process between two countries that produces pre- and post-adoption moments. The term transnational adoption is generative because it draws from critical transnationalism and connotes the network, movement, and dissemination of power along with circulation and connections of bodies, ideas, and

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122 This term is not meant to address the specificities within Asian transnational/racial adoption. While these differences are important, my dissertation is primarily with similarities in how these adoptions are imagined and practiced.
goods. Transnational adoption also offers a more flexible understanding and acknowledgment of complex identities and movements in ways that disrupt authentic, singular identities and notions of family and most importantly call into question the role of the nation. While transracial adoption has largely been reserved for adoptions involving black (but also Latino, Native American, or biracial) children in the United States, I add the descriptor “racial” to formulate the term transnational/racial because it highlights how transnational adoptions involve a multi-layered process that transgresses more than national boundaries but racial ones, where the families that adopt have historically been white. While this term misses some of the nuance provided in the other possible term of “transcultural adoption,” it still helps to reveal the power dynamics within the imagined and practiced act of adoption so that we may understand it as a complex institution and not just an event.

Birth mother/parent/family versus first or natural mother/parent/family. I do not think my view on birth versus first or natural family has fully been formulated yet, but for this dissertation I partly use birth mother/parent/family because it is the primary language that is used today. This alone is not a good reason to use the term. I also believe that, unlike “intercountry adoption,” the term birth mother can be imbued with new meaning. Rather than being a negative or derogatory modifier, I understand birth in birth

123 Sara Dorow, Eleana Kim, and Toby Volkman note how adoptees can move back and forth between their birth and adoptive countries in real life and online forums. Dorow, Transnational Adoption, 25. Kim, Adopted Territory, 10; Cultures of Transnational Adoption, Ed. Volkman, 2; See also Espiritu, Home Bound, 2003 and Grewal, Transnational America, 2005.

124 Multiple studies have found that the percentage of white adoptive parents for transnational adoptions is above 90 percent. See Rojewski, “A Typical American Family?,” 138 (97.4%); Rojewski and Rojewski, Intercountry Adoption from China, 2001 (91.5%); Tessler, Gamache, and Liu, “West Meets East,” 1999 (96%); and Ishizawa, Kenney, Kubo, and Stevens, “Constructing Interracial Families Through Intercountry Adoption,” 2006 (97%). According to Pertman white parents constitute about 90 percent of transracial foster care adoptions. Pertman, Adoption Nation, 29.
mother/parent/family to intensify the meanings of these relationships. Additionally, I use birth mother often instead of birth parents because, as Dorow and Swiffen note, adoption is gendered in such a way that the birth and adoptive mothers are most often the figures who negotiate the birth-adoptive family relationship. I do this fully understanding that there are birth fathers and adoptive fathers (especially in the case of gay adoptions) who also occupy these roles.

Adoptive parent versus parent. While I am not against the use of simply parent or mother or father, I also believe that adoptive does not carry harmful meaning. Like the descriptor, birth, I use adoptive throughout because I think it offers an important analytic to the idea of the family. Both birth families/parents and adoptive families/parents are different from “traditional” biological families/parents. I contend that we should embrace this difference and imbue the terms with critical meaning rather than try to erase them or delimit their meaning.

Chapter Outline

Each chapter examines a unique site of adoption knowledge production. What connects them is the different yet similar ways in which they articulate love and family while ignoring and/or enacting violence (with the exception of part two of the last chapter where violence is engaged). I organize them chronologically not to suggest that these forms of knowledge production are linear or teleological but to show how they change, converge, overlap, and differ. Chapters one and two examine how structural-historical and representational violence are intertwined in adoptive family-making, while chapters three and four begin to consider traumatic violence in conjunction with symbolic and structural violence. In addition, although the first two chapters attempt to get at the
complexity of lived experiences, the latter chapters delve into this more deeply by centering the perspective of the adoptive parents and adoptees and how they shape their own ideas of family. Thus the larger picture of my dissertation is one that shows how transnational/racial families are first normalized and then taken for granted as better families. Yet, since meaning is sometimes challenged (in violent ways) such families must be reconcretized. Lastly, I show how the heteronormative adoptive family is contested in generative ways.

Chapter one, “The New Normal: Positively Defining (Adoptive) Motherhood and Family,” is a critical historical analysis of two types of adoption knowledge formations that overlapped with the increasing visibility of transnational/racial adoptions from Asia. Social work and social scientific knowledge attempted to reshape the way the public imagines, discusses, and practices adoption. Part one examines the promotion of “positive adoption language” (PAL) as a new form of social work and professional terminology that was developed to combat the stigmatization of adoption and adoptive motherhood. I argue that PAL tried to normalize adoption as a legitimate form of family-making and a path to motherhood in the eyes of the public so that it could be equal to biological families. Yet, this “universal,” “loving” terminology enacted symbolic racial violence by discursively instituting white mothers as the norm over and against birth mothers of color in the United States and abroad. Part two provides a critical review of social scientific outcome studies of domestic transracial and transnational/racial adoptions. This research produced “positive,” both affirming and “objective,” knowledge about adoption outcomes. From the collective research, love emerges as a reason for the success of these adoptions. Both the statements of love along with the research methodology ultimately
ignored the structural-historical and symbolic violence of adoption. Thus, this chapter shows how the knowledge production and discourse that emerged from positive adoption language and social scientific studies ignored or misinterpreted the significance of race, which shaped subject and family formation in uneven ways.

Chapter two, “Opposite Futures for the Orphan in (Neo)liberal Adoption Discourse and Law,” looks at congressional hearings and legal scholarship to explore the way in which legal representations and presumptions of transnational/racial adoptions from Asia are framed within the context of the loving American adoptive homes and best interest of the child. Specifically, it examines the ways in which liberalism and neoliberalism work together using the notion of familial love within post-racial and color-blind adoption discourse and international and domestic adoption laws to configure legal racial representations of the orphan, family, and nation. I argue that racial and cultural difference were still embedded in the structure of these laws and adoption practices. Hence, the best interest outcomes for the orphan figure has already been predetermined by constructions of birth and adoptive families along with sending (Asian countries) and receiving nations (the United States) as “opposite futures.” I use Chandan Reddy’s concept of freedom with violence to suggest that the orphan figure as an abject racial object must be rescued from the violence of Asian culture and institutions. Only then can it emerge into full personhood and freedom through transnational/racial adoption by American families and in the space of the U.S. nation-state because they represent the better family and future.

Chapter three, Reifying ‘Real’ Families in Popular Adoption Discourse,” analyzes blog posts and their corresponding comments from The New York Times special, multi-
author blog series “Relative Choices: Adoption and the American Family” (2007) as a site of popular adoption knowledge production and circulation. Digital communication is increasingly becoming a generative site of analysis for many researchers because the ways it produces new language and indeed a new Habermasian online public arena—the blogosphere.\textsuperscript{125} The blog posts and comments produce and circulate popular knowledge about adoption at both banal and deeply insightful, personal levels, elucidating tensions and contradictions that might be less visible in other textual or ethnographic sites. Using content and discourse analysis, this chapter interrogates statements of love in the blogs and comments. They show how adoption discourse that depends on racial and cultural difference violently shapes family formation by denying the importance of adoptees’ traumatic pasts and narrowly defining adoptive parents as the “real parents.”

Chapter four, “‘Birth Culture’ and ‘Critical Adoptee Perspective’: Desires and Pedagogies to Address the Violence of Adoption,” examines community, identity, and family in the popular phenomenon of heritage summer camps for transnational/racial adoptive families as well as a unique (transnational/racial) adoptee summer camp. I argue that these camps function as spaces of desire and pedagogy as well as complex sites for community, subject (adoptive and adoptive parent), and family formation. I combine a traditional ethnography of the Adoptee Camp with a digital humanities approach that examines the online archive of heritage camp web sites and videos. Part one explores how heritage camps employ what I call “birth culture pedagogy.” Unlike previous adoptive practices that ignored cultural identity and promoted complete assimilation, birth culture pedagogy involves cultural teaching that addresses personal desires of

\textsuperscript{125} Barlow, Blogging America, 2008.
adoptees and their adoptive parents to learn and keep alive adoptees’ “missing” ethnic pasts. In addition to fulfilling “lost” ethnic identity, I contend that birth culture knowledge enables adoptive parents to be a substitute for missing birth parents, effacing the importance of the past and reifying a narrow conceptualization of family. Further, the birth culture pedagogy ignores the violent global-historical context between the United States and sending countries, which allows the former to be a space for which culture can be maintained and reproduced. Part two compares birth culture pedagogy with “critical adoptee pedagogy” at the unique Adoptee Camp, which has recently challenged and de-centered the former’s emphasis on the construction and celebration of “authentic” birth culture. Instead critical adoptee pedagogy privileges adoptee perspective, empowerment, and desire for alternative ideas of adoptee community, adoptee identity, and birth and adoptive parents as significant components to family rather than merely spotlighting birth culture.
CHAPTER ONE
The New Normal: Positively Defining (Adoptive) Motherhood and Family

Post-WWII conceptions of adoption shifted it from a legal transaction to a more common means for sentimental family-making. Adoption was gradually accepted as the “best solution” to the “problem” of illegitimacy—a win-win-win situation that gave unwed mothers a second chance, children a better opportunity for a bright future, and infertile couples the chance to participate in family and domesticity.¹ Thus, the practice of adoption had expanded in both form and function. Yet adoption still conjured up images of the “unwed mother,” “bastard child,” and “barren couple.”² These ideas still reflected the historical perception of adoption as abnormal since it lacked biological connection. Underscoring the stigma surrounding adoption was its secrecy, which was considered the “foundation underlying all adoption.”³ Secrecy, which became standard procedure by World War II, involved creating new “original” birth certificates and sealing all birth records even to adoptees. This practice that persisted in the 1970s (and continues today) implied that heterosexual marriage and rearing biological children, or at least the mirroring of this, were necessary components of a normative, healthy, and happy family.

In her seminal book, Kinship By Design: A History of Adoption in the Modern United States, adoption historian Ellen Herman argues that one way that adoption was destigmatized and normalized during the first half of the twentieth century was through a process of interpretation at the beginning stages of each adoption. She describes this process as involving professional helpers such as social workers and psychiatrists who

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¹ Melosh, Strangers and Kin, 2006: 105-6
² Fisher, “Still ‘Not Quite as Good as Having Your Own?’” 351.
“investigated, adjusted, and normalized” behaviors and personalities in order to instill and cultivate a feeling of “realness” for adoptive parents and adoptees and reduce the perceived risks in adoption. Herman suggests that “interpretation” happened systematically but in a way that targeted adopted children and adoptive parents individually and mostly at the psychological and emotional levels in order to convince them that adoption was authentic and real. For example, interpretation required social workers to be “psychologists” in order to interpret the child’s personality and devise a plan for facilitating the best adjustment to adoption.

This chapter extends Herman’s concept of interpretation by considering how it operated at a broader social level of normalization for domestic and transnational transracial adoptions (TRA and TNA for the remainder of this chapter). Normalization, I suggest, was more than just convincing individual adoptive families and adopted children that adoption was or could be real. It was also different from what Herman describes as efforts to “mirror” nature through “naturalization.” Instead, the goal of normalization, as an expansive form of interpretation, was to elevate adoption in the eyes of the public so that it could be equal to and just as normal as families formed through biological reproduction and genetic kinship.

Race, however, was a central dilemma for normalization as a mode of interpretation. Transnational/racial adoptions from Korea and Vietnam, which emerged in the 1950s and 1970s respectively, overlapped with and were spurred by post-World War

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4 Herman, Kinship by Design, 2, 84-85.
5 Ibid., 92-94. Interpretation also included, for example, social workers determining if the reasons explained by parents for wanting to adopt a child were good or bad motivations. Ibid., 109-117.
6 For the purposes of this chapter, I use TRA to refer to domestic transracial adoptions, which have historically meant black (or biracial with one black parent) children adopted by white parents, and TNA to reference transnational/racial adoptions from Asia.
II American and racial liberalism, including the civil rights movement, Cold War politics of anti-communism and democracy abroad, and humanitarianism.\(^7\) Racial liberalism, in particular, underlined the harm of individual prejudice and segregation, while promoting legal rights for minorities and tolerance through interracial contact.\(^8\) Such adoptions from Asia—as well as adoptions from Native American tribal nations and domestic transracial adoptions of black children—by whites exemplified racial liberalism and became a new way to form and expand American families.\(^9\)

A result of this extreme form of interracial contact, however, was a disruption of the effort to reconstruct “nature” conspicuously through the policy of racial matching in adoption. Korean and Vietnamese children physically stood out from their white parents who often lived in rural, homogenous towns. The racial transgressions posed by TRA and TNAs meant that naturalization, i.e. the attempt to mimic nature, was an impossible feat, and this jeopardized the goal of interpretation.

This chapter considers the 1970s through 1990s as a clear historical moment for not only the actual numerical adoptions from Korea and Vietnam but also how they existed in relation to the important circulation of new knowledge about traditional same-

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\(^7\) Herman, *Kinship by Design*; Kim, *Adopted Territories*; Klein, *Cold War Orientalism*; Oh, “A New Kind of Missionary Work.”

\(^8\) Guinier, “From Racial Liberalism to Racial Literacy,” 2004: 95. Guiner highlights that the critique of racial liberalism is that it understands the problem of race as a “psychological and interpersonal” rather than root structural causes of racism. Ibid., 100. Charles Mills argues that modern liberalism has always been racial liberalism, where despite the philosophy of universality, it is dependent on racism. Mills, “Racial Liberalism,” 2008: 1382. Jodie Melamed also critiques racial liberalism, framing it not as a political philosophy or social movement but rather as a hegemonic regime that helped establish U.S. global hegemony. Melamed, “The Spirit of Neoliberalism,” 2006: 4.

\(^9\) Native American adoptions are unique from both transnational and domestic forms of transracial adoptions. I am hesitant to categorize them as both or either (even though they have historically been categorized as transracial) because Native American tribes have a political status in which they are “domestic dependent,” even as they considered themselves and intervened in international politics as independent and sovereign nations. See Williams, Jr., *Like a Loaded Weapon*, 2005.
race white adoptees (also known as inracial) and domestic transracial adoptions. I juxtapose these increasingly visible transnational/racial adoptions from Asia with the emergence and overlap of two types of interpretation: adoption language and research on TRA and TNAs. Thus, this chapter is split into two parts, where professional language and scientific research are my sites of analysis to think about the knowledge production of adoption. Part one interrogates the emergence and promotion of positive and respectful adoption language (commonly known as PAL and RAL) by adoption professionals that developed in the late 1970s and is still promoted today. I suggest that PAL was a response to the symbolic violence of stigmatization of adoption and adoptive motherhood that used institutional and public efforts to reinterpret adoption as a legitimate form of family-making and path to motherhood. I argue that the strategies for interpreting adoption and adoptive motherhood as normal, valid, and real, however, both ignored and enacted symbolic racial (and material) violence onto birth mothers of color. This effort to normalize adoption did not and could not account for both TRA and TNAs. Instead, the industry produced universal, loving terminology offered by PAL and RAL understood white American birth mothers to be the norm of responsibility because they made adoption plans. This ignored the ways in which constructions of race and gender discursively produced motherhood and family, where birth mothers of color and birth mothers of Asian countries were entangled in structures of racism and U.S. imperial militarism. I argue that in terms of TRA and TNAs, PAL and RAL relationally constructed white adoptive mothers over and against birth mothers of color—temporally, 

10 For simplicity, I will mainly use PAL rather than referring to both “PAL and RAL” (except when I explicitly reference the latter) because PAL is the name given to Spencer’s collective terminology, although they both seem to be equally used in today’s adoption language.
spatially, and discursively—and attempted to eliminate the polymorphic meanings of family.

Part two looks at interpretation through a critical review of social scientific research. While these types of study continue today, I focus on the 1960s to 1990s as a key time period in which the question of TRA and TNAs were considered harmful or not for adopted children. Again, the racial difference between either Asian or black children and their white adoptive parents went against the preferred practices of racial matching, which meant that TRA and TNAs also received great scientific interest just as previous studies that focused only on “traditional” same-race placements. I demonstrate how these scientific studies of TRA and TNAs established the “fact” of normalization—both types of transracial adoptees, with the presence of love, were just as normal as their same-race adopted peers. That the adoptees were healthy and well adjusted meant that this particular form of transracial adoptive family-making could be just as good as same-race adoptive families and even biological families. Love emerged as a main theme in positive adoption language and TRA and TNA research, producing “positive,” both affirming and “objective,” knowledge about adoption outcomes.

This chapter fits in with my larger dissertation because language and research are two important sites for which knowledge about adoption is produced. It relates to the violence of love because adoption language and research constitute types of knowledge that make claims about love. Yet, they ignore structural-historical violence that produces the “need” for adoption and positive adoption language as well as any traumatic violence.

11 They in actuality continue to this day, but by the 1990s the question of “harm” has largely been answered.
and symbolic violence that might be enacted by instituting PAL or claiming that TRA and TNAs always have positive outcomes. Additionally, they reproduced precisely those norms of gender, race, and family that adoption inherently disrupted. At stake in such adoption discourses was legitimacy and normalcy for adoptive parents and their families. As my introduction states, the point is not to “restigmatize” adoptive relations in favor of biological ones. Familial bonds that transcend the (hetero)biological have deeply important affective, political, and social value. Rather than privileging one form of family-making over the other, we should examine how we can engage the violence that produces and emerges from both. Yet this chapter argues that the terminology and scientific knowledge that emerged from adoption language and research came at the cost of the birth parents and family, who became the absent presence of normalized (adoptive) motherhood and family. This critique of the violence of love opens up a more complicated understanding of how race was ignored or poorly addressed yet integral in the efforts to “positively” define adoptive mothers and families.

**Part I: Positive Adoption Language**

**Destigmatizing Adoption**

Making a family at any level can be a cause for anxiety (along with hurt, disappointment, fear, etc.), but for many adoptive parents this issue is amplified. Although families are formed in diverse ways—through blood, law (e.g. marriage), social custom (e.g. in-laws), and love—adoption, which is linked by law and love, is the only familial relationship that is devalued.\(^\text{12}\) Many scholars have noted that adoption has

historically been recognized as being different from and less than biological families. Adoptive families continue to be (violently) judged, stigmatized, and discredited by society as abnormal, unnatural, and second or last choice. Adoptive mothers in particular were constructed in popular discourse as infertile and emotionally unstable due to their inability to bear children. With regulation and standardization by the state and adoption agencies, adoptive parents have faced scrutiny in ways that biological parents would never face, including meeting age, income, work (or stay-at-home), health, marriage, and home study requirements. In addition, adoptive parents, and mothers more specifically, contend with pervasive invasion of their privacy, where strangers and friends feel that it is acceptable to ask prying questions or offer off-the-cuff remarks that are often offensive and hurtful to adoptive parents and adoptees.

Thus, by the late 1970s and early 1980s, agencies, social workers, and adoptive parents began to combat the discrimination against and shame attached to adoption and adoptive families. They specifically revised adoption terminology to reflect what they perceived as the accurate outcome and beauty of adoption (see table 2.1 for a compiled list). Surprisingly, very little has been written about PAL or RAL beyond that it should

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15 Jessica DelBalzo offers Honest Adoption Language as the alternative to PAL. I have included the corresponding PAL terms in parentheses. HAL includes terms such as relinquished or lost (plan); reunion (made contact); natural mother (birthmother); and caretaker (parent or adoptive parent). DelBalzo, *Unlearning Adoption*, 2007: 10-12.
be the used terminology.\textsuperscript{16} Without mention PAL or RAL by name, Ellen Herman does briefly note that adoption terminology has changed and been an important “battleground,” but it is brought up more as an explanation of why she uses antiquated terms as a means to contend with the past. Similarly, Barbara Melosh brings up the terms to explain her choices for their use instead of interrogating them.\textsuperscript{17} Adam Pertman, Executive Director of the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute and author of\textit{ Adoption Nation: How the Adoption Revolution is Transforming America}, observes that language can be insensitive and imperfect but suggests that it is also changing. He offers suggestions for teachers, in particular, to use “family orchards” instead of “family trees” for students to map family genealogies so that an adopted child would not have to choose one family (either the adoptive or birth).\textsuperscript{18} In her self-published book,\textit{ Unlearning Adoption: A Guide to Family Preservation and Protection}, Jessica DelBalzo does critique PAL and instead offers “honest adoption language” as an extreme alternative.\textsuperscript{19}

This section explores the ways in which the stigmatization of adoption as abnormal and less than engendered a complex battleground to establish new meanings of realness and legitimacy.\textsuperscript{20} I contend that this effort to both deflect negative attitudes toward and equalize the status of adoptive parent/motherhood elucidates how birth mothers and adoptive mothers faced different types of stigmatization. The adoptive mother and parents, through PAL and RAL, were reconfigured within heteropatriarchal
ideals, where their stigmatized identities could be largely recuperated (as real mothers and rescuers). Birth mothers, on the other hand, were mostly denied this privilege, and placed outside of legitimate motherhood. Moreover, birth mothers of color experienced even greater stigmatization: unlike the white birth mother who could atone for her individual mistake by making a “responsible adoption plan,” the birth mother of color was racialized and her “out-of-wedlock” status was attributed to a “culture of poverty.”

Although positive adoption language emerged from the effort to disseminate a universally (i.e. race-neutral) loving form of communication, it relied on heteropatriarchal ideals that in fact ignored domestic and transnational forms of ideological and structural racism, which discursively relegated birth mothers of color, both spatially and temporally, to an “unconnected past” that was outside of the (adoptive) “family,” engendering new forms of symbolic racial violence.

In 1979, Marietta Spencer, a veteran social worker, wrote a brief but influential journal article on adoption language and terminology, what she would later term “positive adoption language.” Spencer was the program director for Postlegal Adoption Services at Children’s Home Society of Minnesota (CHSM), the first of its kind in the United States, and Co-director of the Adoption Builds Families project. In 1991, Senator David Durenberger of Minnesota awarded her with the Morris Hursh Award for having such a lasting national effect in the area of human service. Despite her unsentimental view of genetic history, saying it was like “washing instructions” for clothes, Spencer

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21 Sweeney, “The Culture of Poverty and Adoption,” 2012..
helped many adopted persons find their birth parents. According to Spencer, PAL was premised on the beliefs that words educate, evoke feeling, carry emotional weight, produce labels, have multiple and changing meanings, and must be used with care. Her goal was to provide a “correct” and common sense language standard for social service professionals and adoptive parents in an effort to displace language considered problematic, negative, and imprecise. Two decades later, Patricia Irwin Johnston, one of the foremost educators and advocates for Respectful Adoption Language (RAL), claimed that RAL was a vocabulary that reflects “maximum respect, dignity, responsibility and objectivity about the decisions made by birthparents and adoptive parents in discussing the family planning decisions they have made for children who have been adopted.” The goal of using and sharing both PAL and RAL, as the Adoptive Families Magazine stated, is to help such terminology to “someday become the norm.”

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27 Johnston, “Speaking Positively.”
Table 2.1: Positive Adoption Language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive Language</th>
<th>Negative Language</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adoption triad / -circle / -tapestry</td>
<td>Adoption triangle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My child / was adopted</td>
<td>Adopted child / is adopted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>Adoptive parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth / biological parent / Birthgiver*</td>
<td>Natural / real parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth child</td>
<td>Own child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth father / mother / parent</td>
<td>Real / Natural father / mother / parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genetic ancestors</td>
<td>Blood relative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born to unmarried parents / outside of marriage</td>
<td>Illegitimate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waiting child / Children in need of adoption</td>
<td>Adoptable child / Available child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Court termination</td>
<td>Child taken away</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make an adoption plan / choose adoption /</td>
<td>Give away / give up / put up / abandoned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child placed for adoption / unplanned</td>
<td>Unwanted child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To parent</td>
<td>To keep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent preparation / pre-adoptive counseling</td>
<td>Homestudy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercountry adoption</td>
<td>Foreign adoption</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interracial</td>
<td>Mixed race</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child from abroad</td>
<td>Foreign child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child with special needs</td>
<td>Handicapped child / hard-to-place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Search / making contact or meeting with / locate</td>
<td>Track down parents / reunion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Indicates the term is used only by some.
Table 2.1 shows a compilation of the numerous and seemingly race-neutral terms and phrases that Spencer and Johnston offered as ways to destigmatize adoptive relations. For example, when using terms related to children, especially introducing them to strangers, Spencer argued that adoptive parents should state plainly that “this is my child” and avoid language such as “this is my adopted child” or “adopted son/daughter.” The qualifier “adopted” accentuated difference between him or her and a possible biological child. More specifically, it perpetuated biological chauvinism, which most adoptive parents were already trying to fight. The issue of difference that is highlighted when using the qualifier “adopted” is something that children who are adopted contend with because even if adoptive parents know not to use this language, inquiring strangers often do not. As Johnston claims, adoption is one of many events in a person’s life, not an immutable personal trait or condition. This was the same reasoning Spencer and others gave for avoiding the term adoptee, which similarly “labels the whole person.”

Dropping the modifier “adopted” affirmed kinship through adoption and destigmatized this status by situating the child on the same level as biological children.

(De)naturalizing Motherhood

One of the main reasons Spencer promoted the use of PAL was because it reflected both the legal outcome and the “moral teleology” of the adoption process. While Spencer never explicitly addresses the issue of race, her omission suggests that the language is race-neutral in ways that would apply to all members of society. According to Spencer, terms concerning the transfer of the child needed to reflect the reassignment of

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31 Johnston, “Speaking Positively.”
parental rights and the legal outcome from “biological parents to the parents of adoption.” Language such as “put up for adoption” and “adopted out” were used in the late 1800s when children were literally put on block for adoption or adopted out via orphan trains, but these terms were no longer applicable to the current process. In addition, phrases and terms such as “given away” and “abandoned” portrayed biological parents as callous and uncaring, while “given up,” “relinquished,” and “surrendered” implied that the child was torn out of their arms. The latter terms also encouraged children to fantasize about improbable reunions. Spencer offered a plethora of suggestions that better described the transfer of children, including “arranging for an adoption,” “making a placement plan for a child,” “delegating an agency to find permanent parents for a child,” “arranging for a transfer of parental rights,” “transferring parenting to others who are ready for this long-term task,” “finding a family who will adopt a child,” and “selecting an appropriate family to parent the child.” These suggestions are also based on her claim that parents cannot “give up a child” because a child is not something that is owned, but that they can “give up parental rights.” Spencer rebutted the claim that children can be removed from parents against their will by claiming, “When the court steps in to terminate parental rights without consent of the bioparents, the chances are that the latter filled the role inadequately or not at all.”

Johnston echoed this sentiment. Without making clear distinctions about race, she argues that all birth parents are “thoughtful and responsible people” with “authority and responsibility.” For Johnston RAL is about using emotionally-correct terms over the

34 Ibid., 454.
emotionally-charged ones: “These emotion-laden terms, conjuring up images of babies torn from the arms of unwilling parents, are no longer valid except in those unusual cases in which a birthparent’s rights are involuntarily terminated by court action after abuse or neglect” (Johnston). The logic of PAL and RAL relied on the perspective that adoption benefits all parties: birth parents are no longer forced or coerced to “surrender” their child but instead “choose” to make an informed and voluntary adoption “plan”; adoptive parents now have a socially embraced way to create and/or expand a family and thus are simply the “parents,” not adoptive parents; and adoptees benefit the most because they receive a caring and loving family, permanent home, and bright future. While Johnston suggests that this mutually beneficial relationship can be described as an adoption circle, the majority of adoption outcomes resemble a moral teleology. The continued state-facilitated legal nature and process of adoption terminates rights for birth parents and transfers them to the adoptive parents. Adoption in this sense is not just a good outcome but considered the best outcome.

Significantly, the rationale behind choosing “emotionally correct,” “positive,” and seemingly race-neutral terms ignored the dynamics of domestic transracial adoptions and transnational adoption from Asia for which the issue of race was infused, which complicate the presumed universality of PAL and RAL. For example, the “thoughtful” and “responsible” language of PAL and RAL used to describe birth mothers’ decision implied that all, regardless of color, were perceived and treated by society in this way. For Spencer and Johnston, birth mothers never had to surrender or relinquish their child

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against their own will. Those who did experience this were partially or wholly “inadequate bioparents,” deserving of state intervention to be separated from their child. This meant that only those birth mothers who were truly undeserving parents had experienced child removal against their will. This ignored the ways in which poor mothers and mothers of color in particular were forced to interact with heightened government regulation and punishment because of racial bias and constructed non-normativity. Even the anti-poverty programs from the 1970s and on had brought families of color closer to government monitoring and thus higher probabilities of being declared as an unfit mother or parent. As Rickie Solinger notes, the transnational and domestic contexts for women of color mirrored each other to some degree in that the issue of adoption was rarely about individual choices (and planning) that mothers make. Rather, it was about “the abject choicelessness of some resourceless women.”

For the domestic context, nonwhite families have historically been perceived by society as inherently non-heteronormative. Mothers of color, in particular, have been constructed as unfit parents and opposite of normative motherhood. This racial ideology was especially concretized with the emergent representations of “culture of poverty” and “welfare queen” in the 1960s. Oscar Lewis believed that intensive ethnographic study of the family could lead to knowledge about “individuals, about family life, about lower-class as a whole, and about the history and culture of the larger society in which these

36 Solinger, Beggars and Choosers, 67. See also Quiroz, Adoption in a Color-Blind Society.
38 Instead, nonwhite female bodies have been used for the reproduction of slaves, as domestic house servants and nannies, test subjects of birth control, and most recently as transnational commercial surrogates. See Roberts, Killing the Black Body; Vora, “Medicine, Markets and the Pregnant Body: Indian Commercial Surrogacy and Reproductive Labor in a Transnational Frame,” The Scholar and Feminist Online (The Barnard Center for Research on Women) 9.1-9.2 (Fall 2010/Spring 2011)
people live."\textsuperscript{39} In his attempt to understand the “nature” of the culture of poverty, Lewis stigmatizes all Mexicans and Puerto Ricans based on the theory that cultural poverty has its own structure and rationale beyond economic deficiency that is passed down to each generation.\textsuperscript{40} Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s 1965 report, \textit{The Negro Family: A Case for National Action}, added to the culture of poverty account by producing a monolithic image of deviancy, hypersexuality, and poor family structure, in particular the dominant black matriarch, within the black home that was stuck in a “tangle of pathology.”\textsuperscript{41} Black families constituted gender and sexual non-normativity that needed to be disciplined by the state.\textsuperscript{42} What emerged from Lewis and Moynihan’s racialized explanations, and with the help of media perpetuating these cultural representations, was the racial, gendered, and sexualized figure of the welfare queen, which constructed black women as deviant able-bodied mothers who were lazy and purposely had more children to garner more undeserved taxpayer support.\textsuperscript{43} These racialized, gendered, and sexualized representations help explain why the specific identities, stigmas, and subjectivities of \textit{birth mothers of color} are unaddressed not only by this new language but by the “solution” of adoption in general. Unlike white birth mothers and white adoptive mothers, nonwhite birth mothers’ identities could not be changed or recuperated through adoption.

Similar to the domestic circumstance, Spencer’s aversion to terms such as “relinquished” and “surrendered” also ignored the racial, gender, and class for the

\textsuperscript{39} Lewis, \textit{La Vida: a Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty}, 1968: xv.
\textsuperscript{40} Lewis, \textit{The Children of Sanchez}, 1961.
\textsuperscript{41} Moynihan, “The Negro Family, 1965.
\textsuperscript{42} Ferguson, \textit{Aberrations in Black}, 2003.
transnational context. But there were also national inequalities produced by war and military intervention that contributed to the situation that many Korean and Vietnamese mothers faced, who had little choice after conceiving children of mixed-race with U.S. soldiers. While poverty and social stigma contributed to these conditions, U.S. military intervention, devastation, and abandonment in both cases created impossible situations for birth mothers who were indeed forced to relinquish their child. Such “positive” and “respectful” language also glossed over the numerous cases in which birth parents never intended to fully relinquish parental rights. Many desperate mothers left their child or children at orphanages with the full intent of returning later. In these cases, and ones that include coercion and outright child trafficking, “surrender” and “planning” never occurred. As Eleana Kim notes, Korean mothers have faced the same stigma of illegitimacy that mothers in the United States face. Yet how we frame their identity and livelihood is subsumed by the production of the Asian orphan figure, who is the victimized object of rescue. In the minds of the West, Asian birth mothers are victims of poverty and cultural patriarchy, whose child will gain hope and freedom in the United States. Asian birth mothers, like mothers of color in the United States, are the absent presence in PAL and RAL because how does one “positively” and “respectfully” convey the effects of military imperialism or adoptions that continued as a way to not only combat overpopulation but develop political and trade relations with Western nations? While Spencer could not have predicted the continued predominance of such adoptions in the late 1970s, both Spencer and Johnston were promoting this language into the

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beginning of the twenty-first century at the peak of transnational adoption. Even as Johnston concedes that there are a few exceptions when birth parents do not make adoption plans, the language they both promoted universalized the white birth parent/mother experience in an entirely Western context. Similar to Chandra Mohanty’s critique of western feminism, the categories of adoptive mother and birth mother in PAL/RAL were presupposed and already constituted “regardless of class, ethnic or racial location,” which placed the marked woman/mother of color as an object without agency.46

Linked to the legal outcome and “moral teleology” arguments was the desire to portray adoption in a positive light and as a normal means for family-making. This made terminology regarding both sets of parents important for adoption supporters. Similar to avoiding the language of “adopted child,” Spencer advocated minimal use of the qualifier “adoptive” to describe parents who adopt. She maintained that since the adoptive mother and father are the permanent parents, legally, socially and emotionally, the descriptor “adoptive” should not be used except in the context of adoption-related discussions, where the terms “adoptive mother” (and father) would then be appropriate. Using the “adoptive parent” label outside of these contexts would permanently and unfairly label the parents by the process by which they acquired a child, which would question the permanency and authenticity of the family tie and highlighted their difference and “abnormality.”47 By dropping the term “adoptive,” the definition of parent became

unbound, which helped to combat the historical bias against adoption and constructed adoptive parenthood as valid and normal.

Second-choice and unsuitability were and still are representations that adoptive parents have historically had to contend with. As a result of this stigmatization, adoptive parents often struggled with the feeling of entitlement and sense of “realness”—that the child was “unconditionally (and exclusively) their own child.” As Johnston notes, “Building a sense of entitlement to one another is a part of the claiming and bonding process for all of those in adoption-expanded families. It’s about believing, with all of one’s being, that you are OK, that you are deserving, that you belong, that, together, the family and each of its members is whole and strong. That we are real.” This psychological hurdle stemmed from the societal presumption that the best parents were biological ones and from fears that birth parents might come back to reclaim their child. Smith and Miroff explain that different perceptions of fitness come into play. Although society, or more specifically the court, must “prove” that birth parents are unable or unwilling to raise their child, adoptive parents must demonstrate to the adoption agency, state, and society that they are fit parents through a rigorous process of prescreening.

Prescreening included finding out information about religion, education, socio-economic status, emotional well being, community status, and infertility and most importantly a home study in which social workers visit the home of the prospective

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adoptive parents, all to determine their in/suitability to adopt. Proponents of PAL/RAL contended that the terms “home study” and “prescreening” discredited adoptive families a priori, suggesting that they be replaced with “parent preparation,” which described agencies and adopting parents navigating the process of adoption. This prescreening process for adoptive parents developed because of two main reasons. First, the ratio of potential adoptive parents in relation to “waiting” children increased, allowing social workers to be more selective in choosing the “ideal” parents. The postwar boom had increased adoptions threefold because 80 percent of unwed mothers placed their child for adoption. That percentage, however, dropped to five percent during and following the 1970s women’s movement, which increased access to contraception, legalized abortion, and destigmatized single motherhood. Fewer healthy white infants, combined with increased demand for adoption, produced a shift from screening children, i.e. which child was adoptable and matched the parents, to screening prospective adoptive parents. This screening exacerbated adoption’s nonnormative status in the eyes of not just the public but agencies too. Pre-screening was a systematic effort that judged prospective adoptive parents in numerous ways to weed out potentially “bad” parents who would be unable to produce healthy children and normal families.

The second reason stemmed from the attempt to control what was at times an unregulated system. For example the first adoptions from Korea, facilitated by the “founders” of modern transnational adoptions Bertha and Harry Holt of Eugene, Oregon, presented concerns and controversy because the Holts’ method of selecting parents only

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51 Wegar, “In Search of Bad Mothers,” 1997: 79-81
required that prospective parents be Christian (Herman 222). Reactions by adoption agencies to the long history of very few guidelines and requirements to protect children led to possible overcorrection, where adoptive parents continually struggled to present their qualifications to be “perfect parent.” In 1984, one adoptive mother in Illinois was told she needed to quit working as a nurse for six years in order to stay at home. She asked rhetorically, “Do they insist that biological mothers stay with their babies for six years? Is there someone out there who dictates that biological parents must have $20,000 in the bank before a wife can become pregnant?”

The stigmatization that adoptive parents faced and in many ways still deal with, however, led to efforts by adoptive parents and adoption social workers to displace and lessen the status of the birth mother. Prior to the institutionalization of PAL/RAL, the biological mother was referred to as the natural, first, or real mother by agencies, the court, and society at large. Spencer, Johnston, and other supporters of adoption felt that these terms in particular worked to delegitimize adoptive families and parenthood. Spencer explained her disapproval of the terms “first mother,” “natural parent,” and “real mother”:

‘First mother (or father).’ This term is accurate only if the birth-giving mother or biological father did some parenting during the postnatal period. If they never functioned as parents, their contribution was limited to the prenatal and birth-giving process. Only in the case of an older child who experience some parenting from his birth parents is it correct to speak of a ‘first mother’ or ‘first father.’ …

‘Natural parent.’ This term, used primarily in legal contexts, implies that the adoptive parent is somehow unnatural, ‘artificial,’ …

‘Real mother.’ ‘real father.’ What constitutes a ‘real’ parent? In terms of familial relationships and social functions, the ‘real’ parents are the

adoptive parents, not biological parents. The adoptive parents care for the child, nurture growth, transmit knowledge and values. The biological parents brought a child into the world; the adoptive parents help the child to cope with the world—a challenging task, and just as ‘real.’ To apply the term exclusively to biological parents is grossly inaccurate. 53

Spencer and other PAL/RAL advocates encouraged using more “correct” terms such as birth mother, mother of birth, and biological parent. Terms such as “natural” and “real parent” used to describe birth parents were “emotionally charged” and threatened the legitimacy of both the adoptee and adoptive parents because it did not reflect the legal outcome of adoption, which severed rights, legal and moral responsibilities, and ties of the birth parents from the child. The term “real parent” to refer to the biological parents violent implied adoptive relationships were “artificial and tentative” and that adoptive families were inferior or “second-best.” 54 In recognizing the legitimacy of birth parents, Johnston states, “Indeed in adoption children will always have TWO ‘real’ families: one by birth and one by adoption.” However, the goal of PAL/RAL in effect was to solidify the placement of adoptive parents over and against birth parents. The new language designated and differentiated the biological realities from the social realities of “real (adoptive) parents.” Moreover, it diffused “competition or conflict” by cultivating understanding within and about the “adoption triad.” The role of birth parents among the three parties of the adoption triad was clarified as being the “man and woman who shared in a child’s conception and who planned adoption for the child.” 55 In this way, PAL/RAL were supposedly respectful of birth parents too, depicting them as responsible individuals who choose to transfer the right and responsibility of parenting to adoptive parents.

54 Johnston, “Speaking Positively.”
While first used by prominent author and adoption supporter Pearl Buck, the term birth parent or birth mother gained greater prominence in the mid-1970s. As a singular word, birthparent or birthmother, germinated from an effort by activist Lee Campbell, a birth mother herself, who was forming a group to address the needs of “parents who had surrendered children for adoption.” Campbell opposed the term “biological parents” because she and other parents were more than “procreating protoplasm;” she also disliked “natural parents” because it defined adoptive parents as unnatural. “Birth parent” had existed in the lexicon, but Campbell combined the two to create a more appealing acronym. The original name she had for the organization was Birth Parents United in Concern, which she then switched to Concerned United Birthparents. For Campbell, “birthparent” conveyed the feeling and social history of being a mother along with the pre-, during, and post-natal aspects of birthing. The process of birthing everlastingly connects birthparents to their child.

Yet within the last two decades some activists have strongly rejected the term birth mother or birthparent. Diane Turski, an activist who calls herself a natural mother, argues that the term “birth mother” is a euphemism for incubator or breeder and was established under “positive” adoption language. Turski contends that this move was more of an attempt to break the natural bond between the mother and her child in order to make the adoptive family less threatened, more comfortable, and more natural. Another natural mother of an adoptee critiques the term birthmother as well: “And its meaning [birthmother] is clear: that we are no longer mothers (emotionally, socially, or legally) to

56 Herman, Kinship by Design, 17.
the children we surrendered for adoption. That the sole parent and mother of our lost child is the woman who adopted our baby.” In 1999, Spencer published an updated guide on correct adoption vocabulary, which gives credence to Turski’s claim. In it, she states that terms such as “Birthgiver” and “Woman who gave birth” are accurate descriptors, while biological mother/father are not. She relegates birth parents to “the woman and man whose egg and sperm combined” to conceive a child and whose main importance is merely being a source for hereditary and health information for the adopted child. In fact, birth mothers often experience this assignment of birth mother or birthgiver even before the adoption is finalized, during the pre-adoptive process. As adoptive parents were concerned with how society viewed their family, the goal of highlighting the legal outcome of adoption was paramount. This was a main reason why “adoption triangle” was classified as a negative term because it connotes that lines were still attached. Thus, the term birth parent, in relation to just “parent,” reinforced the act of severing ties of the child from her/his natural mother. The line distinguishing who the real parent was legally and socially would no longer be blurred.

Here the birth mother, as an actual person and symbolic figure, was discursively distanced from the identity of mother. Her teenage, unwed, or unready status situated her as incompatible with heteropatriarchal and nuclear ideals of family. For example, Spencer promoted steering clear from the terms “illegitimate child” and “unwanted child” because the former was better stated as “out of wedlock” and the latter was not

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59 Spencer, “Adoption Vocabulary,” 12.
necessarily precise because often it was the role of “parent” that was primarily unwanted. For Spencer, “out of wedlock” was supposed to be a less negative term than illegitimate and more exact than unwanted, but the language of “out of wedlock” still provided rationale for the birth mother to relinquish her child. By the 1940s, social welfare professionals had attached neurosis to unwed motherhood, but the status as an unfit mother could be redeemed if she relinquished her child for married couples to adopt. Thus rather than questioning the heteropatriarchal requirement of marriage to raise a child and the social context that makes illegitimacy a negative status or the lack of social support to keep and parent her child, PAL and RAL suggested a sanitized version “out of wedlock” that ultimately upholds the birth mother as an undeserving figure, whose only option for redemption is ironically to only give birth but not to mother.

In other words, the discursive move to take away “natural” from and ascribe “birth,” “plan,” and “responsible” to the natal mother and parents works to simultaneously recuperate white birth parents as good subjects who enable heteropatriarchal family relations and reject a priori any claims that they might make as mothers or parents. This discursive negation is exacerbated by transnational adoption that engenders a vast spatial and temporal distance for the nonwhite birth mother from her child and the identity of mother. Yet, discarding the descriptors “adoptive” and “natural” from (white) adoptive parents and (nonwhite) birth mothers respectively do not provide adoptive parents with the assurance of having a “natural” family. The racial markers distinguishing adoptive parent and child still remain for transracial and transnational

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adoptions. The primary recourse then was to attempt to normalize transnational adoptions and narrow the definition of motherhood, parent, and family. Thus, while PAL and RAL eased the concerns of adoptive parents because the vast majority was white, the new terminologies ignored the way in which racial difference operated materially and symbolically. PAL and RAL never addressed the needs of birth mothers of color, both in the United States and elsewhere, who lacked the resources to make or to reject a “responsible” “adoption plan.”

Spencer also opposed the use of the term “reunion” to describe cases when adoptees both seek and see their biological parents, which in most cases meant birth mother. Spencer argued that the term delegitimized the legal status of adoption and implied that the adoption is (or could be) dissolved even though the adoptee does not rejoin the biological family. Its celebrated status, along with the search and open records movements in general, has also positioned adoptive mothers as deficient and even harmful to the well being of adoptee.64 Spencer characterized “reunions” as a minor curiosity: “In reality, the desire to establish contact often reflects no more than the wish of many adopted persons to take a look at their biological ancestors.” By avoiding the term “reunion,” the meeting could be represented as temporary, singular, or at most a discrete event. Only in the case in which the adoptee “remembers being parented by her or his biological family” could the meeting be described as a ‘reunion.’ For Spencer, phrases such as “making contact with,” “meeting with,” or “getting in touch with”

64 Wegar, “In Search of Bad Mothers,” 82.
describe these encounters more precisely. Johnston is in full agreement with this

perspective on reunions:

While children adopted at an older age may indeed experience a reunion, most adoptees join their families as infants, and as such they have no common store of memories or experience such as are traditionally shared in a reunion. The more objective descriptor for a meeting between a child and the birthparents who planned his adoption (a term which neither boosts unrealistic expectations for the event nor implies a competition for loyalties between birthparents and adoptive parents) is meeting.”

[Emphasis original]

Like Spencer, Johnston is making an “objective” argument about accuracy and emotional correctness in language use. For both, “reunion” is an emotionally charged word that discredits adoptive families and adoptive mothers, while implying a bond that may have “never existed” or will ever exist. Indeed, these terms carefully avoid indication of familial relationship between the adoptees and their birth parents and diminishes actual desires of many adoptees who want to know more or reconnect with their past. This event then is “no more than” a “look at” or “meeting with” one’s disconnected biological past. Thus, Spencer, Johnston, and other proponents of PAL/RAL would argue that the symbolic violence of traditional adoption terminology, which attached the descriptors “natural” and “real” to biological and genetic motherhood, required the introduction of new, common sense language that would destigmatize and validate adoptive families, mothers, and parenthood. But in instituting this new interpretation and language, what violence was enacted?

**Positively Violent**

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66 Johnston, “Speaking Positively.”
Here I argue that the solution to the symbolic violence that adoptive parents and families faced enacted what Denise Silva calls productive violence, which produces certain meaning and representation while destroying or rejecting something else. Early transnational adoptions from Asia represented the strategy of containment of the racial Other, which meant transracial adoption was accepted mainly because assimilation limited harmful biological reproduction of the racial Other and rescuing “orphans” from Communist countries promoted democracy. However, PAL/RAL, especially in the context of transnational/racial adoptions, emerged as a strategy of displacement through symbolic negation and foreclosure. Thus, the problem with the deployment of specific PAL/RAL terms—such as “parent” (instead of “adoptive parent”); “birth parent” (instead of “natural parent”); “unwed mother” or “out-of-wedlock child” (rather than illegitimate child); “placed” (rather than “surrendered” or “relinquished”); and “making contact with” (versus “reunion”—was that it reiterated heteropatriarchal ideals and more importantly erased the importance of birth mothers. It denaturalized the relationship between birth mothers and their children to the extent that if they ever saw each other again, it would be as if they were strangers rather than family. Here, Jacque Derrida’s discussion of representation through the sign and instituted trace is useful. He states the sign is something that is always becoming, i.e. its definition and symbolism, or representation, are never fully concrete. Its becoming, or development, is dependent on the line that

67 Here I am combining Arrisa Oh (2005) and Christina Klein’s (2003) arguments—that claimed Asian transnational/racial adoptions were a way for United States to participate in American liberalism—with Denise Silva’s (2007) argument about liberalism’s containment racial difference through miscegenation, which would disappear the racial Other of Europe (132, 157). Oh, “A New Kind of Missionary Work”; Klein, Cold War Orientalism; and Silva, Toward a Global Idea of Race.

68 Negation requires a positive statement of irrelevance or disavowal of the racial Other, while foreclosure takes place when something is present but there is an absence of engagement as if it were not there. Spivak, A Critique of Postcolonial Reason, 1999: 5.
separates the signifier and the signified. That line, the *trace*, is what polices and
determines which signifiers are legible and illegible.\(^6^9\) The hitherto “unmotivated” line,
Derrida contends, in actuality dictates which signifiers are in/eligible to represent the
signified meaning. Signifiers that are determined to be *ineligible* by the trace are *illegible*.
They are still there—still present, but they are hidden and obscured, or even erased. In
short, the adoptive parents displaced birth parents as the *only* signifiers of “real” parents
in order to establish the new (restrictive) definition of family.

Adoption was reconstructed as a moral teleology that “was good for everyone,”
and at its very foundation was the belief that unwed mothers and children who are born
out-of-wedlock were morally, socially, and emotionally incompatible. More specifically,
the practice of PAL/RAL both ignored and engendered violence that takes place both
before and after adoption. For example, the material and symbolic violence of war and
imperialism that produced the desperate mother, the orphan figure who must be rescued,
and ultimately the need for adoption is ignored or diminished. More importantly,
PAL/RAL executes the preliminary ideological work that is required to make the birth
parents illegible and insignificant in relation to the adoptive parents. This productive
violence works double-time because as adoption agencies and families employ PAL/RAL
in everyday practice it continues to enact the necessary violence to maintain the distinct
representational relationship that separates the birth mother and family from being
legitimate figures in the life of the adoptee by those who avoid acknowledging familial
and cultural connections that existed prior to adoption.

\(^6^9\) Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 47.
PAL/RAL became the instituted trace, the affirming light for adoption, and the violent arbiters of who is legible as the real parent, mother, and family. By discarding “natural” and assigning the term “birth” in its place, PAL/RAL accomplished the symbolic process of denaturalization. As Turski and other opponents of the term birthmother note, new adoption terminology fixed meaning so that the term “birth mother” referred to the undertaking of birth and little else, severing any imagined or actual future emotional and familial tie. The corollary, in claiming the title “parent,” adoptive parents became the unmarked norm. While unable to reproduce the naturalized effect of same-race adoptions, transnational adoptions could more securely sever birth culture and family ties. Despite some language that would suggest otherwise, e.g. adoption circle, PAL/RAL ultimately reiterate heteropatriarchal norms of having only one set of parents. Anything different or more could not constitute a legitimate family.

Neither Spencer nor Johnston mentioned the unique conditions of transracial and transnational adoption. The terminology that they offered was universal and theoretically applied to all adoptions in a race-neutral way. Whether Spencer and Johnston meant to or not, PAL and RAL worked to combat many of the issues that transracial and transnational adoptions had exacerbated. The universalism that is applied to PAL and RAL rehearsed the western feminist refrain of liberating white middle class women (and families) from the stigma of society. But in defining motherhood so narrowly, the universal terms they offered dismissed the biological ties and disregarded the inequalities endured by birth mothers, both white and nonwhite.

The battle over language has not stopped as individuals and institutions continue to promote the use of positive adoption vocabulary. For example, the director of St.
Elizabeth Foundation in Baton Rouge, which is a non-profit organization that provides pregnancy counseling, maternity, and adoption services, submitted a guest column in 1989, to inform news writers and the public to recognize and avoid “biased/faulty terminology”:

Adoption is all about love. It is also about choice. It is about building families. It is about permanence. It is about commitment. The birth mother who isn’t ready or able to parent, as the one mentioned in Cullen’s article makes a difficult and loving choice to give to her baby a better chance by making an adoption plan. The adoptive parents choose to offer their love and nurture to the baby by giving family, permanence, commitment. …

In November 1993, *The Daily Oklahoman* educated readers about Positive Adoption Language during National Adoption Month. Those who educate the public feel compelled because traditional adoption language still abounds. Also in 1993, a reader had to remind *The Seattle Times* that the usage of “natural parents” in the caption of a story on adoption produces a host of negative connotations and issues that Spencer and Irwin outline. Significantly, a government report in 1993 on adoption used the term “natural parent” multiple times. And as late as November 2007, the *Times-Tribune* of Scranton, Pennsylvania, in describing recent changes in federal law that make it harder for birth parents to reclaim their child, used the term natural parent. In fact, one news article that was promoting adoption awareness for National Adoption Month discussed the issue of sensitive language, noting that “it is best to not say things like ‘real parent’ or ‘own child’

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[because] this implies that adoptive relationships are artificial or less important than biological situations.” But in its explanation for promoting terms such as “biological or birth parent,” it says that these terms are inclusive of the natural parent. Thus the effort to establish sensitive language that aligns with PAL was in this case undone by using language PAL explicitly discourages.  

Positive adoption language has been integrated and normalized within the adoption industry and community, but the need for it has bled into other institutional realms. More recently the focus has shifted to education. For example, Adam Pertman suggests that teachers avoid well intentioned “adopt-a-tree” and similar programs. These commitments imply that anything can be adopted, and they can start or stop whenever it is convenient.

Spencer stated that the purpose of outlining positive adoption language was to provide insight for people and the public who unwittingly “continue to confuse and distort” adoption terminology. The editors of Spencer’s article stated that they in general agreed with Spencer’s suggestions as “correct, sensitive and beneficial” and strongly endorsed her concluding comments on education about the language of adoption.  

For Spencer, more precise vocabulary served the interest of those who are involved with and a part of adoption. Ironically, she claimed that adoption was “an essentially simple and orderly human transaction” that “should not be confused or made more complex by the use of imprecise language.” She ended by reaffirming that love was embedded in the creation of a family through adoption and in her effort to transform adoption

75 “Adoption awareness to be promoted.” The Salina Journal (KS), November 13, 2002, accessed November 30, 2012, NewsBank. The 1997 National Adoption Survey also used terminology deem as negative. In the questions it asked the respondents and in its report, they survey used language of “put up for adoption” rather than placed.

76 Pertman, Adoption Nation, 120.

terminology: “After all, the language of adoption is loving communication among members of a family created by social contract, sustained by their life together, and supported by an informed society that validates the integrity of the family.” Despite the explicit allusion to love and “positivity,” PAL and RAL were both effects of power deployed by social workers, adoption professionals, and adoptive parents (rather than birth parents) and instruments of power that have been used to violently define motherhood and family, which has significantly shaped adoption industry and discourse. The new language guidelines are fairly standard now for agencies, and tables delineating positive/respectful language versus negative and old language can be found across the internet in ways that still ignore the nuances of race. Yet despite this major shift in terminology and language, the public perception of adoption continues to show that many people still question family bonds through adoption. The next section examines how the historical context of mixed public sentiment on adoption coincided and led to the proliferation of adoption outcome studies.

**Part II: Normalizing Adoption through Scientific Studies**

While the new, universalized adoption language failed to address the ways in which race played a part in “positively” defining motherhood and family, the issue of race, the specter of the birth mother, and the battle for legitimacy in TRA and TNA could not be ignored. The enormous public visibility of these adoptions meant that family-making was not and could not be a private or secret matter. But even before controversy over TRA and TNAs existed, the uncertainty of and dichotomous views on adoption prompted countless social scientific outcome studies, in the fields of psychology and

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78 Ibid., 459.
social work especially, to determine whether adoption in general had positive or negative outcomes. New questions of success, benefit, and harm emerged as adoption began shifting away from child labor and more toward family-making. Using independent variables such as the child’s sex, age at adoption, natal family background, and adopters’ characteristics, these studies from the 1920s to 1960s tried to measure outcomes including child adjustment and development (e.g. self-esteem and positive/negative behaviors), family integration, child and parental satisfaction, and overall success (or failure). Science was the response to the uncertainty of adoption: it would reassure adopting parents, social workers, and the state that adoptions could not only be safe but successful and beneficial. Greater knowledge of patterns in population samples meant that the process of adoption could be revised in order to manage risks and generate success. More importantly, select studies would prove that with proper intervention nature could yield to nurture and that ultimately love could displace nature, affirming that it has the power to overcome any negative perception.79

While researchers who are engaged in outcome studies reference and review the broader literature of these studies, the discussion of such research outside of the “outcome study context” is very marginal. Most scholars who support TRA and TNAs cite these studies as expert and scientific proof that they do not cause harm. They illustrate how such adoptions can produce loving families with healthy and well-adjusted children.80 The editors of Outsiders Within, which is a collection of academic and literary transracial adoptee-authored texts, critique such on race and adoption studies as

79 Herman, Kinship by Design, Chapter 5.
80 Pertman, Adoption Nation, 32 and 71 and Melosh, Strangers and Kin, 177 and 289.
dominating adoption discourse in a way that tell adoptees how they should feel.\(^{81}\)

Cultural anthropologist Eleana Kim and American Studies scholar Sandra Patton provide brief critiques of outcome studies as a way to set up why their ethnographic- and narrative-based methodologies present new ways of thinking about TRA and TNAs.\(^{82}\)

This has left Ellen Herman as the main scholar to extensively examine the history and effects of outcome studies; however, her research focuses more on early outcome studies for “traditional” same-race adoptions from the 1920s to 1960s, which misses much of the research that addressed TRA and TNAs.\(^{83}\)

This section examines TRA and TNA outcome studies, specifically offering a critical literature review of how outcome research framed adoption and interpreted race. My intervention here is not to re-examine the studies or to completely dismiss them but rather to suggest that they helped establish a specific narrative about transracial adoptive family-making. First, while the studies broadly claimed that domestic and transnational transracial adopted children had healthy outcomes, I argue that the studies were equally important because they normalized both adoption and adoptive families that were transracial to be “just as good” as same-race (also called inracial) adoptions and adoptive families.

At the same time, the way in which race was interpreted and measured was problematically simplistic and positivistic. Race, as both an independent variable (i.e. a child or parent’s “biological” racial make-up) and dependent variable (e.g. level of the

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\(^{81}\) Outsiders Within, Ed. Trenka et al., 4.

\(^{82}\) Kim, Adopted Territories, 9-10 and Patton, Birth Marks, 5.

\(^{83}\) See also Park and Green who critique outcome studies as Euro-centric. Park and Green, “Is Transracial Adoption in the Best Interest of Ethnic Minority Children?” 2000. Herman does discuss David Fanshel’s 1972 study, Far From the Reservation, of Native American adoptions. For her discussion on studies of domestic transracial adoption see Herman, Kinship by Design, 248-249.
child’s ethnoracial identity/pride), was almost always framed as a genetic descriptor or simplistic identity that one possessed or did not possess. Thus the fluidity and constructedness of both their assigned “natural” and self-identified racial identities was never addressed. Moreover, this version of race failed to ascertain the violent global and historical contexts that engender uneven determining ideological and structural effects of racial difference. Hence, I also argue in this section that because many of the scientific studies on TRA and TNAs never accounted for a complex understanding of race, they were never as conclusive as they claimed. While many asserted that such adoptions were beneficial and just as successful as same-race adoptions in terms of adjustment, behavioral, and other measures, there were numerous studies that pointed to the opposite. More importantly, even the studies that claimed to demonstrate that race was not a significant factor for positive outcomes often included in their conclusions deference to inracial adoptions as the presumptive primary option. Thus, even though the importance of race was diminished in the final assessments of these studies, researchers often stated and acknowledged that inracial adoptions were the ideal because the latter could attain the goal of “naturalization.” What emerged from this contradiction was that scholars and supporters of TRA and TNAs employed this research as a crucial site of knowledge production to underscore the transcendence of love and its ability to overcome racial difference and promote a collective interpretation of these adoptions as a normative and legitimate form of family-making.

**Domestic and Transnational, Transracial Studies**

Transracial and transnational adoptions had a whole other effect on adoption research. Matching was the easiest way to recreate naturalization, but this strategy was
clearly inhibited by racial difference that was visible in TRA and TNA. For many people, institutions, and the nation, these adoptions symbolized democratic liberal humanism of the post-World War II era and anti-communist sentiment from the Cold War. Yet, paired with the historical context of slavery, eugenics, immigrant exclusion, segregation, and anti-miscegenation laws in the United States and its imperial tendencies abroad, such adoptions evoked mixed feelings from the American public. Controversy around them came to a head in the 1970s when nonwhite organizations and communities called into question the motives and effects of white parents who were starting to adopt black, Native American, and Asian children in greater numbers.

In 1972, the National Association for Black Social Workers (NABSW) published a position paper that addressed their concerns about the history, present, and future of African American children and families. Widely reviled and labeled as a cultural nationalist and reverse racist statement by transracial adoption advocates, it affirmed the importance of “positive” ethnicity in the historical context of suppressed black identity and asserted the belief that family is the basic unit of society that is crucial for the physical, psychological, and cultural development of identity. In highlighting the structural racism embedded “at every level” of society, it also affirmed the necessity of the black family to raise black children, who would always be posited as racially different from white children and parents, in order to pass on positive cultural identity and survival skills to negotiate racism. This also meant that white parents were incapable of meeting these needs of black children. Indeed many TRA outcome studies often framed their

research inquiry, at least in part, on the opposition articulated by the NABSW and other critics of transracial adoption. Despite wide disagreement within the social work profession, the Child Welfare League of America revised its suggested standards in 1973, supporting the belief that same-race placements were preferred over transracial ones, which was just years after it had publicly supported transracial adoption.

As TRA and TNA adoption began to increase in the 1960s and 1970s and then continue despite their controversy, researchers started looking into the question of whether these placements were beneficial or harmful for the adopted children. These early scientific studies examined numerous independent variables. The main one was the child’s ethnoracial background, where race was conceived as a static physical and genetic descriptor rather than a fluid identity and mode of power. Other independent variables included gender (which like race was reduced to a static category), age at the time of placement, age at time of the study, sibling composition, racial isolation/disapproval, and neighborhood and school environment. They were used to measure just as many dependent variables such as educational performance, level of functioning, discrimination, and problem behavior, with the main ones being self-esteem, ethnoracial identity, and overall adjustment. By and large TRA and TNA were summarized as just as successful as inracial adoptions. The predominant picture was that white parents were able to provide nurturing, loving, and permanent homes that fostered healthy, well adjusted transracial adoptees who were aware of their heritage and had high self-


esteem. Minnesota social worker and researcher Harriet Fricke stated, “[White couples] have all the attributes of good adoptive parents—with an important plus: they are tremendously secure people who do not need constant community or larger-family support to survive.” Likewise, with a success rate of 77 percent, which approximated other studies of “conventional white infant adoptions,” Lucille Grow and Deborah Shapiro, research associates for the CWLA Research Center, concluded, “Thus, the predominant picture is that of healthy and well-adjusted children, aware of their heritage, living with parents who were highly satisfied with their adoption experience.”

Sociologists Arnold Silverman and William Feigelman, in their study, even found that Korean adoptees were better adjusted than their white counterparts.

Self-esteem, in particular, was considered a mainstay of healthy development and has been investigated in many outcome studies. Low self-esteem had been strongly connected to negative outcomes such as aggression, antisocial behavior, and delinquency. Psychology professor David Brodzinsky et al. noted that “being adopted can complicate the development of self-image and self-esteem” because of feelings of being cut off or rejected by birth parents and perceive differences between themselves and their adoptive family members, especially with transracial adoptions. Studies done at various stages of growth including childhood, adolescence, and adulthood on self-esteem have generally


89 Fricke, “Interracial Adoption,” 96.

90 Grow and Shapiro, “Adoption of Black Children by White Parents,” 58.

91 Feigelman and Silverman, “The Long-Term Effects of Transracial Adoption.”

determined little to no difference between adopted and nonadopted children. Social work professors Ruth McRoy et al. conducted a comparative study of black children from TRA and inracial adoptions and found no differences overall in self-esteem, which was even as high as the general population of nonadopted children, which suggested that “positive self-esteem [could] be generated as effectively among black children in white adoptive families as in black adoptive families.” Femmie Juffer and Marinus IJzendoorn, child and family scholars in Netherlands, did a meta-analysis of 88 outcome studies and confirmed that adoptees of all categories, international and domestic as well as transracial and inracial, showed “normative levels of self-esteem.”

Research studies were also concerned with ethnoracial identity, especially after criticism of TRA and TNA grew. This question of ethnoracial identity was also important because many adoptive parents lived in small cities and rural towns. The widely practiced strategy of cultural assimilation, similar to the advice offered by Pettiss, was strongly criticized for stripping nonwhite children of the right to their “birth culture,” or what studies called ethnoracial identity. Opponents of TRA argued that white parents were ill-equipped to do this. The obvious critique was that an adopted child could have high self-esteem but still have a negative view of her or his racial identity. Thus one of the central areas of investigation for adoption researchers was: “Did living in mostly white neighborhoods, going to school with mostly white students, and being raise by


95 The following studies were concerned with the question of ethno-racial identity: Brooks and Barth, “Adult Transracial and Inracial Adoptees”; Grow and Shapiro, “Adoption of Black Children by White Parents”; Fanshel, Far From the Reservation; McRoy et al., “Self-esteem and Racial Identity in Transracial and Inracial Adoptees”; Vroegh, “Transracial Adoptees.”
white parents hurt ethnoracial identity development?” Devon Brooks and Richard Barth, professors in social work, conducted a comparative study of white, black, and Korean adolescents adopted by white parents. It found that there were no significant differences among the groups. Collectively, 65 percent had “secure racial identities” and 35 percent retained “strong racial identities,” while none possessed “weak racial identity.” This led them to conclude that the “present findings demonstrate that Caucasian parents, too, are capable of raising African-American and Asian children and meeting their children’s ethnoracial needs.”

In her comparative study of black adolescents from TRA and same-race adoptions, Karen Vroegh argued that there was no evidence, from her studies or others, that everyday relationships with black people were necessary to the development of a black racial identity. Silverman and Feigelman stated it most forcefully that the findings from their research and other studies showed that the push to curtail transracial placements was highly questionable: “[Our] evidence indicates that whatever problems may be generated by transracial adoption, the benefits to the child outweigh its costs. There is no evidence that any of the serious problems of adjustment suggested by the critics of transracial adoption are present in any meaningful proportion for nonwhite children who have been adopted by white parents.”

In their review of transracial adoption outcome research, Rita Simon and Howard Altstein, two of the most cited authors on TRA and TNA outcome studies, concluded that “the quality of parenting was more important than whether the black child had been inracially or transracially adopted,” and that “transracial adoptees had developed pride in

96 Brooks and Barth, “Adult Transracial and Inracial Adoptees,” 98.
97 Vroegh, “Transracial Adoptees,” 574.
98 Feigelman and Silverman, “The Long-Term Effects of Transracial Adoption,” 601.
being black and were comfortable in their interactions with both black and white races.”99

Simon and Altstein fervently maintained that their “objective,” “unmotivated,” “depoliticized” scientific inquiries and studies demonstrate that transracial adoption is best for the child and society:

After three decades and several volumes of research, this is our final examination of transracial adoption. We enter this area of inquiry with no social or political agenda. We exit with none. We were interested in looking at how races could live together in so intimate an environment as the family at a time when we thought the races could not get much further apart (mid-1960s). To the best of our ability we sought the truth. We think we found it, as far as that abstract can be found. … What we have found is that in the overwhelming majority of cases, transracial adoption is a win-win situation.100

Thus not only from individual studies but from Simon and Altstein’s meta-analysis, research seemed to point to a clear fact that transracial adoptions were successful, just as good as inracial adoptions, and ultimately in the best interest of the child.

**Racial Realities of Outcome Research**

The reality of adoption research, however, was that outcome studies produced mixed results. Pertman critiques the methodology of some studies that preselected respondents that composed of families who were better educated, earned higher incomes, and adopted younger and healthier children. Additionally, children filled out questionnaires in the presence of their parents, which could have influenced their answers.101 Early studies were also largely dependent on parents’ perceptions either in interviews or surveys.102 Silverman and Feigelman even acknowledged that it was

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100 Ibid., 149-150.
102 The following studies were dependent on parent perceptions: Silverman & Feigelman, “The Adjustment of Black Children by White Families” and “The Long-Term Effects of Transracial Adoption”; Brooks
reasonable to ask if such perceptions could be “reliable,” but they had confidence in parental perception because other studies, Fanshel’s 1972 study in particular, have shown that they “closely correlated with the assessments made by trained interviewers and clinicians.”[^103]

Ironically, Silverman and Feigelman’s argument in their 1984 study contradicted their research done in a 1977 study of white couples who had adopted Vietnamese children before and after Operation Babylift.[^104] They found that Vietnamese adoptees who were adopted after the historical moment of Operation Babylift had adjusted just as well as Vietnamese children adopted before it happened, which ran counter to both common sense and their hypothesis. They believed that anti-Vietnamese sentiment and critiques in the media about the desirability and feasibility of these adoptions would increase adjustment problems for later adoptions. They cautiously reasoned that “Even if there were no sudden surge in public hostility toward their adoptions, these parents might be reluctant to admit the existence of problems. H. David Kirk (1964) in his studies of adopting families has described the reluctance of adoptive parents to admit problems in their adoptions” [emphasis mine].[^105]

Thus, Silverman and Feigelman, among many other researchers, ignored the limitations that they had explained a few years earlier in their own study. Another important weakness of adoption outcome research was that longitudinal studies used samples that had high participant

[^103]: Feigelman and Silverman, “The Long-Term Effects of Transracial Adoption,” 592
[^105]: Ibid., 261. Rojewski and Rojewski note that adoptive parents who had negative experiences might be less inclined to participate in such studies too. Rojewski and Rojewski, *Intercountry Adoption from China*, 12.
attrition rates.\textsuperscript{106} It was uncertain whether these studies were showing good outcomes, where usually 70 percent or more of the children who were adopted transracially “adjusted well,” or if they were merely showing the positive outcomes of those who were more willing to share their success stories.\textsuperscript{107} Perhaps even more significant than just high attrition rates was the fact that outcome studies never mentioned or included disruption, where the process of adoption has ended before the adoption is finalized, or dissolution, where the legal tie between the adoptive parents and adopted child is severed after the adoption has already been finalized.\textsuperscript{108}

In addition “race,” a supposedly “non-determining” factor, was in reality very significant in various studies that were conducted in different decades, which contradicted generalized claims by other studies that it was “not statistically significant.” Sociologist Laurence Falk found that white adoptive parents of transracial adoptees face greater isolation from and resistance by relatives and that parents were slightly less inclined to do it again if they had to; were more likely to think that it was more difficult to raise a child of a difference race; and less likely to recommend TRA than inracial couples were to recommend inracial adoption.\textsuperscript{109} Moreover, despite the claims by Vroegh

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\textsuperscript{106} The following studies were longitudinal that also had high attrition rates: Vroegh, “Transracial Adoptees”; Brooks and Barth, “Adult Transracial and Inracial Adoptees”; and Feigelman and Silverman, “The Long-Term Effects of Transracial Adoption.”
\textsuperscript{107} For example, in Feigelman and Silverman (1984) their study continued from the 1975 survey, which had originally sent out 1100 surveys with a 67 percent response rate (n = 737). Their survey in 1981, sent out 545 surveys (from the group of 737) with a completed response rate of 68 percent (372). Thus their longitudinal study comprised only 33.8 percent of the original survey goal of 1100 surveys or a slightly better rate of 50.5 percent of the original 737 respondents.
\textsuperscript{108} Like adoption data in general, reporting terminations are not mandatory, and thus there no accurate number. Varying studies of dissolution have found that somewhere between 10-25 percent of adoptions dissolve. Dissolutions are much rarer, occurring only for 1-10 percent of finalized adoptions. Child Welfare Information Gateway “Adoption Disruption and Dissolution,” 2012, accessed March 10, 2013, https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/s_disrup.cfm.
\textsuperscript{109} Falk, “A Comparative Study of Transracial and Inracial Adoptions.”
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as well Silverman and Feigelman, McRoy et al. found positive self-esteem in transracial adoptees but lower levels in their sense of racial identity.\textsuperscript{110} Those who attended integrated schools, lived in integrated communities, and had parents who accepted their racial identity felt positive about themselves as black persons. Transracial adoptees who did not have those experiences, i.e. their racial identity was de-emphasized and had no black role models, tended to devalue their racial identity. Some children who had no contact with blacks within their neighborhood or school had negative perceptions of blacks in general: “blacks are poor,” “many are militant,” and “they use bad English.”\textsuperscript{111} White adoptive parents, they stated, should be aware of and accept that the racial identity of their child is different from their own. They should be willing to make changes to help their child’s development by moving to integrated neighborhood, enrolling in integrated school, and establishing social relationship with black families. They conclude by claiming: “Although most white adoptive families applying to adopt black children probably can provide loving homes for the children, not all of them can fulfill black children’s need to feel positive about their black identity.”\textsuperscript{112} Thus they offered a conditional endorsement of transracial adoptive placements that “if necessary,” the parents should meet “specific criteria” and that adoption agencies investigate the larger “racial milieu” in order to determine whether they can successfully nurture healthy racial identity for their child.\textsuperscript{113}

In a much more contemporary study of families who adopted from Korea, Sociologists Elizabeth Rienzi, Jiannbin Shiao, and Mia Tuan, found that most white

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 525.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 526.
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid.
parents, when dealing with racial differences, often took a color-blind approach, encouraging the adoptees to assimilate because it was easier than dealing with unfamiliar racial issues. They argued that this approach actually led to a white perspective that tried to “normalize” their children, which, “consciously or not, worked to include their own children in the White category.” Additional evidence from surveys has suggested that many Korean adoptees considered themselves as white, which suggests they did not possess positive ethnoracial identities. In a survey of 167 adult Korean adoptees nearly 60 percent considered themselves either “Caucasian” or “American/European,” while growing up. More specifically, 36 percent of the adoptees considered themselves “Caucasian” and 22 percent considered themselves “American/European.” This idea of assimilation is bolstered by another study by Bergquist et al. that surveyed Caucasian parents who adopted children from Korea. More than two-third of respondents (68 percent for mothers and 73 percent for fathers) reported that “their transracial adoption did not change the racial characteristics of their family.” These studies strongly contradict the claim that there has been “no evidence” of “any significant proportion” showing that transracial and transnational adoptions are affected by notions of race.

Additionally, while a few researchers understood and were interested in the social notion of race (as opposed to it being only a biological trait or self-ascribed identity), they along with other researchers who did not make this distinction, conflated children who were perceived “fully” within a singular racial category with children who were deemed

114 Elizabeth Rienzi, Jiannbin Shiao, and Mia Tuan, “Shifting the Spotlight,” 12. See also Shiao and Tuan, Choosing Ethnicity, Negotiating Race, 2011.
115 Survey of the First Generation of Adult Korean Adoptees. 2000. The other percentages were 14 percent viewed themselves as “Asian/Korean,” while the remaining 28 percent considered themselves “Korean-American/European.”
“mixed-race” or “bi-racial.” In his study of 125 black children in white homes, Grow stated: “Most were described as having fair or light brown skin coloring and some Negroid features, but only slightly more than half were ‘obviously’ black, according to their parents.” For Vroegh, of the 34 “black” children who were adopted by white parents, 74 percent (n = 25) were of mixed black and white background. The purpose here is not to suggest that disaggregating racial categories for analysis would have necessarily reversed research outcomes. In fact, disaggregation might have led to more positivist claims about “mixed-race” children. Rather it points to the way in which “race” was reduced to a limited concept of biological heredity on the one hand and the absence or presence of self-ascribed “(ethno)racial identity” on the other rather understanding the complex social constructions and the individual and structural material consequences of race. In other words, both the decision of whom to adopt—i.e. the difference between adopting a child who is “obviously black” versus a child who is racially ambiguous—and how individuals, family members, society, and even adoptees themselves react to this decision were affected by race in complex ways. Race was more than an independent “biological” marker or dependent self-ascribed identity.

117 Falk (1970) compared adoptive parents who had adopted inracially with parents who adopted transracially. The latter group adopted children of varying backgrounds, which he disaggregates and categorizes as: “Negro” and “Negro-Caucasian”; “Indian” and “Indian-Caucasian”; and “Oriental” and “Oriental-Caucasian.” Falk, “A Comparative Study of Transracial and Inracial Adoptions,” 83. But Falk for his analysis, he again only compared the experiences of all the parents who had adopted transracially, as a whole, with those who had adopted inracially. For McRoy et al. 17 of the 30 “black” children adopted by white parents were categorized as “Black/White,” while eight were “Black/Black” and the remaining being other variations of mixed-raced Black. Yet, their study only divided the children into two groups: inracial adoptees (black children adopted by black parents) and transracial adoptees. McRoy et al., “Self-esteem and Racial Identity in Transracial and Inracial Adoptees,” 523. Feigelman and Silverman (1984) did not bother to disaggregate their groupings of black, Korean, and Columbian children. Feigelman & Silverman, “The Long-Term Effects of Transracial Adoption.”

118 Grow and Shapiro, “Adoption of Black Children by White Parents,” 58.

119 Vroegh, “Transracial Adoptees.”
For instance, what many of these studies showed either explicitly or indirectly in adoptive parents’ preferences to adopt white children or bi-racial children was the symbolic value of whiteness. While bi-racial children were being categorized wholly within the white parent-black child binary, their perceived “racial make-up” was appealing precisely for the exact opposite reason that they were closer to whiteness and further from blackness. In Fanshel’s (1972) study of white parents who adopted Native American children through the Indian Adoption Project, his research revealed that all transracial adoptions were not considered equal, showing a distinct racial preference. Fanshel reported, when asked about alternatives to Native American adoptions, that 15.6 percent of adoptive mothers responded that they would have “adopted easily” a child who was mixed “Negro-white” but who looked obviously “Negro,” while 58.3 percent responded that they “could not consider” such an adoption if asked. When adoptive mothers were asked if they would consider the adoption of an “Oriental,” the percentages reversed; 70.8 percent responded that they would have “adopted easily” and 6.3 percent said they “could not consider.” Sociology professor and adoptive mother Sara Dorow explains this phenomenon in her study of white parents who were making adoption and surrogacy plans and choices. She argues that “whiteness” operates as the invisible background noise. Dorow suggests that Asian babies are perceived as being desirably different and relatively baggage-free which allows for the celebration of positive culture while washing away negative cultural particularities, but U.S. black babies remain baggage-laden, tainted with abjectness, illegality, and criminality.  

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Lastly, researchers ignored the structural historical violence that preceded adoption. None of the early studies examined the conditions and context for why adoption was “needed” in the first place or ways to prevent the state of crisis that “compels” society to accept TRA and TNA.  

Fanshel in fact did quite the opposite by blaming the condition of Native American children on Native American “culture” and personal irresponsibility that produced unmarried mothers, illegitimate children, poverty, and other child welfare issues. Simon and Altstein argued that the “international component” of TNA in fact simplified adoption rather than making it more complex because Asian children did not carry the “historical baggage” that black children possessed, which was the point that NABSW alluded to in its position paper against TRA: “True, there are other issues of wealth, power, race, deception, kidnapping, class exploitation, colonialism, and imperialism, but these conditions are not as ‘close to home’ as the troubled and at times violent history of race in the United States.” Their statement acknowledges the violence involved in TNA, but then simultaneously negates its importance in how we might think about TRA and TNA in the larger context. None of the early research studies examined the effects of denying Native sovereignty, breaking treaties, disproportionate child service reporting, criminalization, the war on drugs, the prison industrial complex, neoliberal policies such as welfare reform, militarism, and war. Dawn Day, a black social worker, was the only researcher to mention the

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122 Fanshel, *Far From the Reservation*.

123 Simon and Altstein, *Adoption Across Borders*, 144.
discriminatory nature of child welfare services and the need for prevention in addition
and prior to adoption.\(^\text{124}\)

A “Loving” Solution

The point of this section is not to debate the minutiae, accuracy, or the merits of
these adoption outcome studies, but to interrogate what was at stake. The issue was
domestic and transnational transracial adoptions be just as good (normal) as traditional,
same-race adoptions? Countless social scientific studies have “proven” that they indeed
could be successful and therefore normal in terms of identity, behavioral, and
psychological adjustment when compared to same-race adoptions.\(^\text{125}\) Rita Simon argued
that two and a half decades’ worth of studies have shown that TRA and TNA do not
produce harm and are “unequivocally” in the children’s “best interest.”\(^\text{126}\) Harvard law
professor Elizabeth Bartholet, a strong advocate for TRA and TNA, argued that there is
no credible evidence to suggest that transracial adoptions produce harm, but that there is
evidence to suggest that children are indeed harmed by institutional care that “delays
adoptive placement or denies adoption altogether.”\(^\text{127}\) Many adoption researchers
declared that these adoptions were a success and in the children’s best interest without
addressing the fact that even in almost all of their studies, 30 percent of children had
significant adjustment or identity issues.

Here, I argue that in ignoring the nuances of race and making broad claims about
the success of TRA and TNA, researchers assisted in normalizing and legitimizing such


\(^{125}\) Simon and Altstein, *Adoption Across Borders*; Bartholet, “Commentary”; Kennedy, *Interracial
Intimacies*; Haugaard, “Research and Policy on Transracial Adoption.”

\(^{126}\) Simon, “Adoption and the Race Factor,” 278.

\(^{127}\) Bartholet, “Commentary.” 319.
adoptions. These adoptions already could not reproduce the efforts of “naturalization” in the same way that same-race adoption could. Additionally, many people were not ready for multiracial families and credible criticism by organizations and parts of the general public questioned the ability of white couples to raise nonwhite children, their motives, the social context, and government priorities with concern to TRA and TNA. Some of the studies even admitted that inracial placements were preferred, and that transracial adoption should be allowed only in the circumstances where there are not enough nonwhite parents to adopt. These scientific outcome studies were a response to the public and professional anxiety around such adoptions. They became a form of interpretation that validated this way of family-making as a desirable and viable option by claiming unequivocal success even when results were often mixed and various research limitations affected the ability to make absolute claims.

Furthermore, the findings on TRA and TNA match the majority of general social scientific research on “traditional” same-race adoptions by white parents as a successful and normal mode of family-making. This research on traditional adoptions has shown that adoption benefits each member of the adoption triad as loving possibilities: adopted children adjusting remarkably well, receiving love, permanency, and safety; adoptive parents having an opportunity to share their love and form a family; and birth mothers

128 See Grow and Shapiro, “Adoption of Black Children by White Parents.” Brooks and Barth claimed, “Thus while continued efforts to recruit, prepare, and support families of color for adoption of children of color are to be strongly espoused, this study provides further evidence that transracial adoption is a practical and appropriate placement option for children in need of permanent homes.” Brooks and Barth, “Adult Transracial and Inracial Adoptees,” 98. Fanshel also stated, “[Keeping Indian children with family or with family of same tribal heritage] is by far the most preferred plan for caring for deprived Indian children. But if this is impossible, then on the basis of the good adjustment made by most Indian children placed with non-Indian families, as reported in this research study, we should continue these transracial adoptive placements of Indian children.” Fanshel, Far From the Reservation, 49.
receiving a second chance to have a bright future not hindered by motherhood. In particular, for adopted children, these studies illustrated that they had similar outcomes (e.g. self-esteem, behavior, and development) to their non-adopted peers. Benson, Sharma, and Roehlkepartain in their 1994 study of 881 adopted adolescents and 1,262 adoptive parents found that parent-child attachments in adoptive families are similar to biological families and that adoptees scored higher on identity measures, e.g. self-esteem, than their non-adopted peers. Brodzinsky and Palacios stated “a growing body of empirical data has suggested that the differences between (adopted and non-adopted) groups are relatively small and that the vast majority of adopted children are well within the normal range of adjustment.” In short, recent outcome studies have provided further confirmation that adoptive placements and families can be just as successful as biological families. Moreover, since the studies comparing children of “traditional” inracial white adoptions with non-adopted children showed similar outcomes for each, this idea of transracial adoptions (both domestic and transnational) being “just as good” could be extended to comparisons with non-adoptive families as well.

Adoption research then emerged as the primary strategy for producing knowledge that could demonstrate the success and strength of TRA and TNA adoptions. Just as significant, though, was that these TRA and TNA studies enabled supporters to then point to love as the reason for success. Some of the most vocal supporters of TRA and TNA


131 Psychological Issues in Adoption, Eds. Brodzinsky and Palacios, 2005: x.
have used these early scientific outcome studies to declare unequivocally that such adoptions are made successful not by the racial character of the parents but by universal qualities of permanency and love.\textsuperscript{132} Issues pertaining to racial difference, alienation, and probable racism that adoptees will face were dismissed by the power of “personal commitment” and love, which are more important than “racial knowledge.” Juffer and IJzendoorn note that these risk factors, which can lead to less optimal development, are counteracted by “protective factors” provided by adoptive families that engender resilience in adopted children.\textsuperscript{133} As Silverman and Feigelman stated, the success of these controversial adoptions was attributed to “the impact of a positive home and family environment [which] can undo much of the damage created by previous deprivation in young children.”\textsuperscript{134} According to Bartholet, the question of who parented children of color was unimportant: “[W]hat parentless children need most of all is not someone who looks like them but someone who loves them.”\textsuperscript{135} In another example, Adam Pertman, leading adoption expert and director of the Evans B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, affirmed the compelling disposition of adoption research that points to positive outcomes: “[V]irtually every piece of current research agrees that stability and love during children’s youngest years play critical, lifelong roles in their psychological development, their emotional well-being, and their ability to learn.”\textsuperscript{136} While Simon and Altstein do warn that more than love is need, they also declared, “The results show that these children feel loved, secure, committed to their adoptive families, and comfortable with

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\textsuperscript{132} Barholet, “Commentary”; Kennedy, \textit{Interracial Intimacies}; Pertman, \textit{Adoption Nation}; Simon and Altstein, \textit{Adoption Across Borders}.
\textsuperscript{133} Juffer and van IJzendoorn, “Adoptees do not Lack Self-esteem.”
\textsuperscript{134} Feigelman and Silverman, “The Long-Term Effects of Transracial Adoption,” 600.
\textsuperscript{135} Kennedy, \textit{Interracial Intimacies}, 457-8
\textsuperscript{136} Pertman, \textit{Adoption Nation}, 33.
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their racial/ethnic identities.” Adoption researchers as Simon and Altstein argued that the concern over the racial identity of the parents has been overstated, and like Bartholet and so many others, they claimed that “the quality of parenting was more important than whether the black child had been inracially or transracially adopted.” Importantly, for Simon and Altstein, these types of adoptions were success because parents provide love and took a colorblind approach to adoption, which is an area that I explore further in chapter two.

**Conclusion**

By looking at Positive Adoption Language that emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s (and its contemporary form in RAL), we can better begin to see the ways in which adoption social workers and parents tried to actively interpret the loving possibilities of adoption in new ways that would destigmatize adoption and adoptive motherhood, which would in turn legitimize them as a normal form of family-making and avenue to motherhood. This public education effort to change adoption terminology by narrowing the meaning of mother, parent, and family, however, had considerable repercussions for birth mothers (and families), especially for those who were nonwhite and not categorized as “responsible choice-makers.” Moreover, the visibility of constructed racial difference complicated the goal of normalization for TRA and TNA. It served as a perceptible reminder that the discursive process of de-naturalization of birth mother and naturalization of the adoptive mother was not as smooth and solely “positive” act, especially for TRA and TNA. In this way, positive adoption language revealed how

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137 Simon and Altstein, *Adoption Across Borders*, 141.
138 Ibid., 52.
139 Ibid., 53.
adoptive mothers, white birth mothers, and birth mothers of color were stigmatized in different ways as relational racial and gendered subjects. While (white) adoptive mothers could be recuperated within heteropatriarchal ideals of motherhood by adopting a child and becoming a nuclear family by fully disconnecting from the birth family, white birth mothers could only be redeemed through making the “positive choice” adoption and being severed (legally and symbolically through PAL/RAL) from “real” and “natural” motherhood. Lastly, birth mothers of color were invisible subjects in terms of PAL/RAL. Neither adoption nor PAL/RAL addressed their identities, stigmas, or subjectivities because, as “illegitimate” mothers, they exist outside of the idealized concept of the universal woman. Yet, the controversy of TRA and TNAs meant that the birth mothers of color would be the most haunting and disruptive specter for adoptive families. In attempting to positively define and sanitize the process of adoption, PAL/RAL in fact hid existing and produced new forms of symbolic violence.

Where PAL/RAL largely failed to engage with the dynamics of race and TRA and TNAs, social scientific research simplistically addressed race, concluding that such adoptions would not harm the adoptees. Original outcome studies tried to show that adoption could produce healthy and happy adoptees and families that were just as good and “normal” as families produced from heterosexual marriage and biological children. Studies that focused on transracial and transnational adoption attempted to answer whether these adoptions had any deleterious effects on adoptee self-esteem, ethno-racial pride, and ethno-racial identity. Despite many limitations and contradictory results, many of the studies made broad conclusions that TRA and TNAs were just as good as biological families and inracially adoptive families. Additionally, from these results,
adoption researchers asserted that they should be the solution to the moral crisis of the overcrowding foster care system. Their “objective” and “positivistic” research that made sweeping claims enabled TRA and TNA supporters in other areas to point to the indisputable scientific research as their reasoning for supporting and promoting these types of adoption. Any harm that produced these adoptions in the first place, or prevented black parents from having access to adoption, or that might be the effect of such adoptions were ignored or minimized and overshadowed by the “objective” outcomes, moralization, and statements of love, which posited love as superseding any racial factor. My aim here is not to argue that had scientists been more objective and accounted for the various research limitations, they would have produced better studies. Instead, I juxtapose PAL/RAL with social scientific research to show what was at stake in the efforts of social workers, adoptive parents, and researchers. Both produced new knowledge and representations that had serious symbolic and material consequences for the adoption industry, adoptees, adoptive mothers/parents, and birth mothers/parents, all in the effort to legitimize TRA and TNA as normal and loving.

Belief in the veracity of TRA and TNA outcome research became hegemonic, which enabled TRA and TNA to be framed as moral imperatives for children stuck in foster care in the United States or in orphanages abroad. Their moralization meant that such adoptions could not only be successful and beneficial but were also desperately needed and seen as a proper moral solution. In this sense, scientific knowledge validated

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140 A few of the research studies explicitly rehearsed the trope of rescue and humanitarianism as well as the danger of delaying such adoptions as main justifications for adopting across racial lines. See Grow and Shapiro, “Adoption of Black Children by White Parents”; Falk, “A Comparative Study of Transracial and Inracial Adoptions”; Fanshel, Far From the Reservation; Feigelman and Silverman, “The Long-Term Effects of Transracial Adoption.”
TRA and TNAs as the privileged solution to the problem of race and culture, ignoring the structural-historical and symbolic violence of adoption that confronted birth mothers (and adoptees). In the next chapter, I explore the ways in which the government participated in the knowledge formation, discursive representations, and ultimately legal production that situated the orphan figure, families, and nations in specific ways that furthered the cause of TRA and TNA.
CHAPTER TWO
Opposite Futures for the Orphan in (Neo)liberal Adoption Discourse and Law

This isn’t chattel here. We’re talking about a child.
– Judge Patricia Seabrook

It’s not about them [the biological parents] or them [the adoptive parents]. It’s about Lee, her best interests. It cannot be in any child’s best interest to remove her from the only family that she knows—her parents, her sister, her country, which is now America. My heart goes out to you [the biological parents]. I simply cannot imagine your pain here or the horror that has been the last four years of your life. If this were about you, I’d hand the child over myself, but it’s not. It’s about Lee.
– Defense Counsel for Lee’s Adoptive Parents

Imagine if an American child were abducted; taken to different country; the parents go to that country to get their child back, only to hear that sorry the child belongs here now. That would turn our stomachs. The very reason why we have this Hague treaty is to prevent this kind of horror.
– Adam Branch, Lawyer for Lee’s Biological Parents

In the 2011 episode “American Girl,” of NBC’s hit drama Harry’s Law, the plot showcases an emotional legal struggle over a girl, who is adopted from China, between her American and Chinese parents. Couched in the human rights discourse of “best interest of the child,” the story illustrates the complexity of transnational/racial adoption, family, and the law. As the plot unfolds, the audience learns that Mr. and Mrs. Chen had their daughter taken away from them when she was two years old by local Chinese family-planning government authorities based on the One-Child Policy. Their daughter was then “legally” adopted by Mr. and Mrs. Thomas, an African American couple in the

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1 “American Girl,” Harry’s Law. NBC. Nov. 9, 2011.
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
4 I use transnational/racial adoption in my dissertation for various argumentative purposes as explain in the methods section. In legal discourse, the terms intercountry and international adoption are more prevalent such as the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption and the Intercountry Adoption Act. In this chapter I will refer to adoptions from Asia in long form, transnational/racial adoption (and still use TRA for domestic transracial adoptions). However, if the context requires it, I will international or intercountry adoption.
United States. According to Adam Branch, the prosecution lawyer for the Chens, the law was on their side because both the United States and China are signatories to the Hague Convention on the Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect to Intercountry Adoption (HCIA). Although Judge Patricia Seabrook articulates a sense of empathy for the Chens, saying that if her daughter had been abducted that she too would “hunt her down until the ends of the earth,” she ultimately sides with the Thomases, stating: “Mr. and Mrs. Chen I am deeply sorry, but I cannot justify upending this little girl’s world.” Thus, any empathy and rights for the birth parents are trumped by the rhetoric of the “child’s best interest” and relatedly her future prospects in one family versus the other.

While this story presented in “American Girl” is television drama, it nearly matches (and seems to draw from) the controversy covered by The New York Times in August and September 2011, which reported that at least 16 babies were taken by family planning officials between 1999 and 2006 in Longhui County of Hunan Province in Southern China. In 2005, Chinese and foreign news media reported that local government officials and orphanage employees in Hunan had sold at least 100 children to other orphanages, who were then adopted by foreign adoptive parents. Traffickers also targeted migrants and the poorest villages, abducting and buying their children, whom they then sold to orphanages. While child trafficking stories concern many adoptive parents in the United States, most of them, along with U.S. adoption agencies, do not

5 The 1993 Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption was an international treaty to establish standards for intercountry adoption practices that would protect the “best interest of the child.” See in text further below for a discussion of the HCIA. [Hereinafter: Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption.]
fully address the controversy and the possibility that their child might not be abandoned or orphaned as they were told.⁸

I lead with the gripping and emotional example of “American Girl” from Harry’s Law and the corruption cases in China because they get at the dangers, complexity, and contradictions of transnational/racial adoption and the emerging “adoption industrial complex”⁹ within a neoliberal global political-economy of circulating capital and illegal movement of bodies. More specific to this chapter, the show and actual corruption cases also point to the ways in which law, discourse, and representation work to construct the figures of the orphan, birth and adoptive parent, and the nation. Further, this particular episode is compelling because of the way in which anxieties of corruption are assuaged through the promotion of a liberal multicultural framework, which promotes racial inclusion and cultural celebration while hiding the ongoing social consequences of power and race. In tandem with multiculturalism is the narrative of post-raciality for which race

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⁸ The Times profiled one adoptive mother, Susan Merkel, 48, who with her husband adopted their daughter, Maia, from China in 2007, when she was nine months old. While she said her husband did not like to think about this possibility because they would never know for sure, she said that the thought horrified her. Ms. Merkel was adopted too and has met her birthmother, which was a positive experience, helping her understand her past and identity. But she also states that she would not willingly return her daughter even if there was evidence that she was seized against the will of the biological parents: “I would feel great empathy for that person,” she said. “I would completely understand the anger and the pain. But I would fight to keep my daughter. Not because she’s mine, but because for all purposes we’re the only family she’s ever known. How terrifying that would be for a child to be taken away from the only family she knows and the life that she knows. That’s not about doing what’s right for the child. That’s doing what’s right for the birth mother.” John Leland, “For Adoptive Parents, Questions Without Answers,” The New York Times, September 18, 2011, accessed February 17, 2012, LexisNexis Academic.

⁹ Kimberly McKee conceptualizes the transnational adoption industrial complex as emerging from the U.S. military industrial complex as a neo-colonial, multi-million dollar global industry that commodifies children’s bodies rather than a site of humanitarian rescue. The transnational industry adoption complex links the social welfare state, orphanages, adoption agencies, and U.S. legislation to increase transnational adoptions. McKee, “The Production of Children: Tracing the Origins of Transnational Adoption,” Association for Asian American Studies Annual Meeting, 2013. Thus, the TAIC is conceptualized similarly to the prison and military industrial complexes, which are conglomerations of various stakeholders in a social, economic, and political system that seeks to profit from the continuation and increase of prison and military operations. See Gilmore, Golden Gulag, 2007.
no longer matters in any U.S. context. These two notions work to produce a quintessential “liberal” American family (a variant of the traditional, “conservative” white American family). The child at the center of this battle is Chinese and the adoptive parents African American, but the judge is also black and adopted by white parents herself, highlighting the multiple embodiments of what a loving “American” multicultural and post-racial family could look like. These families show how post-racial America can transcend racial difference in family-making and at the same time embrace and celebrate it.

Additionally, Judge Patricia Seabrook’s intersecting and successful identities of being a black transracial adoptee, mother, and female judge represent how her present moment is a clear manifestation and validation of the presumed future that existed at the time of her own adoption. She is a reminder and proof that the scientific outcome studies were correct in concluding that liberal expansion of domestic transracial adoptions was not harmful but successful and beneficial. She is emblematic of the futuristic good that might be produced from the domestic laws that promote color-blind transracial adoption. In this way, she also symbolically represents the new futures—meaning the positive possibilities from the choice of transracial adoptive family-making compared to the frightful possibilities of a biological mother choosing to parent her child or a child being forced to linger in foster care in hopes of reunifying with her/his family. Hence her identity and positionality help explain how she is able to adjudicate this complex case. They bestow both a subjective (from experience) and “objective” (being a judge) viewpoint, giving her final decision that much more credence. It is a discomforting verdict but one that the audience can ultimately agree with because in the end the answer
was never really in doubt. Thus, my research questions include: How is the best interest of the child determined in transnational/racial adoption policymaking? What sorts of existing violent structures and representations are operating in order to activate and facilitate such adoptions? Lastly, how does adoption, as a loving act, produce further violent outcomes in the legal sphere?

This chapter extends Sociologist Sara Dorow’s important work on racial, familial, and national imaginaries that are derived from the institutions, discourses, and practices of U.S. adoptions from China. While her examination employs a “critical global ethnography,” I center legal knowledge production and the legal love this engenders concerning transnational/racial adoption privileges such adoptive families against biological ones. In this chapter, I show how the legal representations, presumptions, and determinations of the Chinese and larger Asian adoption cases are framed within the context of loving adoptive homes and best interest of the child. Additionally, it considers how the structural-historical and representational forms of violence propagated by the state and legal advocates that not only followed but necessarily preceded and existed in relation to the loving act and institution of adoption. Specifically, it examines the ways in which liberalism and neoliberalism, which I explain below, work together using the notion of familial love within post-racial and color-blind adoption discourse and

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10 Dorow, *Transnational Adoption*. Dorow examines three main “impossible contradictions” (unresolvable and unavoidable): 1) the child as an object of commodified consumption and protective familial care; 2) the tensions produced by the attempted “clean break” of adoption that yields “dislocation and relocation” for the adoptee; and 3) “fixed and flexible imaginaries” that produce racial and national meanings. While Dorow’s examination focuses on the adopted child’s cultural and economic movements, her centering of race, nation, and family are also important, particularly the latter for this chapter.
international and domestic laws to configure the orphan figure; birth and adoptive families; and sending (Asian countries) and receiving nations (the United States).

Although the Hague Convention in Respect to Intercountry Adoption states that every case must consider the “best interest of the child,” I argue that in U.S. legal discourse and practice of transnational/racial adoption this decision has already been predetermined. Thus, the issues of whether transnational/racial adoption is “good or bad” and whether there needs to be more “accountability” to avoid “scandals” are important. However, the more pressing issue for transnational/racial adoption is deconstructing how the relevant figures—“orphan,” parents, and nations—exist in representation and are molded within and effected by the debate and law. I contend Asian children and their biological parents violently emerge in representation as distinct racial subjects vis-à-vis Western adoptive parents within their respective global/historical context, which posits each family (birth and adoptive) and nation (sending and receiving) as constituting what I call “opposite futures” for the children in Asia who are reduced from subjects to objects in need of rescue. They can only be saved and attain a full life as well as the entire array of possibilities of love through adoption in the United States, where they will then be afforded the privilege of permanency, economic stability, and above all else love (both parental and legal), which Asian biological or adoptive parents and Asian nations cannot provide. These differences, through representational violence, are imagined, naturalized, and deployed to elevate transnational/racial adoption as the privileged and better means of creating family and dealing with social issues.

Chapter one underscored the 1970s to 1990s as an emergent moment when “positive adoption language” and scientific outcome studies influenced normalization of
TRA and TNAs. This chapter highlights the 1990s and 2000s as a key time period in which the law shaped Asian transnational/racial adoption and family-making. Both chapters share an interest in different sites of adoption knowledge production and how the structural and symbolic violence of love affects family formation. Thus, while the previous chapter examined adoption knowledge production in the professional and scientific fields, chapter two analyzes the production of knowledge of family and love within the legal sphere of the nation-state, specifically congressional hearings and legal scholarship. While many scholars have discussed the domestic laws and the HCIA, there was little literature that used congressional hearings as a primary site of analysis. Most literature has taken these legal formulations as given with supporters briefly summarizing and explaining them, which allows them to make an argument based on the law. Critics of such laws have generatively critiqued or problematized them but without digging into the discursive and structural legal context from which they emerged.

For this chapter, in part one, I outline the moral and historical context of the HCIA and the larger narrative that emerges from congressional hearings about the HCIA. After defining liberalism and Chandan Reddy’s concept of “freedom with violence” that I

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11 See Briggs, Somebody’s Children; Patton, Birth Marks; Quiroz, Adoption in a Color-Blind Society; Kennedy, Interracial Intimacies; Pertman, Adoption Nation; Roberts, Shattered Bonds, 2002.
12 See Solinger, Beggars and Choosers, 2001 for an example of using extensive evidence from congressional hearings. Even most law review articles did not focus on hearings as source material. See Briggs, Somebody’s Children; Kennedy, Interracial Intimacies; Patton, Birth Marks, for examples that minimally use congressional hearings.
borrow and build on, I explore the construction of the orphan figure in legal discourse as a product of western liberal notions of freedom and love that simultaneously ignores and engender symbolic racial violence. In other words, transnational/racial adoption is supposedly a project of “inclusion” that eschews race. In *part two*, I first draw from congressional hearings and a collection of domestic laws to interrogate how neoliberalism functions in relation to liberalism to produce families that represent what I call “opposite futures.” I show how this production of opposite futures is first established in domestic TRA, with the help of so-called color-blind policies that in fact re-inscribe racial inequities, and are then applied to the context of transnational/racial adoptions. Then secondly, I illustrate how this logic of opposite futures for the relational conceptualization of family is extended onto the nation as well. Lastly, I try to explicate some ways in which we might think beyond scandals and basic reform.

**Part I: Love, Liberalism, and Freedom with Violence**

**The Hague Convention and the Production of “Best Interests”**

Adoptions from China began in significant numbers in 1992, and since then it has become the largest sending country for U.S. families, who have adopted more than 81,000 children from China, constituting 26.5 percent of transnational/racial adoptions.\(^{15}\) Even then, as Dorow has suggested in pointing to its hypervisibility in popular media, the symbolic significance of transnational/racial adoptions from China “exceed[s] what the

\(^{15}\) From 1992-2011 the top sending countries after China (81,219) are Russia (60,369; 19.7 percent), Guatemala (33,672; 11.0 percent), South Korea (30,680; 10.0 percent), Ethiopia (11,930; 3.9 percent), Ukraine (9,566; 3.1 percent), India (7,652; 2.5 percent), and Vietnam (7,630; 2.5 percent). These number were calculated by me from the {{772 The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute 2013}} and {{672 U.S. Department of State 2013}}. Additionally, at least 10,000 children from China have been adopted by other countries since 1992. See also Goodman, “Stealing Babies for Adoption.”
numbers suggest.” China is unique because as a sending nation it was almost always perceived as being efficient and having the best institutional safeguards. As Thomas Atwood, president and CEO of the National Council for Adoption, stated, China “has become a model of consistency and predictability” in the realm of “decision making, and setting policy, procedures, and oversight.” The U.S. government has at some point placed 17 countries on temporary or permanent moratorium because of known or suspected abuses and corruption. Unlike scandal-ridden countries such as Cambodia, Guatemala, India, Nepal, or Vietnam, China was thought to have had a clean record for transparency and uncorrupt supply of healthy infants. Yet this representation of China contradicts the West’s imagination of it as a morally bankrupt and human rights violating Communist nation. To be sure, even within this contradictory representation, China still mirrors larger symbolic representations of Asian countries such as South (and North) Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, and India as spaces of immorality, ineptness, cultural backwardness, and/or Communism. It is from this demographic and historical context that I use China as my primary and a representative example for thinking about race, specifically “Asian” vis-à-vis the “West,” as a global-historical formation that informs the ways we think about, discuss, practice, and embed in law, issues pertaining to transnational/racial adoption. I contend that the international human rights regime embodied by the HCIA emerges from an already existing global/historical racial

16 Dorow, Transnational Adoption, 10.
18 Quiroz, Adoption in a Color-Blind Society.
20 Indeed, the representation of China in transnational/racial adoption discourse significantly overlaps with the configuration of Asian immigrants as the hardworking model minority and deviant threat. See Lee, Orientals, 1999.
knowledge about Asia, which contributes to the ways in which orphan, birth and adoptive parent, family, and adoption are defined and prescribed.

When the various types of domestic transracial (TRA)\textsuperscript{21} and transnational/racial adoptions first emerged, they were not an unquestioned given. The National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) published a position paper critiquing TRA in 1972, charging that it was harmful to the positive development of a strong racial and ethnic identity of black children and destructive to black families and the community. Transnational/racial adoption was also controversial. The criticism aimed toward the latter surfaced mainly during specific historical moments. Before the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1961, there were no laws that governed transnational/racial adoption, which meant that adoptions were instead governed by refugee and displaced persons acts.\textsuperscript{22} Many of the adoptions prior to 1961, however, were conducted as proxy adoptions. For example, Bertha and Harry Holt facilitated such adoptions, which drew the ire of adoption agencies and professionals who believed that greater standards, care, and safeguards were required. Operation Babylift also generated great controversy because many of the children adopted were believed to still have living parents. Comic strip writer, Gary Trudeau, published a series in Doonesbury that also panned such adoptions as a way to assuage guilt from the Vietnam War. They also involved the transnational and transracial elements that made them risky and uncertain.

The rising prevalence of transnational/racial adoption worldwide, along with the realities and fears of child trafficking and baby stealing, prompted the United States to be

\textsuperscript{21} Similar to Chapter one, I use TRA to refer to domestic transracial adoptions, which has historically corresponded to the adoption of black children by white parents.

\textsuperscript{22} Herman, \textit{Kinship by Design}, 218.
a party to the 1993 Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption (HCIA). The HCIA was and still is the most significant agreement passed to date concerning transnational/racial adoption.\textsuperscript{23} It came on the heels of the UN Convention on the Rights of Children (UNCRC) of 1989, which began to address, among many others, the issue of transnational/racial adoption and the right to a family.\textsuperscript{24} Building on the initial steps of the UNCRC, the HCIA is an international agreement to establish and ensure common safeguards so “intercountry adoptions take place in the best interests of the child and with respect for his or her fundamental rights.”\textsuperscript{25} The “best interest” of the child is referenced six times in the full text of the convention. Domestically, the best interest of the child doctrine, as universal litmus test in the United States, has been ensconced in child welfare policy as a part of divorce and child custody hearings.\textsuperscript{26} According to Kohm, the doctrine is heralded because it is the

\textsuperscript{23} Convention and treaty are often used interchangeably. Conventions involve many parties who hold an international gathering to discuss global concerns that produces international agreements, standards, and procedures. Stronger than declarations, conventions are legally binding to member states who have signed and ratified them. See Appendix 6 “Glossary of Treaty Terminology” in Treaties and Other International Agreements, 2001. See also “Appendix 3: A Human Rights Glossary,” Human Rights Here and Now, Ed. Nancy Flowers, 1998.

\textsuperscript{24} The UNCRC was a multinational collaboration that stemmed from a proposal by a Polish committee of the International Year of the Child meeting in 1979. It was the first time in which the needs and legal rights of children were exclusively addressed, concentrating on numerous issues such as child labor; children affected by war and participating in armed combat; child imprisonment, slavery, and exploitation; homelessness and abuse; and health and under-education. David Winder, “Protecting the World’s Children,” Christian Science Monitor, January 18, 1985, accessed February 17, 2012, LexisNexis Academic. Lewis “On Children’s Rights Gains in U.N.” The New York Times, November 11, 1988, accessed February 17, 2012, LexisNexis Academic.


\textsuperscript{26} The “best interest of the child” doctrine is used by the courts to determine the placement and disposition of children in divorce, custody, visitation, adoption, the death of a parent, illegitimacy proceedings, abuse proceedings, neglect proceedings, crime, economics, and all forms of child protective services. Kohm, “Tracing the Foundations of the Best Interest of the Child Standard in American Jurisprudence,” 2008: 337. Kohm traces the interest and protection of children to various historical moments and texts such as Ancient Greece, the New Testament, and the Enlightenment. In 1967, the Supreme Court adjudicated the case In re Gault, which was a landmark decision that found constitutional rights for children, giving them the right to procedural safeguards. Notably, the parents’
highest standard for child welfare yet derided because it is almost wholly subjective. As a multilateral treaty, the HCIA set a global framework for norms, procedures, and cooperation that govern transnational/racial adoption to protect the rights of children, in particular from abduction, sale, and trafficking. One of its most significant contributions is that the HCIA has legitimized and privileged transnational/racial adoption in the case that family preservation is not possible and domestic adoption has been exhausted. This differs from the earlier UNCRC, which placed transnational/racial adoption below in-country institutional care.

The United States was a signatory to the HCIA in 1994. For the first step, Congress passed the Intercountry Adoption Act in 2000, and designated the Department of State as the Central Authority to oversee transnational/racial adoption. It was ratified in 2007 and implemented in April 2008. In the eyes of U.S. lawmakers and legal advocates in support of transnational/racial adoption, there was a moral imperative to intervene via adoption for the helpless orphans abroad in a way that mirrored government intervention with regard to the languishing children in the U.S. foster care system. As Senator Larry Craig said in a 2006 congressional hearing on “Asian Adoptions in the United States,” “[W]e are fully entering a new era of international adoption by

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27 Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption.
28 Bartholet in facts criticizes the UNCRC because it puts too much weight on paying “due regard... to the desirability of continuity in a child’s upbringing and to the child’s ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic background,” which privileges “suitable” in-country foster or institutional care above transnational adoption. She argues that this is used to limit and restrict international adoption because it is construed to be a violation of children’s rights. Bartholet, “International Adoption: The Child’s Story,” 2007: 378-9.
30 Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption.
Americans, an era in which the Federal Government has a critical role in the adoption.”

Moreover, as the previous chapter showed, the social scientific outcomes studies “definitively” reported that such adoptions could work and were in the “best interest of the child,” rebuking the NABSW’s claims to the contrary. In his written statement to Congress, Thomas Atwood, president of the National Council for Adoption, stated: “The benefits of intercountry adoption to children are indisputable. The clinical record clearly confirms what common sense tells us—that outcomes for children who are adopted internationally are better than those for children raised in institutions or in foster care.”

Atwood similarly added that the truth seemed “self-evident” that given the choice, most people would choose a loving, permanent family through intercountry adoption over living without a family in the country where “one happens to have been born.” This “dire need” narrative coupled with scientific “certainty” of positive outcomes for transnational/racial adoptions activated the government’s increased role in facilitating them.

The dominant narrative that emerged from the congressional hearing on the “Implementation of the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption” in 1999 was that the transnational/racial adoption was a key solution to children in need of a loving, permanent home and that the United States in particular was a positive future for them. Democratic House Representative Sam Gejdenson stated that transnational/racial adoption was the solution to this crisis: “Clearly, international adoption solves problems. Children living without loving families and in often terrible conditions have an

32 Ibid., 32.
opportunity for a very bright and optimistic future here in the United States or with adoptive parents in other countries.”  

That transnational/racial adoption was a “bright and optimistic future” and solution for children was “clear” because it has been a part of a long history of the United States “welcoming” orphaned children. Mary Ryan, ambassador and Assistant Secretary of State for Consular Affairs, reminded everyone of this fact: “The United States, particularly since World War II, has opened its arms to orphaned and abandoned children around the world, and many parents look to international adoption to build American families and to provide a better life for these children.”

Indeed, the transnational/racial adoptions that followed World War II, the Korean War, and the war in Southeast Asia, along with representations of destitute orphanages and uncaring institutional workers, produced the image of the waiting Asian orphan and loving American adoptive families in our collective imagination. Republican House Representative Thomas Bliley painted the picture in his opening statement to the 1999 hearing: “Thousands of children worldwide are waiting helplessly for parents to read to them, to teach them how to tie shoelaces, to say bedtime prayers with them, and to eat ice cream with them on a summer night. It is in the best interests for a child to be part of a loving family. The Hague Intercountry Adoption Act gives the U.S. Congress an opportunity to stand up and reaffirm our support for intercountry adoption. I am proud to support this bill because I have been blessed by my own experiences with adoption, so now I am doing what I can to help thousands of innocent children find a home.”

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34 Ibid., 9.
35 Ibid., 8.
These statements from the 1999 congressional hearing exemplify the ideological presumptions in adoption discourse among government officials. They point to the way in which discourses about loving American families and democratic government have facilitated the incorporation of overseas “orphaned” children who are in need of homes. Bliley’s admission that he has been touched by adoption in his own family illustrates that the personal and familial are intimately tied to political decisions. His emphasis on basic all-American activities such as reading books and eating ice cream convey the simplicity of the situation—there are children in need, families who can provide loving homes, and a government that can facilitate this process. While love and liberalism appear to be operating at separate levels of the familial and state, Elizabeth Povinelli, in *Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy, and Carnality*, critiques formulations of love as solely individual events or relationships: “But love is not merely an interpersonal event, nor is it merely the site at which politics has its effects. Love is a political event.”

She critiques those who conceptualize love as *only* an intimate event that is privilege above all else: “[T]he intimate event is not merely a substantive good in and of itself; it *opposes* all other modes of organizing intimacy. In this Manichean universe, those multitudinous others who don’t organize their intimacies on the basis of socially exfoliating love, but on the basis of lust, tribalism, race, kinship, or religion, do not have true love.” This notion of “true love” is hegemonic and bound to liberalism that “secures the self-evident good of social institutions, social distributions of life and death.

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37 Ibid., 177-8.
and social responsibilities for these institutions and distributions.” While Povinelli is describing love in terms of sexual intimacy, I believe it applies to familial love of transnational/racial adoption as well because liberalism and love, together, are seen as the “normative horizon” (i.e. the perceptible means and limit) for children in need of permanent homes. Thus, transnational/racial adoption discourse follows this liberal logic that we should be formulating families based on individual, familial love not “tribalism, race, kinship, or religion.”

In conjunction with Povinelli, I employ Chandan Reddy’s concept of “freedom with violence” as a critique of liberalism. Reddy’s concept considers how emancipation is mutually constitutive with state-sanctioned, naturalized, and legitimate (material and symbolic) violence. In his formulation, legitimate violence is “more than a universal extension of rational violence.” Rather, Reddy states, “[T]he state’s claim to legitimate violence is predicated on its ability to achieve a monopoly on rationality as well, most powerfully through the extension of universal citizenship.”

Reddy’s introductory example of pairing the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act with the National Defense Authorization Act of 2010, shows how liberalism’s claim of inclusion and protection of individual freedoms from arbitrary violence in formal juridical equality hinges on the normalization of state violence in war. Freedom from violence is useful for my analysis because I maintain that the liberal guarantee is not just freedom from nominal “arbitrary” (i.e. individual hate crimes) violence but also freedom

38 Ibid., 17. For Povinelli, the goal is not to seek a redemptive narrative for love because this would fulfill and comply with hegemonic love but rather to track and challenge its operation. Ibid., 25.
39 Ibid., 4.
41 Ibid., 34.
42 Ibid., 39.
from violence by racial Others/enemies, their culture, communities, and states. Hence the “War on Terror,” as an example, is violence in the name of freedom. But at the level of transnational/racial adoption, freedom from violence appears to include freedom from patriarchy, Communism, poverty, and unfit child welfare policies, which are institutions, ideologies, and conditions that the West ascribes to Asian geographies. In addition, my modification—*love and freedom with violence*—identifies the liberal acts of loving adoption, emancipation, and inclusion as wedded to violence. These liberal acts ignore the self-implicated contexts and conditions that contributed to the formation of this dire need as well as the productive violence of underscoring racial difference and thus futurity that are hinged on opposition.

**The Orphan Figure: Racial Object of Rescue**

As Denise Silva argues, global subjects emerge in representation as relational racial subjects, either as the racial I or racial Other. I contend that it is this already-ascribed racial meaning, and the “iconography of rescue,” that generates the victimized orphan figure, who in emerging as an object of rescue is only able to achieve full subjectivity through transnational/racial adoption. Indeed, the orphan is often presupposed even though its meaning is not fixed. Critical adoption scholar and cultural anthropologist Eleana Kim argues that the orphan is a highly mediated and sentimentalized social and legal figure. For example, a 2004 joint report by USAID,

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43 Briggs argues that visual iconography of rescue has become a finely functional trope that simultaneously activates ideologies of rescue, diverts attention away from structural reasons for poverty (such as famine, natural disasters, international, political, economic, and military causes), and enables popular support for various neoliberal public policy and international policy initiatives that benefit the United States while also projecting an image of it as the rescuer. Briggs argues that these tropes of extreme poverty and rescue have created a cultural logic in which adoption enabled the average U.S. individual to participate in foreign policy. Briggs, “Mother, Child, Race, Nation,” 2003.
UNICEF and UNAIDS, indicates that there were 143 million orphans in sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean.  

This number, however, is inflated because while the common definition of orphan denotes the loss of both parents, UNICEF defines “orphan” as any individual under the age of 18 that is without one or both parents.  

More stunningly, according to Shihning Chou et al. only four percent of children in institutions are “true” biological orphans.  

Kim notes that what is often overlooked and illegible is the production of the orphan as something abject that must be saved.  

It is this orphan that must be freed and loved. Briggs adds that visual imagery of a mother and her child/waif, distinct from but similar to the orphan, throughout the last century has helped shape the politics of transnational/racial adoption in terms of liberal interventionism and the notion of rescue. This “visual iconography of rescue” manifests in sentimental narratives and the rescue trope of transnational/racial adoptions along with their dependence on stereotypes of innocent, sick, helpless, and crying children vis-à-vis the culturally cold, indifferent, backwards, and/or grateful birth parents.

This racial rescue narrative has had an enduring hand in the history of adoption, and transnational/racial adoption specifically. Rescuing orphans began with their linkage to urban poverty and “criminality” that led to “orphan trains” in the 1840s, where

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45 Myers, “Preserving the Best Interest of the World’s Children,” 798. See also “Who can be Adopted?” U.S. Department of State. Online. According to the State Department, a child is categorized as orphan if it meets the following requirements: “the child must have no parents; or the child has a sole or surviving parent who is unable to care for the child and has, in writing, irrevocably released the child for emigration and adoption. In addition, the child must be under the age of 16.”
47 Kim, Adopted Territory, 45.
children were shipped from the East Coast to rural areas for adoption. Civilizing and religious tropes also permeated the “rescue” and adoptions of Native American children. In addition to the long history of boarding schools, by the mid 1950s, the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Child Welfare League of America began promoting the placement of Indian children in white adoptive homes as a means of assimilating and civilizing them while simultaneously terminating tribes. Further, transnational/racial adoptions during post-war periods of WWII and the Korean and Vietnam wars were motivated by ideas of rescue, which were often fueled by Christian beliefs. Operation Babylift might be the most explicit example of rescue in transnational/racial adoption history. Authorized by President Gerald Ford, Operation Babylift was a highly publicized “humanitarian rescue” effort to evacuate through airlift 2,000 children from Vietnam to the United States. As Briggs argues, this iconography and practice of rescue has become normalized and transformed into a regime of truth, hiding the ways in which the United States has often been structurally implicated in the causes and the “need for rescue” of the racial Other in the first place.

What follows is a close reading of Harvard law professor Elizabeth Bartholet’s “International Adoption: The Child’s Story” to examine representations of the orphan in

50 Fanshel, Far From the Reservation, 84. In his study, Fanshel attempts to examine motives of adoptive parents, which some parents explicitly state desires of rescuing children in need. See also Stark and Stark, “Flying the Coop,” 2006.
51 Kim, Adopted Territories, 10; Klein, Cold War Orientalism; Oh, “A New Kind of Missionary Work.”
52 An additional 1,300 children were flown to Canada, Europe, and Australia. Like initial adoptions from Korea, this too was highly unregulated and even fatal when a cargo plane carrying more than 300 children and adults crashed, killing more than 100 of them. “Operation Babylift, 1975.” Adoption History Project, 2012, last accessed March 31, 2013, http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~adoption/archive/AIDOBRA.htm.
Bartholet is a highly distinguished scholar in the field of adoption studies and one of the strongest proponents of TRA and transnational/racial adoptions. In her law article she implores policymakers “to think empathically about the child at the heart of the international adoption debate.” To assist her readers in this exercise, she narrates a hypothetical “rational conversation” between herself, along with the audience, and a “typical” (read universal) child. She presumes this child is a girl in China because there are more girls available than boys and it is the top sending country. Based on this conversation, Bartholet hopes to convey the child’s experiences, needs, and wants. She describes how the child would first want the physical attention of being “held, fed, comforted, and played with, and kept clean, dry and warm” and then emotional connection and educational stimulation that would allow her to build strong relationships and succeed in life. Bartholet then asks questions about what the child would prefer in terms of preserving her “birth heritage”; “growing up in her country of birth”; being adopted domestically in her country of birth; staying in an orphanage; or being “placed abroad in a loving adoptive family.”

Offering details to help make this decision, she describes the institutional living conditions of this universal child:

She knows from her daily experience that the orphanage is a horrible place. … When she screams for attention because she is hungry or cold or wet or just alone, nobody comes--attendants arrive only every four or six hours and then leave immediately after hurried diaper-changing and bottle-propping events. She would notice if she were capable of understanding that infants around her stop screaming after a while; they learn that screaming does not produce any result. … Her current orphanage is fairly typical. Some are better, providing a little more care, but still little if any opportunity to develop the kind of relationship with a nurturing parent figure that is essential for normal human development.

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54 Ibid., 344-5.
Some are far worse, with infants dying at a high rate, and children whose biological age is in the teens lying in cribs looking as if they were toddlers, unable to talk or walk because they have been so deprived of the attention it takes for a human being to actually develop. Photographs of some of the still-living children in certain of these institutions look like photographs that could have been taken in the Nazi death camps, except here the subjects are all children, bone-thin, expressionless, staring back emptily at the camera eye.\(^{55}\) 

In addition to citing studies to back up her claim that institutional life is damaging, Bartholet’s exercise of imagining what the child would want simplifies the decision of choosing adoption over detrimental institutions. The invocation of Nazi genocide suggests institutionalized children exist in spaces of widespread death and extreme deprivation.\(^ {56}\) In this situation, the orphan is marked as a racial Other and as an ultimate victim. Indeed, the identification of global racial difference explains both their lot in life and need to be rescued.\(^ {57}\) The children are alone, without meaningful contact or care.\(^ {58}\) 

As Susan Soon-Keum Cox, VP of Public Policy Holt International Children’s Services, stated in her written testimony to Congress at the hearing on “Asian Adoptions in the United States”: “The conditions of orphanage care in China have improved dramatically in the last decade, and domestic adoption, foster care, and permanency programs for orphaned children in China are increasing each year.”\(^ {59}\) In contrast, the prospect of being adopted presents a storybook future. Bartholet acknowledges that if this child grew up abroad that there may be minor bumps in the road; many people would ask her about her

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\(^{55}\) Ibid., 346-7. 
\(^{56}\) Linda Olsen asks the provocative question: “Should the orphaned children of the world live, or should we let them die? Intercountry adoption could be the vehicle through which many children have the chance to live” Olsen, “Live or Let Die,” 2004: 525. 
\(^{57}\) Here, I would argue that Eastern European and Russian children occupy an ambiguous space of both the racial Other and the transparent racial I. 
\(^{58}\) This representation ignores efforts by Chinese government officials and agencies to improve their system. 
“real parents” and “birth culture,” but that her adoptive parents might also send her to a summer heritage camp or “take her on a ‘heritage’ trip to her country of birth,” which would presumably alleviate the harm done from any negative experiences in the United States and these inappropriate questions and assumptions.

She continues her imaginative exercise, writing:

She might grow up wondering about her racial or national identity—wondering if she is truly ‘American’ or more truly something else. However we should also tell her that many people in her country of birth would be thrilled if they had the opportunity to go live in the U.S., especially if they could get the kind of education and other advantages that most adoptive children will enjoy, so that they could participate in what is still seen by many throughout the world as ‘the American dream.’ We should tell her that the research shows adopted children do very well on all measures that social scientists use to assess human happiness, and that it reveals no evidence that children are in any way harmed by being placed internationally. Finally, we should tell her that the research shows that children raised for significant periods of time in institutions do terribly badly on all of those social science measures.60

In this second part, while Bartholet concedes to the identity struggles that the child might have to negotiate, she proceeds to deflect the importance of race, conceptualizing it as a formal, objective classification or skin color rather than a historical construction and onto-epistemological technology of power.61 Bartholet’s reasoning is similar to Peter Hayes who argues that racism is not endemic to society and that segregation does not exist; therefore concerns about positive racial identity and healthy coping mechanism would be minor because children adopted transracially would only have to negotiate sporadic individual acts of racism. In this way, critics of transnational/racial adoption who are concerned with national and cultural identity are similar to the critics of domestic

61 See Chapter one for references to studies that highlight the difficulties faced by transnational/racial adoptees.
TRA in that they are both attacks on humanist values.\(^2\) Bartholet asserts that despite this challenge of identity, many Chinese adults would be envious of the opportunity to live in the United States with its education and rewarding life, indeed the “American Dream,” it would afford. According to her, research unequivocally states that children do well on all measures of happiness and are not harmed in any way by transnational/racial adoption. In contradistinction, being raised in an institution, like an orphanage, means that a child will “do terribly bad on all of those social science measures.” Her statements lead to her final conclusion:

> It seems obvious to me what this infant would choose if she could choose. She would choose not to spend another day or hour in the institution if at all possible. She would choose to go to the first good adoptive home available, regardless of whether that was in her country of birth or abroad, so that she could begin living the kind of life infants deserve and need both in terms of their day-to-day life satisfaction, and in terms of their prospects for normal development so that they can live and thrive as adults.\(^3\)

Transnational adoption here proceeds as a form of rescue and freedom. Bartholet’s statements explicitly suggest that the choice of adoption amounts to a full future and life, while a choice of institution results in death, as noted by her comparison to death camps. The cultural distinction that is outlined by Bartholet becomes a proxy for racial difference. Thus, not only is racial difference ascribed to the orphan figure but also to the space in which the orphan occupies.\(^4\) She cannot live or become a thriving fully modern subject in the space of the Chinese institution. Only through adoption, the liberal and loving act within the “positively” racialized space of the United States, can the child have

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\(^2\) Hayes, “Transracial Adoption,” 306, 308.  
a future. In creating these absolute truths and speaking for the racial Other, Bartholet contributes to the production of the orphan figure as not a subject but an abject victim and racial object of rescue.

One of Bartholet’s contentions is that orphans are too young and irrational, thus unable to speak for themselves, but in her own gesture of speaking for them she exemplifies what legal scholar Shani Kings calls “MonoHumanism.” While at first glance “one humanism” seems to be an inclusive project, King uses this term because it actually encapsulates the exclusive strategy of ethno/Eurocentric humanism that is deployed by Westerners. In explaining MonoHumanism, he states:

What MonoHumanism represents, more specifically, is the notion that the United States has substituted its own view of all non-American peoples or cultures for positive knowledge of them, facilitating the creation of the Western identity of self as the normative center. The narrative of identity that accompanies MonoHumanism subscribes both universality and superiority to Western knowledge and discourse, which effectively results in the exclusion and displacement of the knowledge and discourse of historically oppressed peoples.

Here King draws from Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. For Said, Orientalism is not only the geographic arrangement of the world in “two unequal halves”—the Orient and Occident—but also the endeavor to ascertain, possess, and control the Orient in ways that reveal inner knowledge and truth about the self. To be sure, Orientalism “views the Orient as something whose existence is not only displayed but has remained fixed in time and place for the West. So impressive have the descriptive and textual successes of Orientalism been that entire periods of the Orient’s cultural, political, and social history

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65 This is to clarify that race is not only ascribed to the racial Other but exists for the racial I too, but for the latter, it is often “unmarked” or “invisible.” *See* Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, 1998.


are considered mere responses to the West. The West is the actor; the Orient a passive reactor” (emphasis mine). MonoHumanism also mirrors transnational feminist of color Chandra Mohanty’s description of Western feminism that constitutes a Eurocentric (or self-referent) “power-knowledge” nexus within it that problematically employs universalizing methodologies through the production of difference. In these cases, the category of women is presupposed and already constituted “regardless of class, ethnic of racial location,” which places the “marked” woman as an object and without agency. King, Said, and Mohanty expose the ways that the construction of race is inextricably tied to the production and circulation of knowledge, which is why the question of “How is knowledge about adoption produced and by whom?” is so important.

Thus, Bartholet’s exercise in speaking for the voiceless follows the violent racial strategies of MonoHumanism, Orientalism, and Western feminism by configuring a totalizing and bleak outline of the orphan. The orphan, for Bartholet, is violently presupposed and only through transnational/racial adoption can it re-emerge in full life. Transnational adoption is thus good for children, good for adoptive parents, and “bitter-sweet” for birthparents—who, “given their real-world choices,” would choose an adoptive home no matter if it were domestic or abroad. This narrative suggests that only Western love provided by a nuclear family is rewarding, discounting any love that an orphanage worker might have for the children in their care or that the biological parents or family still might provide.

68 Ibid., 108.
69 Mohanty, Feminism Without Borders, 2003: 222.
Human rights discourse has always been couched as a moral imperative to address global and social justice, inequality, oppression, and rights. Human rights discourse, however, often devolves into a regime of truth that reduces subjects to the singular figure of victim.\textsuperscript{72} In other words, being “on the agenda” of human rights discourse requires ultimate victimization and the erasure of one’s agency to gain political sympathy and action. Thus, transnational/racial adoption discourse is \textit{still} about saving and rescuing orphans, even as many “progressive” adoptive parents try to go beyond this problematic past. Echoing Bartholet and UNICEF, among others, legal scholar Lisa Myers states, “Many of the world’s leaders, human rights organizations, and leading scholars have publicly recognized that international adoption often represents the only means of saving orphaned or abandoned children from lives of abuse, neglect, or exploitation” because they “represent the most vulnerable and innocent members of our global society.”\textsuperscript{73} Elizabeth M. Ward also argues that one way to protect the human rights of children is through transnational/racial adoption: “Accessibility to intercountry adoption is a human right of orphaned children and should be treated as such by both domestic and legal regimes of international law.”\textsuperscript{74} She adds that prohibiting transnational/racial adoption also increases chances for further human rights abuse through trafficking, child pornography, child prostitution, and hazardous working conditions,\textsuperscript{75} in effect arguing that transnational/racial adoption has the power to \textit{prevent} human rights abuses.\textsuperscript{76}

\textsuperscript{73} Myers, “Preserving the Best Interest of the World’s Children,” 787.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 759.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 752.
The Asian orphan in this case is an exemplary neoliberal subject because she embodies a rescued victim that adds to the post-racial imaginary, and she also contributes to the neoliberal (re)production of Western families. Moreover, her rescue and inclusion allows the United States to deny entrance to undutiful (racial immigrant) subjects and families. As Kim suggests, neoliberal logic posits teleology, and in the case of transnational/racial adoption it materializes in the form of a transaction in which the adopted children trade their cultural losses for incredible economic and social gain as a cosmopolitan global citizen.77 Bartholet confirms Kim’s thesis when she dismisses the importance of cultural identity for adoptees. She asserts there is no evidence to show that a child will be happier with a strong sense of racial/ethnic identity “than children who think of themselves primarily as belonging to the human race, or as belonging to groups defined in non-racial and non-national ways.”78 Hence, through adoption the orphan figure is able to deflect negative racial and cultural particularities of birth and acquire new ones in the United States and through her new family. Despite the absence of agency, neoliberal (and liberal) logic suggests that adoption is the best outcome and indeed the only outcome that provides the unidirectional radical transformation needed to become a privileged rights bearing subject. The material, legal, and social transaction of adoption in fact resembles capital trade—it satiates both the supply side (to acquire a “better life”) and the demand (entitlement to children and a family by Western individuals and couples). In short, neoliberal policies and liberal humanist or liberal

77 Kim, “Our Adoptee, our Alien,” 518.
78 Bartholet, “The Child’s Story,” 360-1. She adds, “What the studies show, what developmental psychologists have long known, what common sense tells all with any experience with parenting, is that what is key to enabling children to grow up with a healthy sense of self-esteem and identity is a loving, permanent home as early in life as is possible.”
multicultural beliefs have worked in tandem to produce the universal subject of democracy and globalization, except this subject can only emerge with the help of the adoptive family. In the case of transnational/racial adoption more specifically, the universal subject can only be universal in the geography of the United States or some other Western receiving nation.

The point here is not to argue that orphans do not exist or that reforms of adoption practices are not needed. Rather, it aims to critique the way in which orphans have become legible not as subjects who eventually (and at what would have to be a young age) assert their agency through acts of labor, resistance, memory, and survival, but as abject racial objects of rescue whose only chance at a full life is through transnational/racial adoption. Institutions are powerful, but are they totalizing? The conditions of many orphanages might be deplorable, but what does it mean for those who are not adopted or for the people working in Asia to provide better services? Adoption supporters, using the language of human rights and the guidance of the Hague Adoption Convention have painted a dystopian picture. Does subjectivity not exist in other spaces? What allows for Western families and the United States, along with other Western countries, to have such privilege of universality?

**Part II: Opposite Futures in Law and Discourse**

**(Neo)Liberal Law and the Better Family**

Crucial to this chapter is an understanding that the orphan figure is only one prominent variable in the liberalism/neoliberalism equation. Another involves the construction of adoptive families as not just the good but the better family. Again, race

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plays a strong role in the ways in which adoptive parents are racially “unmarked” as universal and therefore legible as a legitimate family, while the birth parents are racially marked as illegitimate and therefore illegible as a potential family. Legal scholar Bernie Jones adds that analysis of transnational/racial adoption must not only consider the ways in which race informs adoption but examine how it is inherently a feminist issue as well because transnational/racial adoption “is predicated upon one woman's inability to mother her child and another's ability to take the child overseas and become a parent.”

The birthmother’s minimal legibility as birthmother hangs on the premise that she relinquishes her child because, without this action, she would be known simply as a “mother.” This action is seen as a loving one that enables the win-win-win situation for the adoption triad, leading her to be both integral to and separate from the formation of the new transnational (post-racial) family. In this section, I explore how neoliberalism and liberalism facilitate the naturalization of this process so that transnational/racial adoption is the normative horizon.

In *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*, Lisa Duggan describes neoliberal hegemony as a conglomeration of national and global processes that has attacked the social welfare state and redistributive social liberation movements in favor of privatization, deregulation, free markets, open borders, global corporatism, and a nonredistributive form of equality. While it claims to eschew culture and politics of common sense economics or “nonpolitics,” Duggan warns that

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80 Stuart Hall contends that cultural identity is not a fixed essence but fluid and a *relational* position. Thus, cultural identities to an extent are shared and collective, and they are also mediated, imaginary, and fragmented. Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” 1994: 367.


82 Duggan, *Twilight of Equality?*, x-xii.
neoliberalism is in fact reliant on these social formations: “Neoliberalism… organizes material and political life in terms of race, gender, and sexuality as well as economic class and nationality, or ethnicity and religion. But the categories through which Liberalism (and thus neoliberalism) classifies human activity and relations actively obscures the connections among these organizing terms.”

Duggan clarifies that while neoliberalism appears to be working to our advantage and simultaneously disconnected from our social, cultural, political, sexual, and economic identities, it actually operates in an oppressive and obscuring manner. Domestically, neoliberalism focused on individual freedom and responsibility which meant bringing poor families, who were disproportionately of color, closer to governmental regulatory and disciplinary powers, producing a number of negative consequences. These families received fewer resources to support their families; were investigated at higher rates for drug use in medical and social service settings; and were given harsher sentences for minor and nonviolent drug offenses, which resulted in higher and longer rates of family separation as well as making it more difficult to reunify. These neoliberal policies were thus acts of legitimate violence against families who were poor and of color.

The incredible growth of transnational/racial adoption coincided with a number of liberal and neoliberal domestic laws that helped shape how adoption was situated in relation to government priorities of family formation. In the same year that the HCIA convened, Congress held its second hearing (the first one being in 1985) on the “Barriers to Adoption” in America in an effort to address the rapidly increasing foster care population, especially for children of color. The broader purpose of both the 1993 and

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83 Ibid., 3. See also Harvey, A Brief History of Neoliberalism, 2005.
1985 congressional hearings was to address the “tragic” condition of children, especially children of color, being trapped in foster care. The fear was that foster children faced a daunting life after “graduating” from or “aging out” of the system, leading to joblessness, homelessness, mental illness, drug abuse, delinquency, crime, suicide, and prostitution, all with a 100 percent higher mortality rate and 30 percent greater chance of ending in prison than children who have not been in the system. 84 African American children in particular had much longer average wait time in foster care than their white counterparts and had a less likelihood of exiting foster care through adoptive placement. A number of congressional representatives and witnesses posited TRA as the “only positive alternative to homeless children,” 85 a point suggested in the title of the hearings, “Barriers to Adoption.” Transracial adoption had an added benefit, as Senator Gordon Humphrey stated, in that it would “preserve our traditions of family life,” which have “contributed to the strength of this country.” 86 With adoption as the given solution, the specific goal of the hearings was not to determine the barriers to adoption in general but in particular TRAs. 87

84 See Pierce’s submitted article and also Merritt, Father Engel, and Woodson. Committee on Labor and Human Resources U.S. Senate, “Barriers to Adoption,” 1985: 208, 216, 267, 386.
85 Ibid., 267.
86 Ibid., 317.
87 Barriers to adoption in general included social workers having high caseloads and low morale, which caused high turnover for workers and contributed to children getting “lost in the system.” There was also little training for social workers, poor record keeping, and lack of reliable data needed to make policy decisions. Recruitment of families, especially of families of color, was often hindered by procedural barriers such as long, unresponsive, expensive, and intrusive process. Financial barriers were also cited such as high fees and lack of financial assistance for health care and child care. Other barriers included the feeling that judges refused to terminate parental rights and the lack of leadership within agencies. There were also barriers that stemmed from faulty and negative attitudes about children with special needs as being unadoptable and also attitude that no family is good enough for a particular child.
A handful of the witnesses spoke out against the systematic push for TRA as the solution, testifying that the focus should instead center the numerous barriers specific to the recruitment of families of color. They connected these barriers to the institutional racism inherent in the adoption process and industry.\textsuperscript{88} A National Urban League study found that of 8000 applications by African American families, only two were approved.\textsuperscript{89} Frequently, black adoptive parents were over-screened and confronted with insensitive and bureaucratic barriers, where they were required to be within a certain age range, live in their own home (not an apartment), only one parent was allowed to work yet needed to meet income standard, single parents were ineligible. Many black prospective adoptive parents were uncomfortable with, and often could not afford, the expensive fees because the belief that fees were immoral and too closely resembled payments for human bodies made during slavery. There was a consensus among critiques of TRA for the urgent need to hire more black social workers at all levels who were knowledgeable about the strengths of the black families and who knew how to approach, respect, and work in the black community as opposed to basing decisions from popular cultural representations of black pathology and criminality.\textsuperscript{90}


\textsuperscript{89} Committee on Labor and Human Resources U.S. Senate, “Barriers to Adoption,” 1993: 44.

\textsuperscript{90} See testimonies by Father Clement, Elizabeth Cole, William Merritt, and Alice Washington. In her written statement, Alice Washington explained this phenomenon: “In schools of social work workers are taught the pathology of Blacks. Workers then transfer the information into practice by looking for the weakness in Black families, not the strengths. They tend to read negatives into a perfectly positive situation. For example, one county worker was suspicious of a family who was vegetarian. She felt the child would not get any meat to eat and this was not good. Another worker wanted to know why a woman was a college professor wore an earring in her nose. She spent an hour interrogating her about the earring.” Committee on Labor and Human Resources U.S. Senate, “Barriers to Adoption,” 1985: 438-439.
Importantly, witnesses also highlighted the need for preventative measures. For example, Barbara Tremitiere, Director of Adoptions Services at Tressler Lutheran Service Associates, Inc., in Pennsylvania stated that that keeping families together should be the highest priority, which could mean providing supportive services, financial help, homemaker services, respite care, supportive ‘grandparents’ (retired persons), family-to-family help (buddy families), and relative support. Elizabeth Cole echoed the sentiment that the government ought to invest as much “time and money and thought in giving services to families in crisis…. Let us preserve families so that we do not have to recreate new ones.” William Merritt, President of the National Association of Black Social Workers, characterized the systematic push for TRA as a “hostile act against our community” and, citing the United Nation’s definition of genocide, called it a “blatant form of race and cultural genocide.” Merritt’s citation of genocide indirectly alludes the long history of institutionalized racial violence perpetrated by the U.S. nation-state against African American and Native American families and children through slavery, lynchings, Indian extermination as well as termination of tribes and cultural assimilation/genocide of Native peoples, especially Native American children through late nineteenth and early twentieth century boarding schools and the Indian Adoption Project during 1958-1967.

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91 Ibid., 110.
92 Ibid., 407.
93 According to Merritt, the effort to legally systematize transracial adoption as the only alternative for children in foster care matched one aspect of the United Nation’s definition of genocide, which Merritt summarized: “with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national ethnic, racial or religious group: … imposing measures intended to prevent birth within the group; and finally, and most important to our purpose here today, forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.” Committee on Labor and Human Resources U.S. Senate, “Barriers to Adoption” 1985: 213. See also United Nations “Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.” December 9, 1948. Last Accessed March 8, 2013. http://untreaty.un.org/cod/avl/ha/cppcg/cppcg.html.
Despite the repeated testimonies by multiple experts and practitioners that addressed the issues of recruitment of families of color, prevention strategies to keep families from being separated in the first place, and ways to increase the success rate of family reunification, congressional representatives who spearheaded the push to increase adoptions saw TRA as a key solution. Rather than address the historical and systematic conditions that undermined the social and economic stability of families of color and prevented them from opportunities to adopt, representatives fixated on “racial discrimination” against white adoptive parents as the main barrier to TRA. Many of the witnesses at the hearing echoed this sentiment that “reverse racism” was hurting children of color and white adoptive families. In her written statement, Carol Coccia, President of the National Coalition to End Racism, passionately argued that “children are PHYSICALLY DYING, AND THE SYSTEM IS RESPONSIBLE.” She added that the matching policies violated the federal rights of children to equal services and discriminated against potential parents on the basis of race.\(^{94}\) In response to Merritt’s critique of the systematic push for TRA as institutionally racist, Senator Howard Metzenbaum argued for a color-blind approach: “[The child] ought to have an opportunity to be adopted by a loving parent… Regardless of race…. What concerns me is that I have always thought that there ought not to be discrimination based upon race, whether it was in employment, or whether it was in education, and I get the feeling there is a kind of racism involved in your testimony…. What about the child?"\(^{95}\) In the eyes of TRA supporters, race matching policies were “literally killing children.”\(^{96}\) Significantly,

\(^{94}\) Committee on Labor and Human Resources U.S. Senate, “Barriers to Adoption,” 1985: 19.  
\(^{95}\) Ibid., 229.  
\(^{96}\) Committee on Labor and Human Resources U.S. Senate, “Barriers to Adoption,” 1993: 70.
supporters of TRA ignored the ways in which structural policies and laws were contributing to the separation of children from their families in the first place. Children of color were already imagined as belonging in foster care, and how they got into the system was irrelevant. Thus, TRA was perceived as the opposite and only alternative to the bleak and inevitable outcomes after foster care.

This naturalized representation of foster care as both an inevitable yet dangerous space for children of color was juxtaposed with the loving and stable white adoptive family, which reinforced these two scenarios as “opposite futures.” However, foster care was not the only pessimistic future for children of color. Families of color, and black families specifically, were posited as a future that would be less than. In the 1985 hearing, Dr. William Pierce, President of the National Committee for Adoption, submitted a short article by Carl Rowan for the record, entitled “Should Whites Adopt a Black?” In the piece, Rowan conceded that children of color from Asia and within the United States who are adopted by white parents might develop some problems, but he posited the troubling alternative: “The average black child who lives in a black family in a black section of America today is jobless, and will have no work experience into adulthood, if ever. That child is vulnerable to all kinds of sexual and physical abuse. A tragic number of young black men will be caught up in crime and drug addiction by the time they reach puberty. Young women will become pregnant, though unmarried, in their teens.”97 Rowan and by extension Dr. Pierce, strongly believed that any deleterious white environment was incomparable to the hostile black environment.

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97 Committee on Labor and Human Resources U.S. Senate, “Barriers to Adoption,” 1985: 208.
Dr. Pierce, in the 1993 hearings, testified that even the prospects of a black adoptive family were not ideal, especially if the child had spent time with white foster parents who were interested in adoption. He critiqued efforts of kinship adoption, where social workers sought out biological relatives for adoption, as another form of racist matching in disguise. Dr. Pierce offered as an example a case in Minnesota for which white foster parents wished to adopt an African-American toddler. Instead, social workers conducted a search to find a biological relative for the purpose of “family preservation.” The maternal grandparents were found in Virginia, but they had not known the child existed. The tragedy for Dr. Pierce was that “the child's life was disrupted as he left the only parents he had ever known” because of racist politics.

Harvard Law Professor Randall Kennedy, in his testimony during the follow-up congressional hearing to Interethnic Provisions in 1998, shared a similar view, lamenting that white foster parents bond with a child of a different race but they are prevented from adopting that child. What happens instead is “authorities select as the adoptive parent a relative of the same race as the child, even when that relative is not as close to the child as the foster parent and will likely prove to be an inferior adoptive parent.”

The presumption made by both Dr. Pierce and Kennedy was that the relatives would not be able to love or care for the child in the same way that the white foster parents would have because, as Povinelli might say, it was love based on biology rather than true love. Dependent on the unmarked conditions of whiteness, their statements underscored the way in which the “best interests of the child” was couched in representations of stable and loving white

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98 Committee on Labor and Human Resources U.S. Senate, “Barriers to Adoption,” 1993: 72
families being better than and opposite of black families (and even biological ones). In this context, representations of freedom and love embodied by white adoptive families produce symbolic violence because they simultaneously imagine black families as lacking proper love and freedom.

The formulation of opposite futures, culled from scientific outcome studies, “common sense,” ignoring structural racism, and witness testimony based on color-blind ideology, empowered Congress to act. The goal of reducing the disproportionate number of children of color in foster care was a liberal project of the state but in deploying “liberal” color-blind ideology with neoliberal strategies of restructuring families it had violent outcomes. In 1994, Congress passed the Multiethnic Placement Act and in 1996, the Inter-ethnic Adoption Provision (collectively known as MEPA-IEP). Both laws explicitly targeted TRA as the solution to high rates of children of color in the child welfare system. Together, they eliminated practices that favored racial and ethnic matching, which were considered the primary culprits that kept children of color in foster care limbo, where they would eventually grow up to become homeless or incarcerated.

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100 While color blindness can be traced to many sources, it is significantly influenced by the Fourteenth Amendment, Brown v. Board of Education. Gotanda “A Critique of ‘our Constitution is Color-Blind,’” 2. It appropriates Martin Luther King Jr.’s hope that one day his four girls would be judged not “by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.” As Pamela Anne Quiroz notes, the contemporary form of color blindness deploys these previous notions in a new racial logic that presumes the civil rights movement was successful and racism has ended. Since race no longer shapes social opportunities, thinking, or actions, we should not use race consciousness in social policy. Therefore, any use of race is problematic because it inhibits racial meritocracy. Quiroz, Adoption in a Color-blind Society.

101 The Howard M. Metzenbaum, 42 U.S.C. § 622(B)(9), 5115A, Pub. L. No. 103-382, §§ 551-554, 108 Stat. 4056, 1994. This was repealed by Removal of Barriers to Interethnic Adoption Provisions of the Small Business Job Protection Act of 1996, 42 U.S.C. §§ 671, 674, 1996B, Pub. L. No. 104-188, § 1808, 110 Stat. 1903, 1996. [hereinafter MEPA and/or MEPA-IEP]. While both had the goal of increasing transracial adoptions from the U.S. foster care system, IEP in fact repeal MEPA because the latter had a loophole that still allowed race to be considered in adoption placement. IEP explicitly abolished racial discrimination—making it unlawful to consider color, race, or nationality when making adoption placements—against children and prospective adoptive parents in attempt to ensure the “best interest of children” and provide permanent, safe, stable, and loving homes.
For many TRA adoption supporters, “equality” required color-blind practices because color-blindness privileges “individual choice” over “group rights.” Parents and advocates of TRA began challenging racial matching on the ground that these practices were discriminatory, denying white prospective parents the right and opportunity to adopt children of color. Ignoring the existing structural racism, a strategy of color-blind ideology, they also claimed that race matching was discriminatory toward children of color who were denied the right to be adopted and placed in a permanent and loving home. When a court sided with the biological parents or “family preservation,” this is often seen as a horrific failure of the system. MEPA-IEP became a part of the U.S. state’s liberalism, which guaranteed protection of individual freedoms from “arbitrary violence,” in formal juridical equality. MEPA-IEP sought to stop this “discriminatory” violence, allowing the state to integrate and even reconcile the freedom from violence afforded through TRA. Yet, the liberal enactment of freedom was predicated on and required its own forms of violence in terms of how children of color were separated from their families in the first place.

Similar to the MEPA-IEP, the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) was passed by Congress in 1997 to promote and expedite the adoption of children in foster care. It was a major shift that for the first time favored permanency through adoption as a privileged outcome if reunification with the biological family “failed” or was not possible. In 1996, the same year that Congress overhauled and reduced welfare spending

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103 Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, 42 U.S.C. 1305, Pub. L. 105-89, 111 Stat. 2115. This law, among other things, repositioned adoption as a higher priority by allowing adoption to be an option earlier, shortening the time allocated for attempts at family reunification.
and programs for poor families via the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act,\textsuperscript{104} it also passed another significant law, the Adoption Tax Credit (ATC). The ATC, which has been renewed multiple times since its enactment, gave adoptive families financial assistance to help pay for eligible adoptions costs in the form of a tax credit (rather than just a deduction).\textsuperscript{105} In conjunction with the other already existing federal funding for adoption—such as state adoption incentives, where individual states receive additional funding for increasing the number of adoptions or ongoing adoption subsidy programs mostly in the form of health care payments—the ATC represented another neoliberal move to increase family-making through adoption while reducing “illegitimate” and “bad” families.

The representation of “opposite futures” was exacerbated by these new socioeconomic and legal conditions. The passage of “hidden welfare” through tax credits such as the ATC for adoptive families happened at the same time that significant cuts were being made to the traditional, visible welfare programs.\textsuperscript{106} Welfare reform was largely driven by the racialized, gendered, and sexualized imagery of the African American “welfare queen,” who was represented as being locked in a “culture of poverty” bearing multiple illegitimate children and depending on government handouts.

\textsuperscript{105} Adoption Assistance Provision of the Small Business Job Protection Act of 1996, Pub. L. No. 104-188, title I, § 1807(b), 110 Stat. 1903 (1996). This provision provided a $5,000 credit to adoptive families for non-reoccurring eligible expenses relating to adoption (e.g. adoption fees, court costs, attorney fees, etc.). Since 1996, the Adoption Assistance Provision has been renewed multiple times. It currently provides a maximum credit of $12,650. “Adoption Benefits FAQs.” IRS.gov Online. Last Accessed: 18 March 2013.
\textsuperscript{106} Although not engaged in adoption discourse, Sociologist Chris Howard explains how scholars have historically defined social welfare as the sum of direct expenditures. They have, thus, overlooked spending programs, i.e. tax expenditures, that have cost hundreds of billions of dollars. Howard, \textit{The Hidden Welfare State}, 5.
while refusing to work.\textsuperscript{107} Through its time limits and stricter eligibility and work requirements, welfare reform was seen as a way to reinstitute “family values,” “traditional” family structure, and individual responsibility.\textsuperscript{108} Sandra Patton notes that as a complement to welfare reform, adoption was seen as a solution to illegitimacy and even had its own section in the penultimate version of the bill, titled “Reducing Illegitimacy”: “[The] bill paired adoption with welfare reform as a means of relocating ‘illegitimate’ children in ‘legitimate’—two parent, heterosexual—families.”\textsuperscript{109} Through color-blind ideology and neoliberal principles that prefer privatization and individualism over strong social welfare, these laws worked in concert to construct white adoptive parents as not only the aggrieved party but also the rightful parents who would emancipate children of color from the foster care system and move them into a loving home. These laws highlight how color-blind adoption discourse ignored predominant and underlying structural racial violence that contributed to the disproportionate rate of separation of families of color and the unequal access to adoption for both minority families and children of color. Cumulatively, the adoption discourse and this assembly of laws solidified the “opposite futures” argument, whereby mothers of color were no longer just “bad mothers” but “ineligible mothers” when measured against white middle class parents who were always-already considered to be the “better (heteropatriarchal) families.”

\textbf{The Transnational Context}

\textsuperscript{107}See Chapter one for discussion of culture of poverty and welfare queen.  
\textsuperscript{108} For more on welfare reform see Roberts 1997 and 2002 and Fujiwara, \textit{Mothers Without Citizenship}.  
\textsuperscript{109} Patton, \textit{Birth Marks}, 23.
Overlapping the domestic context of TRA, transnational/racial adoption was normalized as a solution to global poverty and homelessness, but in the case of transnational/racial adoption, the representation of race appeared in the figures of the orphan, family, and nation in seemingly race-neutral terms. Simon and Altstein argue that transnational/racial adoption was indeed buoyed by the absence of racial issues because Asian children did not carry the “historical (racial) baggage” that black children possessed. As Dorow also adds, Asian adoptions were popular not just because the absence of historical baggage but also because the spatial distance engendered a stronger belief that the Asian birth parents could not re-appear to make claims for the child later in life. Further, Asian cultural difference was “flexible” and “redeemable” rather than “abject” and irredeemably “damaged” like black cultural difference. Nevertheless, I argue that the color-blind ideology, liberalism, and neoliberalism that unfolded for domestic TRA help illuminate why transnational/racial adoption is also about race even though it has been veiled as race-neutral. Instead of the explicit discourse on race and color-blindness, culture and nation were proxies for racial difference in representations of transnational/racial adoption. Yet, the domestic laws that promoted color-blind adoption and enacted welfare reform helped concretize the narrative that white families were the better choice when considering the child’s best interest. Extension of liberal inclusion and a neoliberal future that would promise full life by the state had been embedded in

110 Ironically, Simon and Altstein admit that there are “issues of wealth, power, race, deception, kidnapping, class exploitation, colonialism, and imperialism” but claim that these issues “are not as ‘close to home’ as the troubled and at times violent history of race in the United States” Simon and Altstein, *Adoption Across Borders*, 144.

111 Dorow, *Transnational Adoption*, Chapter one.
discourse and law and in many ways overlapped into the context of transnational/racial adoption.

In 1999, Congress held another hearing on the “Implementation of the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption.” While the United States had signed the HCIA in 1994, it had not ratified the Convention. Thus, the hearing was held to discuss which department should oversee the Central Authority required in the Hague and how the United States would interpret the treaty. Significantly, just as in the earlier hearings regarding domestic TRA, there was no discussion on efforts to keep Asian families together. In his opening statement, House Representative Bill Delahunt explained whom the Hague would benefit and protect: “U.S. ratification will signal our desire to encourage intercountry adoption and our commitment to creating a legal framework that will better protect adoptive families and their children.”112 Congressman Earl Pomeroy also stated that in signing the HCIA, “the United States and over 60 other nations recognize the importance of international adoption” and of the effort to protect “adoptive families from fraud and abuse.”113 According to Congressman Richard Burr, the HCIA would also enable greater efficiency for adoptive parents: “We are here today to discuss legislation that will make the process more transparent, more orderly, and less stressful for those who want to provide a child with nothing more than a loving home.”114 This sentiment was echoed in the 2006 hearing on “Asian Adoption in the United States,” which reaffirmed the United States’ commitment to transnational/racial adoption and discussed in large part concerns about corruption. Thomas Atwood, in his oral testimony,

113 Ibid., 6.
114 Ibid., 5.
explained the National Council for Adoption’s “holistic” approach that recommended transnational/racial adoption as a “positive option for orphans, second in preference to timely domestic adoption, but to be preferred over domestic foster care, and group or institutional care.”

Just as in the 1999 hearing, Mr. Atwood’s scenario glaringly omits reunification with the birth family or keeping the birth family intact in the first place as priorities for the international communities. In both hearings, the orphan figure was an unquestioned given for which transnational/racial adoption was seen as an inevitable solution and opposite future that would yield a better life and family.

In 2008, 15 years after the Hague Convention, Congress finally ratified it. With more than 80 nations as signatories, the HCIA is generally considered a constructive and beneficial development in transnational/racial adoption. Yet, many adoption supporters have criticized it. Their main critique posits that while the effort to stamp out corrupt, unregulated, and exploitative adoptions is needed, sending countries, which are often developing nations, do not have the resources to implement the standards and regulations. This inevitably and harmfully creates a backlog of the process, causing children and prospective adoptive parents to remain in limbo. According to Lisa Myers, the HCIA is easy to distort, “Countries and critics of international adoption have manipulated the Treaty to prevent adoptions from occurring and delaying the process, thereby trapping children in institutions.”

The other critique focuses the lack of an international supervisory body. Enforcement of the HCIA is handled solely by each of the designated state Central Authorities. This lack of an international governing body makes it difficult

\[115\text{ Committee on Foreign Relations U.S. Senate, “Asian Adoptions in the United States,” 2006: 29.}\]

\[116\text{ Myers, “Preserving the Best Interest of the World’s Children,” 798.}\]
to stop exploitive and corrupt practices, and as supporters suggest, any indication of a scandal could mean dramatic decreases in who is available to be adopted.\footnote{117}

David Smolin argues that even with scandals, agencies continue adoptions until government intervention by either the sending or receiving countries. He states that there is strong financial incentive to look the other way: “United States agency personnel are financially or ideologically motivated to ‘believe the best,’ doubt negative reports, minimize abuses, and keep the system open and running at all costs even when abuses become apparent.”\footnote{118} The HCIA is supposed to safeguard against corrupt practices by creating regulations, and the hope is that all the rules are followed by those engaged in the facilitation of transnational/racial adoption. But on the heels of scandals, two main arguments have surfaced in legal discourse: 1) Keep the adoption pipeline open and functioning despite corruption and violation of principles because the good of “saving” and “freeing” children outweighs possible faults. Shutdowns are detrimental and even reforms in these cases almost always slow the process to a grinding halt; or 2) Shut down any further adoptions and push for reform because such abuses and exploitative practices hurt children, birth families, and adoptive families more than placement overseas would “fix.”\footnote{119} The U.S. government has at different times suspended adoptions from various countries such as Vietnam in 2002, Cambodia in 2003, and Nepal in 2010. Adoptions from Vietnam resumed in 2005 and adoptions from Nepal are open but discouraged,

\footnote{117} Wechsler, “Giving Every Child a Chance,” 25. 
\footnote{118} Smolin, “The Two Faces of Intercountry Adoption,” 2005: 476. In reference to abuse in India, Smolin says, “Significantly, despite the scandals, United States agencies only stopped accepting new referrals for placements after the system itself closed down, after the 2001 scandals. Moreover, there is no evidence that a single United States agency has ever taken any significant action to report, prevent, or remedy the many instances of corrupt adoption practices to which they have been witting or unwitting parties.”
\footnote{119} Ibid., 453-4.
while efforts to reestablish adoptions from Cambodia are ongoing and nearing a reopening. With respect to scandals and corruption, the argument is about whether to hinder/halt or continue/facilitate transnational/racial adoptions. In the case of Nepal, 80 families were in the process of adopting when the U.S. government delayed the process due to concerns about unreliable, falsified documents and instances where birth parents were searching for their child who had been put up for adoption without their consent. Even with this knowledge, more than 60 families continued their adoption processes.\textsuperscript{120}

The 2006 congressional hearing on “Asian Adoptions in the United States” revealed that representatives of Congress cautioned the federal government against implementing the Hague and fighting corruption because of the fear that it would inhibit transnational/racial adoption. Senator Larry Craig stressed that adoptions must be ethical and transparent but also asserted that the orphan would be the victim in cases of bureaucratic crackdowns to corruption: “[W]e should help these nations find ways to fight corruption while allowing legitimate adoptions to proceed. Otherwise, it is the orphan who will be paying the price for somebody else’s criminal behavior, the orphan who cannot be adopted domestically, and may be deprived of a permanent, loving home from an adoptive family of another country.”\textsuperscript{121} Senator Mary Landrieu, in her own testimony for that same hearing, expressed similar frustration when the government overreacts, instituting additional barriers that ultimately harm children and adoptive families:


\textsuperscript{121} Committee on Foreign Relations U.S. Senate, “Asian Adoptions in the United States,” 2006: 5.
Believe me, nobody wants to eliminate fraud more than our delegation, our whole caucus, but I want to say this for the record: When a bank is robbed in Chicago, we do not shut down the banking system. We go find the bank robber, and we put them in jail. Every time there is one stealing of a baby, or you know, one violation of a crime, everybody starts shutting down international adoption. And we don’t realize, when they do that, they literally sentence children to death, literally. And they disrupt the lives of thousands of good tax-paying church-going American citizens, who are just to the end of their process, and then somebody steps up and says ‘‘Oh, we have a suspicion that 10 babies were taken illegally, so we are shutting the system down.’’ It is the worst shock to the system, and we do not do it anywhere else. And I’m going to fight against these closures that we keep going through, and we need to keep the system open, transparent, and it is a literal lifeline to children, and a happiness line for parents.122

In their statements, both senators agreed on the importance of preventing child trafficking and corruption but placed greater emphasis on the continuation of adoption, which was justified by the narrative of life, freedom, and happiness for the child. Similar to the language from the debates about the foster child, foster care, and domestic TRA, these statements articulate the Asian orphans as ultimate victims with a future in which they are “sentenced to death,” while the white American adoptive family simultaneously embodies the good (tax-paying and church-going) neoliberal subject, victim of regulation, and more importantly the locus for the best future. Thus, rather than taking seriously the fact that U.S. adoptions may facilitate child trafficking and corruption by its very global capitalistic nature, this material violence of familial separation induced by poverty, coercion, and misinformation is seen as a form of acceptable and even inevitable violence that is unfortunate but worth the costs. Here, dominant adoption discourse eerily

122 Ibid., 26. Sen. Landrieu added, “You want to eliminate fraud, you want to eliminate crime, criminal behavior. But if we have a process that is so full of red tape, bureaucracy and paperwork, et cetera, and if we stop the process every time there is one violation, we will never create a system in this country or the world that gives a chance for kids who are desperate for parents, and parents who are desperate for children, to find each other.” Ibid., 23.
resembles conservative and neoliberal calls for deregulation, while claiming such abuses only occur on an individual basis. Ironically, as I showed earlier, the regulation that is in place through the Hague is seen as consumer protection for the adoptive parents. During his opening statement on the final markup of the Intercountry Adoption Act of 2000 (IAA), which was the law that outlined the plan to implement the HCIA, Representative Benjamin Gilman stated why the IAA was important: “We want those parents to have the best information and services available to them. This bill provides many consumer protections to improve the transnational/racial adoption process and to establish a consistent and reliable system that will be recognized by foreign nations.”

To be sure, not much of the legal transnational/racial adoption literature pertains to birth parents or birth mothers. Human rights and neo/liberal logic have written birth mothers as always outside of the universal mother figure. When faced with a decision between the two, transnational/racial adoption advocates seem to believe that the choice is easy. At a recent transnational/racial adoption conference, law professor David Smolin shared his story of his own two children adopted from India in which he found out after the adoption was finalized that they were taken from their mother without consent. While he tried everything in his power to find and reconnect them with their birth mother, there was nothing he could do since in the eyes of the United States the adoption was finalized. He called up numerous U.S. adoption agencies posing this same scenario to them, and what he found was that none of the agencies felt morally compelled to try and rectify the

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124 One exception is Kathleen L. Manley, who advocated for the passage of the Hague and making sure that birth parents’ rights are considered and respected. Manley, “Birth Parents,” 2006.
situation. As the Smolin’s and the Nepal example suggest, once adoptions have reached the point of involving an American family, this is presumed to be in the best interest and future for the child even if the birth parents are alive and non-consenting. Such adoptions represent freedom from the violent and opposite futures that India and Nepal symbolize for the orphan, yet they are simultaneously freedom and love with violence because of the ways in which this love and freedom are hinged on accepting trafficking as normative.

Bartholet rationalizes this presumption that transnational/racial adoption is in the best choice by explaining that birthparents typically surrender their children because they are poor and have no means for a real choice to raise their children. Hence, the fact of being paid to handover one’s child does not represent diminished personhood: “Giving them [birth parents] money may be wrong because it will always be hard to know for sure that the money given was not the reason for surrender. But giving money to desperately poor birth parents almost all of whom would likely surrender their children in any event, is not the worst evil that such birth parents or their children are faced with.”

Relinquishment and adoption in this case are inevitable. Thus, legal scholars advocating for the increased facilitation of transnational/racial adoption separate the interest of the child (and adoptive parents) from the interest of the birth parents/mother. Despite the HCIA’s supposed stance against corruption and unethical practices that might separate families, once the adoption process occurs (whether legal and final or not), the law and public sentiment shift to favor the adoptive family, which was often the case with TRA as

well. For transnational/racial adoption proponents, the promotion of domestic (in-country) adoptions or maintaining familial relationships for Asian mothers and fathers are seen as impossible outcomes, as adoption has been normalized as the best way to produce freedom from violence. Smolin elucidates how advocates are often the last to condemn transnational/racial adoption abuse (if at all, even as isolated events) because they fear that it will decrease access to transnational/racial adoption. Thus, again, while such adoptions are couched in the language of liberal humanism, advocates are more concerned with facilitating adoptions for Western families while ignoring not only the conditions of separation and need in the first place but also the conditions that are engendered by the neoliberal, unidirectional “free” flow of children in transnational/racial adoption.

**Opposite Futures: China’s Cultural (Racial) Difference**

Similar to the constructed difference of birth parents and adoptive parents, the nation of origin, China in this case, and the United States are also configured as oppositional cultural and moral spaces. To be sure, sending and receiving nations have used transnational/racial adoption as a form of foreign policy. In addition to “helping” needy and orphaned children after the Korean War and war in Southeast Asia, they helped normalize political and economic relations between Asian countries, such as Vietnam and China, and the United States. As House Representative Thomas Bliley stated in the 1999 hearings on the Hague Convention, “I believe helping disadvantaged children overseas is an important investment that improves our relationships with other
countries and advance our foreign policy objectives.”127 At the same time, both sides worry about the image of the nation that is presented through transnational/racial adoption. Sending countries such as China do not want to be seen as being incapable of taking care of their own as was the case for South Korea during the 1988 Olympic Games.128 Hence, according to adoption supporters, claims that the United States is exploiting Third World countries for their “resources” are exaggerations based on national pride.129 The United States, on the other hand, portrays itself as the liberal space of transnational, post-racial families; moral freedom and democracy; and destined opportunity. This narrative, however, is being disrupted by efforts by Asian countries and governments to promote more domestic adoptions and reform their child welfare systems. From the 2006 congressional hearing on “Asian Adoptions in the United States,” there is a strong anxiety about Korea and China’s effective promotion of domestic adoption and how this could hurt transnational/racial adoption. Thomas Atwood, President of the National Council for Adoption, qualified his praise on the increased emphasis and effort by these countries, stating that they should be applauded but “America should continue to advocate in these countries that a family through intercountry adoption is better for children than domestic foster or institutional care, especially for younger children.”130

South Korea in particular had proposed an amendment in its legislature that would have

127 Committee on International Relations U.S. House of Representatives, “Implementation of Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption,” 1999: 104. According to Senator Mary Landrieu, they also helped facilitate better public understanding and acceptance of other countries: “[T]hese children become the most effective ambassadors for these countries when they come to the United States, without saying or doing anything. The children’s’ presence softens and opens up America’s eyes to China, and to Korea, and to Vietnam, and to Guatemala … more than I can tell you.” Committee on Foreign Relations U.S. Senate, “Asian Adoptions in the United States,” 2006: 24.
130 Ibid., 30.
ended transnational/racial adoption. For Atwood and his organization, the National Council for Adoption, this was an “urgent matter” in which the U.S. government should push for “ongoing, proactive international adoption advocacy.”

While both nations employ their children as symbolic tools, the United States has had greater success in using culture and race to define il/legitimate parents, families, and nation-states, which has enabled it to construct itself in relation to previous and continuing depictions of Cold War China and other Asian countries such as Korea, Vietnam, and India. For example, Christina Klein and Arissa Oh examine adoptions from Korea and “symbolic” adoptions from China during the 1940s and 1950s. They illustrate that the political and social commitments of the U.S. nation-state, its middlebrow culture, and Christian Americanists to transnational/racial adoption were built on a fictive familial love relationship between America and Asia that portrayed the U.S. ability to transcend the boundaries of race, nation, and culture. They contend that this gesture of inclusion into the U.S. national body politic, however, was necessarily premised and founded on characterizations of the U.S. as morally, economically, and politically superior to China and Korea. Transnational adoption was based on notions of extreme poverty and the moral duty to rescue children along with the overshadowing presence of communism in both situations. Julie Hua adds to this critique of victimization and the production of national cultural difference by examining the ways in which human rights discourse has framed Chinese girls who are adopted by American families as victims of

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131 Ibid., 30, 34.
132 Oh, “A New Kind of Missionary Work,” 162. She uses the term Christian Americanist to describe the twin pillars of secular Christianity and American patriotism.
133 Klein, “Family Ties and Political Obligation,” 44. Klein specifically examines advertisements of the Christian Children’s Fund that solicited readers to “accept their ‘responsibilities toward a bankrupt, starving world’” and symbolically adopt the children of China.
China’s One Child policy, where China is posited as culturally amoral, static, and backwards vis-à-vis the myth of inclusion, progress, and multiculturalism of the United States. She argues that the multilayered human rights discourse in the U.S. suggests that both the women and girls in China are victims of a patriarchal society and traditional government. Hua notes that Chinese adoptees are made legible because their potential to assimilate and shed their cultural difference and “Asianness,” but birth mothers are relegated as unintelligible because they are still perceived through the lens that connects them with a static country and traditional government.134

In the case of China adoption scandals, the dominant narrative places the blame squarely on the Chinese, who are transitioning to capitalism: “‘It's a corrupt system,’ said Brian Stuy, a Salt Lake City resident who has adopted three Chinese girls and operates Research-China.org, which traces the origins of such children. ‘It's just so driven by money, and there's no check and balance to the greed.’”135 Media stories about the scandal focus on the corrupt government officials and the traffickers, largely ignoring the ways in which U.S. families are implicated in the high-value market-based demand that has created incentive not only to boost the “supply” of “available” children for foreign parents rather than domestic ones136 but also develop related industry products such as hotels for adoptive parents, Asian Barbie for newly adopted children, summer camps in China, birth country tours, etc. This is in large part because the United States interprets itself as a rule-abiding country. Adoptive parents rarely question where or how their required $3,000 cash “donation” gets used, even though they know most of it does not go

136 Smolin “The Two Faces of Intercountry Adoption,” 477.
toward helping children. According to David Smolin, the few who try to reform transnational adoption are threatened by the adoption community or have to abide by contractual gag orders for fear that saying something might jeopardize their child’s citizenship or legal adoption status.\textsuperscript{137} The move by adoption supporters then is to maintain the oppositional cultural and moral position of each family and nation. Thus, these representations of birth parents and China reduce them to always already incapable of care and as moral and cultural anachronism stuck in the past, with no hand in the future. U.S. families and nation on the other hand are culturally, morally superior as capable actors and spaces of rescue, love, and freedom.

Edward Shorter has underscored that the most notable shift from the traditional to the modern family was from its instrumental and functionalist role to an expressive one, but Michel Foucault argues that while the family is an independent institution, it also becomes an instrument for the state as a means to produce a better nation.\textsuperscript{138} Together, race, gender, globalization, liberalism, and neoliberalism have enabled legitimate structural violence in the conditions of poverty, family dissolution, stigma of illegitimacy, under-funded welfare systems, and unequal laws on the one hand and the movement of huge sums of capital, leading to abuse and trafficking on the other. These representations, discourses, and socio-economic and legal policies have assisted in the apprehension of children who are subsequently made, legally or unlawfully, into “orphans.” Hence, what the HCIA does, as both a liberal and neoliberal project, is legitimize and promote adoption, which on its face value seems beneficial for the child and adoptive family

\textsuperscript{137} Ibid., 482.
\textsuperscript{138} Shorter, \textit{The Making of the Modern Family} and Foucault, “On Governmentality.”
rather than the state. To be sure, the child and adoptive family benefit, but at the same
time, the (neo)liberal aspects of the HCIA and transnational/racial adoption fortify the
representations of freedom, love, and dutiful (Western) neoliberal subjects, who will form
better families and thus a better nation.

**Conclusion: Beyond Scandals And Reform**

In tracing the representational configuration of the orphan, family, and nation, I
have tried to show both the conditions and violence required to make a
“transnational/post-racial family.” As the *Harry’s Law* episode “American Girl” shows,
transnational/racial adoption is complex. It can be loving and violent at the same time.
Nevertheless, the show also reconfirms what we already knew: the United States and the
American family constitute the privileged space and actor in transnational/racial
adoption. Even though international law (HCIA) was supposedly on the side of the birth
parents, Mr. and Mrs. Chen, the national law (in this case the judge) re-interprets the best
interest for Lee, the young child at the center of the case. Just as the title suggests, Judge
Seabrook confirms that her status should remain “American” because U.S. representation
deems China and even her birth parents as unable to fulfill her best interest. Indeed, the
“loving” possibility of returning to her birth parents is imagined as a *traumatic future*,
providing another example of how the birth parents and country of origin are constructed
as uncertain and violent spaces. This example helps us understand how law and
representation, especially cultural and racial ones, work to make legible and illegible
subjects, families, and nations. As international law, the HCIA promotes
transnational/racial adoption as possibilities for love and freedom from violence, and in a
case such as the one presented in *Harry’s Law*, U.S. national law can re-interpret the
international rights discourse for its own benefit and specific goal of appearing as a multicultural/post-racial democracy of freedom and opportunity.

Even as transnational/racial adoptions have declined, they are still promoted and privileged, which means that once a new market (country) opens there will be more opportunities to engage, despite efforts to avoid them, in unethical practices inherent in the global exchange of capital and human beings. This has left us with a troubling gap between the theory of international adoption law embodied in the HCIA and its practice. Numerous scholars have written on how to “improve” the HCIA or prevent unethical adoption practices in order to follow the guidelines set out by it in the first place. But as David Smolin maintains, the adoption industry is not self-regulating: “[I]t seems clear that most of the parties involved in intercountry adoption possess strong motivations to favor even a systematically abusive adoption system over no system at all. Thus, transnational/racial adoption is not a self-regulating or self-correcting system.”

Governments of sending countries have very few resources, making the regulation of

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139 Patricia Meier suggests that powerful anti-trafficking measures be put into place and that resources should be increased to prevent and punish trafficking in international adoption. Meier, “Small Commodities,” 2008. Chou et al. contend that the HCIA needs to better define the “best interest” and what constitutes reasonable fees. Chou et al., “Intercountry Adoption on the Internet,” 29. Lisa Myers advocates against the trend to install government-run system because funded government systems are just as susceptible to corruption since they have little oversight and are of lower priority compared to other areas such as infrastructure, agriculture, and medical and health services. Myers, “Preserving the Best Interest of the World’s Children,” 801. This is one of the very reasons why David Smolin argues for receiving countries to be the solution. He argues that reform should include forcing U.S. adoption agencies to be held legally accountable for their partner agencies. Smolin has proposed that part of adoption fees go toward an incentive payment to birth mothers to raise her child. Smolin, “Intercountry Adoption and Poverty,” 2007: 445. In attempting to get beyond an either/or debate of whether transnational/racial adoption is either “good” or “bad” and whether the Hague Convention “facilitates” or “hinders” such adoptions, Jena Martin, presents a framework for how the Hague Convention might mirror the Indian Child Welfare Act in how it addresses paradigms of family, rights, and culture (and sovereignty) Martin, “The Good, the Bad & the Ugly?” 2007.

140 Smolin “The Two Faces of Intercountry Adoption,” 475.
corruption in transnational/racial adoption a low political priority.\textsuperscript{141} Adoptive parents and adoption agencies also have direct investments in maintaining the “global adoption pipeline” that we too often try to deny.\textsuperscript{142} The question of how can the HCIA be reformed to stop corruption but still facilitate adoption is problematic from the outset because it never addresses the matter of representation for which knowledge about the racial/cultural Other already exists. Thus, the issue is representation before abuse and scandals. The latter will continue so long as the West believes in its liberal project. The focus on scandals also misses how the practice of transnational/racial adoption is infused with global capital. Most transnational/racial adoption advocates admit that it is not the answer, but that offers one solution that is infinitely better than doing nothing. Smolin repudiates it as a false binary. If the goal is to really help children in need, the other option should not be to “do nothing.” This requires us to reexamine how we think and practice adoption.

Transnational adoption cannot be individualized and sentimentalized solely along the lines of liberal love because it is inherently political. It exists within a complex global and historical web of violent and uneven power relations that has shaped how we have come to know and experience adoption, which necessitates that we interrogate why its current figures, subjects, laws, ideas, and practices are taken as given. Thus, this chapter is a critique of how we think about and come to know the subjects who are involved in transnational/racial adoption and the way in which the law exploits love and race to imagine opposite futures and facilitate unequal movement of bodies. The critical task

\textsuperscript{141} Ibid., 485.
\textsuperscript{142} Ibid., 491.
then is not to enumerate the ways in which racial subaltern subjects such as Chinese children or women are “aggrieved” vis-à-vis “evil and powerful” white racial subjects, but rather it is to consider how global policies and ideologies such as liberalism and neoliberalism work with analytical categories of power such as race, gender, class, and sexuality, to produce modern racial subjects in ways that they can be excluded or included for various individual, familial, institutional, and national projects and agendas.

Thus, I conclude by asking what is elided when the only concern is avoiding adoption scandals or, similarly, if the goal is only generating more adoptions or stopping them completely? There needs to be a system of accountability, but in thinking beyond scandals we can ask other critical questions, drawn from transnational feminism, such as what are the limits of rights discourse?; who decides what is in the best interest of the child?; how might we denaturalize racial and social constructions of orphan, birth parent, adoptive parent, and nation in ways that do not posit these figures, subjects, and spaces as always oppositional and mutually exclusive?; how do we frame the issues of institutionalization (orphanages), homelessness, and transnational/racial adoption differently so that the children and their mothers are not always rendered objects in need of rescue?; what are ways we might critically challenge normative Western, feminist, and LGBT143 rights, expectations, and entitlements to adopt another person’s child?; and lastly, how might we envision other models of family that are not dependent on the binary of either biological or adoptive kinship?

143 Jennifer B. Mertus argues that LGBT couples and individuals should be allowed to transnationally adopt children because it fulfills the needs of children without homes and people who want to parent and build a family. Mertus, “Barriers, Hurdles, and Discrimination,” 2011.
This chapter has shown how legal discourse and structures have presumed opposite futures for the orphan figure such that the (white) American family and U.S. nation are the better future. My next chapter explores popular adoption discourse through blogs and their comments to explore how even though this decision has been made the need to deny historical pasts of adoptees and re-state “realness” become common themes because hegemonic meaning always has to contend with competing realities, discourse, and meaning.
CHAPTER THREE
Reifying ‘Real’ Families in Popular Adoption Discourse

Ultimately I want generations after me to know this about the culture of blood and the culture of adoption: That blood is thicker than water, but love can be thicker than blood.

—Hollee McGinnis, Transnational Adoptee

Tracing the limits of love

On December 4, 2007, The New York Times (NYT) Online ended its engaging month-long blog series “Relative Choices: Adoption and the American Family” on transnational and transracial adoption. The quote above is from transnational adoptee and scholar Hollee McGinnis’ blog piece, “Blood Ties and Acts of Love.” There were nineteen entries by eleven different authors (by adoptive parents, adoptees and one birth parent), and this was the last sentence of both her blog and entire series. It is a powerful one to say the least because, for most, it encapsulates the meaning and power of love as the ultimate and enduring bond in adoption. McGinnis’ nuance of “can be”, however, flexibility such that love does not always or completely triumph blood.

As the previous two chapters have shown, transnational/racial adoption discourse has historically narrated such adoption as a loving, apolitical, and individualized transformative experience that allows adoptees to reemerge into a new opportunity and chance at full life. It is articulated as a shift away from violence (e.g. abuse, poverty, homelessness, cultural depravity) to a place of love, permanency, and safety. These linear narratives of transnational/racial adoptions negate and foreclose various forms of violence that are generated and maintained by the state, adoption agencies, adoptive families, and even by adoptees themselves. In other words, marked violence (or the

tropes of violence that are associated with adoption) is interpreted as resolved while unmarked violence is relegated to the past, forgotten, or ignored and rejected completely. This chapter asks: What are the popular narratives about transnational/racial adoption that continue today in the NYT blog series, and to what extent do their employments of love address, ignore, or reproduce material and symbolic forms of violence concerning adoptee identity and family?

While the first and second chapters examined positive adoption language, social scientific studies, and legal discourse and laws, this chapter explores selections from The New York Times (The NYT's) special, multi-author blog series “Relative Choices: Adoption and the American Family” as a site of popular knowledge circulation and production. It analyzes the blogs but more specifically the comments in response to the blogs, beyond official adoption discourse generated by adoption professionals, scientists, governmental officials, and legal scholars, to explore how love and violence operate within adoption discourse, especially for transnational/racial adoption. Following the previous chapters, I am interested in the ways in which violence and love is constitutive of (adoptive) family formation. Similar to Ann Anagnost, the point is not just to critique love as insufficient but reframe it as a way to understand how this structure of feeling engenders what I call the violence of love. Many scholars have offered incisive critiques of adoption that focus on secrecy; poverty, institutional care, and race; and transnational

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2 See methods in my introduction for a discussion of discourse. Also, while The Times did not explicitly state it, nearly all of the blog entries dealt with transnational adoptions that were also transracial.

3 Anagnost, “Scenes of Misrecognition.”
political-economic and cultural circulation of children. My intervention, however, critically analyzes unmarked violence as contributing to the production of il/legibility for adoptive parents, adoptees, and birth parents and how this can be produced by statements and acts of love.

My interests in legible subjects and (family) units of adoption is similar to Asian American feminist Laura Kang’s application of the term in regards to Asian/American women, which considers “the terms and conditions by which Asian/American women have been rendered legible, visible, and intelligible.” Legibility is about the ability to transcend constricted specificities or negative particularities that render one unintelligible. Even after attempts to hide, obscure, or even erase certain subjectivities, that which is produced as illegible is often still present. The way I am conceptualizing legibility also links to Jenny Edkins’ theory of trauma and social order. She argues that trauma produced by the state is political, rather than only psychoanalytical, where the state is a site of danger instead of a site of refuge. As the main apparatus and producer of traumatic violence, the state has a vested interest in silencing the traumatized. Their legibility is dependent on being silenced, which is what enables a return and maintenance of “linear time” in a way that obfuscates the reality of “trauma time.” The traumatic must be hidden because it is a threat to the imagined completeness of the subject and

4 Carp, Family Matters, 1998; Briggs, “The Visual Iconography of Rescue,” and Somebody’s Children; Patton, Birth Marks; Roberts, Killing the Black Body and Shattered Bonds; Dorow, Transnational Adoption; Marre & Briggs, International Adoption.
5 See Myers, “Love and Violence in Transracial/national Adoption.”
7 Edkins, Trauma and the Memory of Politics, 4.
8 Ibid., 42.
9 Ibid., 34.
state. Thus linear and complete reality is constructed and temporary, always in contention with trauma time.\textsuperscript{10}

Edkins’ concepts of trauma, violence, and linear time are important because it highlights the ways in which popular discourse and the state through the legal facilitation and pre-adoptive structural violence play out demonstrates that the traumatic is not merely psychoanalytical but socio-political for adoptees. Additionally, the family represents a microcosm of the state; thus in the case of transnational/racial adoption, the adoptee, \textit{before} adoption, faces the traumatic experiences of separation from her/his family and institutional care, or as Margaret Homans suggests, an “unremembered yet life-altering event.”\textsuperscript{11} However, that traumatic violence often reappears and is suppressed \textit{after} adoption. The adoptive family, many times, exacerbates the effect of this violence by ignoring or rejecting the adoptees’ past identity, history, and connection to birth family in its attempt to construct a linear, normalized, and strictly defined family. This purposeful action and continual process is violent, what Silva calls “productive violence,” which I referenced in the introduction, because it is violence that produces the meaning for the adoptee and adoptive family while destroying or rejecting the meaning of birth family and past.\textsuperscript{12} The point here is not to suggest that there is an absolute origin or past in which truth and resolution can be found. Rather this chapter explores how the emergence or production of legibility in popular adoption discourse for one violently affects another. In analyzing statements of morality, culture, and legitimacy, it attempts to

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 12-14.
\textsuperscript{12} Silva, \textit{Toward a Global Idea of Race}. 
understand how adoptive parents, adoptees, and birth parents as il/legible racial subjects are produced in representation through the negation or foreclosure of the past and claims to realness.

First, I examine the abundant assertions that history and the past are irrelevant, what I call antihistorical statements. Second, I examine articulations of “realness” by adoptive parents and then by adoptees. Lastly, I conclude by interrogating expressions of love and rethinking its role in adoption. I argue that these blogs and their corresponding comments have helped create and maintain a linear narrative of completeness and finality for the adoptive family that displaces, negates, and forecloses what happened before and outside of adoption, which includes the past and future in regards to multiple identities, acknowledgement of birth parents, and complex (nonheteronormative) family structures. The statements in the blogs and comment sections, and broader adoption discourse in general, engender representational violence and subsequently mystify and efface that violence as well as the marked and unmarked structural-historical and traumatic violence. In short, I argue that violence is a productive force that cannot be relegated solely to the obvious moments preceding adoption. It both precedes and succeeds visible and physical violence in the forms of denying the past and making claims to realness. Indeed, love and violence are co-conspirators and effects of family formation in the attempt to form legitimate and legible heteronuclear adoptive families.¹³

The influence and importance of blogs as news, infotainment, and literary media forms has increased substantially in recent years. Yet, online participation is not just

¹³ Drawing on the term heteronormative, I use ‘heteronuclear’ to highlight the ways in which adoption discourse centers and attempts to reproduce nuclear and ‘normative’ families within adoption, i.e. one mother and one father.
limited to “proper” blogging. Many internet users have contributed to the exploding trend of posting comments in response to online blogs or articles. For example, blog posts or news articles on Fox News online and The Huffington Post now can easily elicit between many hundreds to more than 15,000 comments. Online communication is increasingly becoming the object of study for many researchers, from the ways it produces new language, and indeed a new Habermasian online public arena—blogosphere to the ways it stimulates learning and facilitate feminist community formation and action.\textsuperscript{14}

Technorati, the largest blog directory and search engine, has published an annual “State of the Blogosphere” reports since at least 2004, which give details on demographics and key trends of types of blogs and who is blogging along with the motivations and effects of them.\textsuperscript{15} A few studies specifically explore personal and topic blogs in relation to their comment sections.\textsuperscript{16} In terms of adoption, Ann Anagnost, in her internet ethnography, examines social and community interaction on email list postings, as “intimate confessionals,” by adoptive parents of children from China and the effects of the affective labor generated from constructing “celebratory” cultural identity for their children.\textsuperscript{17} Pamela Anne Quiroz analyzes how race is discussed in online adoptions forums.\textsuperscript{18} Such analysis can be generative for adoption studies because it underscores the ways in which adoption discourse is deployed in new media forms that are less mediated and more


\textsuperscript{15} Technorati, “Technorati’s State of the Blogosphere,” 2012.

\textsuperscript{16} Aharony, “LIS Blog Comments,” 2010; Bolander, “Disagreements and Agreements in Personal/Diary Blogs,” 2012. Bolander looks at how respondents mark messages to show agreement and disagreement in the comment section, while Aharony examines the language, information, and content of the comments.

\textsuperscript{17} Anagnost, “Scenes of Misrecognition,” 397.

\textsuperscript{18} Quiroz, \textit{Adoption in a Color-blind Society}. 
spontaneous. Further, it elucidates how such forms can reveal existing tensions and contradictions that might not be as visible in other textual or ethnographic sites.

The uniqueness of blogs is that they’re “democratic,” allowing any individual with internet access to intake or contribute to knowledge circulation and production about adoption at both banal and deeply insightful, intimate levels. Likewise, the comment space for blogs enables respondents to capture and share their initial thoughts. On the one hand, this is still mediated because many posters sign their names after their post, so there is some degree of self-censorship. They can also be less mediated because the choice of anonymity enables posters to say whatever comes to mind without repercussion. While there were numerous comments that were brief, usually expressing gratitude or thanks for sharing, the comment function provided respondents the opportunity to contemplate, draft, and possibly revise their answers, which meant there were also longer comments. Many of these longer comments offered complex perspectives about adoption that revealed interesting trends or notable tensions. At the same time, even comments that were shorter and of average length provided self-identifying information and fruitful insight into how adoptive parents, adoptees, individuals, and to a lesser extent birth mothers, felt. The comment function enables an instantaneous letter to the editor/“author” that is fueled by but also contributes to already existing knowledge and discourse. While blogs are perceived as more ephemeral and certainly do not have the powerful reach of mainstream or in some cases even alternative media, they have the

19 For a more detailed literature review of blogs see Aharony, “LIS Blog Comments.”
20 Birth mothers are an extreme absent presence in the blog series. There was only one blog author, Lynn Lauber, who is birth mother. Most of the blogs produced zero respondents who self-identified as birth mothers. Additionally, since this was The New York Times, where a majority of the readers are American, there was no clear presence of Asian birth mothers, even in the comments for Lynn’s blog, “Reunion.”
potential to connect with hundreds or thousands of readers each day and indefinitely exist within an accessible and searchable online archive. Another reason this The NYTs blog series is an interesting site of analysis is because as the “liberal voice” and newspaper of record for the United States, it in many ways represents the model of multiculturalism and “progressive” change.

To be sure, The NYTs contributes to the larger narrative within adoption discourse that places transnational/racial adoption in a liberal humanist framework of progress and inclusion. Adam Pertman, director of the Evans B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, and others, have suggested that domestic and transnational transracial adoptions have moved along a linear development from bad to good to better through his adoption “revolution” thesis. Some of the blog comments fit this narrative in which adoptive parents acknowledge their limits and state how they have learned and continue to learn from the past to understand the complexity of adoption issues. One adoptive parent, Mr. Doug, expressed how things have changed:

As a father to two adopted children (China and Korea) I understand the issues that my children face each day of not “looking like me”. To this end we have encouraged them to explore there [sic] culture and celebrate these differences to give them the self confidence to succeed in life and to answer any questions they have. We lead local groups to assemble internationally adopted kids, to go on picnics, outings, campins, get togethers etc [sic] .... We have created a [sic] entire community that has not existed in the past. We feel that we have learned from the past and the stories that have been told, and from stories like the above to better help our children adapt and learn what it is to be different and to be Asian in an American family.

22 Pertman, Adoption Nation; Herman, Kinship by Design; Kennedy, Interracial Intimacies; Register, Are Those Kids Yours?, 1991; Simon & Altstein, Adoption Across Borders. See introduction of dissertation.
23 Mr. Doug, Comment #33 of “Tracing My Roots Back to Korea,” 2007.
The statement by this father underscores the extent that some adoptive parents have attempted to provide a comforting, safe, and nurturing environment that acknowledges adoptees’ multiple and fluid identities. For decades adoptees were often pushed and practically required to assimilate fully into their white adoptive families in order to be legible subjects.\(^24\) As chapter two illustrated, color blindness emerged as a problematic “progressive” response to assimilation ideology and practice, where color “should not” and “does not” affect people, experiences, and outcomes.\(^25\) Now, as Mr. Doug states, many adoptees are no longer forced to reject their perceived negative particularities. Instead, they are encouraged and assisted by their parents to “culture keep” by exploring their mixed cultural identity and asking questions because there is acknowledgement that the adoptive family is bi- or multi-racial rather than monolithic.\(^26\) More rare but emerging in practice are adoptive parents who do not define family as heteronuclear by engaging birth parents as significant to the family.\(^27\) Here at an individual level, love is present, immense and acts as an enabler, not pretending to possess transcendent powers or trying to narrowly define the adoptee and adoptive family. This shift in discourse and practice that Pertman and Mr. Doug convey, however, hides the ways in which new, continued, and disguised forms of violence are being produced and maintained.

\(^{24}\) Susan Pettiss, associate director of International Social Service, American Branch, which was one of the largest intercountry adoption agencies in the United States, believed that children adopted from foreign countries should “quickly shed their former culture,” adding “the quicker they do so the better their adjustment.” Pettiss, “Cultural Factors in Adoption of Immigrant Children,” 1962: 22. She embraced the idea that since culture was learned, assimilation would help create a sense of belonging in the child’s new family. The aim was to have children “speak like them, eat like them, and dress like them, and be completely identified in every way,” which would cause the importance of physical differences to fade away. Ibid., 23.

\(^{25}\) For a comprehensive analysis of how color blindness operates within the contemporary adoption context see Quiroz, *Adoption in a Color-Blind Society*.


“Your Past Doesn’t Matter”: Denying the Historical

Adoption in general has traditionally represented a narrative of finality and closure. Pertman underscores this point by explaining that adoptive families have historically wanted to maintain a strict notion of family in order to be normal: “Society’s central mistake in the past, which led to nearly all the faulty statutes and misguided behaviors we still live with, was to try to force adoption into the same mold as ‘normal’ (defined as biological, same-race, heterosexual) family formation.” This desire for normality and completeness by adoptive parents (and at times adoptees), free from the fear of intrusion by birth parents or another past and identity, stimulates the violent material and symbolic “clean break” that is embedded in adoption law, discourse, and practice. In transnational adoption, this break has heightened relevance because a vast majority of the time birth records do not exist and children are adopted at younger ages so they do not remember as much from their childhood or past. The clean break allows the privileged transnational adoptee to (violently) re-emerge as another subject with a new identity and, as Barbara Yngvesson notes: “The clean break separates the child from everything that constitutes her grounds for belonging as a child to this family and this nation, while establishing her transferability to that family and that nation. With a past that has been cut away—an old identity that no longer exists—the child can be re-

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29 Pertman, Adoption Nation, 189
31 As one adoption expert put it, “[A]s own-country adoption becomes more open, more couples may of course turn to intercountry adoption in the expectation that they will not have to concern themselves too much with issues about parental access and possible interference.” Solinger, Beggars and Choosers, 31.
embedded in a new place, almost as though he or she never moved at all.”\textsuperscript{32} While the notion of blocking out or erasing history is impossible because history is fundamentally engaged with the present and the future, there is constant effort to ignore or negate the unremitting specter of the birth parents and separate them from the adoptive family in social death.\textsuperscript{33} The clean break, in this sense, is more than just fulfilling the legal, “permanent” obligation of adoption, but it also rehearses the trope of moral teleology and opposite futures that defines the adoptive family as normative, loving, and complete for both adoptees and adoptive parents. The narrative of inclusion and progression, however, obscures the unmarked violence and complex realities of adoption.

Thus even as the requirement of cultural assimilation by transnational adoptees has diminished in recent years, the discursive and material presence of the clean break is still articulated and practiced in the form of criticizing adoptees’ desire to wish, know, or connect to the past. Indeed, several of the comment writers explicitly denied the historical contexts for many adoptees who express curiosity or desire to know about their past. Statements from the blog responses suggest that there is a presupposed problem of an abandoned child without a home, family, and love and a simple solution motivated by love in which the child’s re-emergence through adoption is all that matters, enabling full life and the creation of a destined, complete family.\textsuperscript{34} In this section, I demonstrate that

\textsuperscript{32} Yngvesson, “Going ‘Home,’” 7.
\textsuperscript{33} Patterson argues that slavery as a form of social death, is “the permanent, violent domination of natally alienated and generally dishonored persons.” Patterson, \textit{Slavery and Social Death}, 1985: 13.
\textsuperscript{34} It could be argued that white adoptive families play a role that is opposite to Giorgio Agamben’s critique of the state—that is, while the state determines bare life, adoptive parents cultivate and support full life. Agamben, \textit{Homo Sacer}, 1998. Thus, through transnational and transracial adoption, nonwhite children can be made intelligible and become universal subjects of hope, demonstrating the morality adoption and the power of love.
although some people, as noted above, have recognized the value and reality of birth parents and birth history, the trope of “clean break” reemerges in a new way.

One way this is articulated and has continued from earlier adoption discourse is through the theme that the past does not matter. This was echoed by one adoptive father, Alan Buckle who has two sons in their 30s, says that children adopted may emerge differently in terms of being “wanted” and “loved,” but that after adoption this difference has minimal significance. He replies to “Blood Ties and Acts of Love,” which describes Hollee McGinnis’ anticipation and the significance of her giving birth as a Korean adoptee. Her main point, however, is to highlight that there are cultures of both blood and adoption, where “love can be thicker than blood.” In his response, he says:

Our children, adopted children, all, whatever, they came into the world the same way. The difference can be that some were deeply wanted and loved, and others were not. Too often a child is an ‘accident’. But an adopted child may be an accident, but their adoptive family is most certainly not! Thus the child born of love, and the child taken in adoption are the results of the same early, simple, decent, honest wish, and receive the same dedication and same love. It always saddens me to learn that some adopted children wish to look back, and are obsessed with this insignificance. They must learn [to] … look ahead, not back. Those who look back can well loose [sic] the future. No child is to be grateful to the parents. The adoptee is a child as any other and should shut off any wish to know of a very brief, and now insignificant past that is not important. To all children - Get on with your life. … We are so very briefly on this earth, and there is so little time! Make the best of life; the past is dead.35

Although Buckle’s statement does not appear to be made in malice, the focus should not be on the intentions of the speaker, which defenders of his statement might suggest, but more importantly on what the statement does. Beyond Buckle’s reductionist claim that

35 Alan Buckle, Comment #59 in “Blood Ties and Acts of Love.”
children who are up for adoption are not loved, his statement is revealing. For Buckle, the emergence of the child after adoption is the crucial moment but not because it is somehow unique. Instead, this moment, according to Buckle, is conflated with the experience of a non-adopted child; they are both “results of the same early, simple, decent honest wish, and receive the same dedication and same love.” The “wish,” in this sense, is both the desire to have a child and the work or the impetus that was furnished in order to adopt. It and the continuing work of love and dedication are justifications for not needing to “look back.” For Buckle, the “obsession” of looking back is a useless and fatal mistake because one’s future will be marred by the death of her/his past. Buckle’s statement is a common reiteration of denying the personal trajectories of adoptees. The common refrain of “those who look back can well lose the future” posits the past as solely negative and as something to be shunned and forgotten, which is the essence of historicity and linear time. It does not acknowledge the impossibility, for many transnational/racial adoptees, of forgetting the complex traumatic past and its important role in the present and future. Instead, Buckle’s statement constructs the adoptive family as the foundational and central component, symbolically annihilating the existence of birth parents and the history and identity that are connected to them.

Another commenter, John, responded to a blog entry by Jeff Gammage expressed how he was troubled by Jeff’s focus on the “unknown and unknowable” beginnings such as the details of birth and relinquishment of his adopted daughter from China:

36 Unlike this statement, many statements like it, and recent popular culture references such as the critically acclaimed film Juno, there is countless evidence to demonstrate that most birth parents find it very difficult to relinquish their children for adoption and it becomes something that they struggle with and think about for the rest of their lives.
My wife and I, as parents to two little girls adopted from China, never considered the ‘next best thing’ to be the details of how they were found and by whom. For us – all four of us — the only thing that matters is that we all came together as a family. That is a story we can and do tell to our daughters, now 8 and 5, to their endless delight. We can recount, first-person, how we came to China to adopt them, how they cried when they were handed off to us, how we were overcome in return, how we spent our days exploring the local side streets and shops before flying home, and how the people we encountered in China – regardless of their age, gender, social standing, etc. – expressed utter joy that we had adopted these two little girls and that they’d grow us [up] in the United States [sic]. Unlike other many adoptive parents, we never think much about why our girls were abandoned. We can only guess at the possible answers, and we spell those out to our girls when they ask. They have asked but, frankly, not very often. Their interest is tepid. None of the four of us had ever wondered about how our girls were found. My wife and I have, however, wondered at times about those who cared for our girls for the year or so they were each in an orphanage/foster home. We try to be candid and understanding in answering our girls’ questions, when they do ask. And we try to give them some perspective on China, its culture, history and people, but without hallowing the country. After all, we tell them, China is an amazing land in many way but if the people fully appreciated its girls, our two would still be there. Of course, they know they’re adopted from China but we treat it casually, not something connected to angst or unrequited memory. We don’t have photos of our girls when they were newborns but, trust me, we aren’t hurting for photos of them. We focus on enjoying the time we have together and don’t worry much about what happened before.37

Similar to Buckle, John says that the historical does not matter; what does is “that we all came together as a family.” Again, important for him is how the adoptee emerged during adoption. For John, the relevant beginnings and histories of his two daughters only extends to the point of “adoption day,” or as others refer to as “gotcha day,” the semi-equivalent of birthday for adoptions, which in many ways fulfills that fantasy of an individualized blank slate and clean break.38 John and his wife’s actions were the only

37 John, Comment #101 in “Finding Zhao Gu,” 2007
38 Gotcha Day, also known as Adoption Day. It is a controversial term, where many adoptive parents and adoptees believe it to be celebratory and more specific than Adoption Day, while some adoptive parents and adoptees feel it reeks of possession and disrespect for the birth family and adoptees.
significant conditions that enabled their two kids to be adopted. Although not explicit, John’s narrative rehearses the trope of rescue. In his version of the story, he and his wife are the prominent actors who created their family through adoption. Abandonment, which is usually a necessary criterion for rescue because it engenders political commitment, does not have to be critically considered, but it is presupposed and superficially justifies their actions. The vague/non-existent historical and social conditions of abandonment are replaced by an explicit recount of how the adoptions were “unequivocally” supported by Chinese people.

Additionally, John and his wife’s lack of inquiry and consideration of the historical is never regarded as a possible explanation for the paucity of interest from their daughters; instead it is defended by pointing to their daughters’ so-called “tepidness.” The semi-contextualized historical accounts that they do provide their children, John admits, is limiting, as they “give them some perspective” without “hallowing” China. To not provide at least some perspective would suggest that they were dangerously modeling previous adoptive families in completely ignoring their past. As John clarifies, however, there is a balance between not enough historical perspective and too much. Too much, to the point of “hallowing” China, could greatly jeopardize the validity, necessity, and genuineness of their adoption; it would present contradictions (especially in the area of abandonment) that could not be easily reconciled, such as why were they really abandoned? It brings the birth parents back into the narrative because it generates the possibility that the reasons for “abandonment” cannot be presupposed. Thus, John and his wife’s actions of not going “too far” are strategic, evidenced by John’s statement that “after all” if China “fully appreciated its girls” they would still be there. The reiteration of
cultural and moral difference names China as the racial Other and again justifies their decision to adopt from there. Cultural depravity, as a “violent” condition of possibility for the need for adoption, becomes a stand in as the signifier for “race,” where the trope of “race” is present but the language of “race” is absent. It, along with a nearly complete focus on the individualized present, simplifies the act and institution of adoption by placing the blame on China as morally and culturally deficient, relieving them of responsibility and commitment to their children’s historical past.

Another revealing example is presented by an adoptive parent, Bill Samuelson, who in response to Lynn Lauber’s blog, “Reunion,” on her experiences as a birth mother reuniting with her daughter, acknowledges her story as “poignant and valid” but says his experience is different:

… I have a very different perspective as an adoptive father. This is all very sentimental and melodramatic. How does knowing who your birth parents are change who you are? There are lots of people (including myself) who have essentially no clue who their grandparents and older ancestors are. So what? How’s this different than not knowing who your birth parents are? Birth parents are what they are. They’re not some cosmic connection to the fabric of universal oneness of harmony that so many think they are. They’re no big deal. What’s a big deal? The experiences, character, and knowledge my kids develop as they grow. How they will tackle life in the future, not the past. That’s a big deal and that’s the bottom line. I am glad my two adopted sons, who were born in western China, have essentially no chance of finding their bio parents. The last thing my children or their parents need is for some stranger(s) to show up at holidays or birthdays and try to pretend everything makes perfect sense. There’s a good chance they would carry baggage, possibly a freight car full of baggage, and like a couple other commenters have suggested, there’s a really good chance they’ll ask for money. That’s a lot of people’s bottom line, after all. As parents, my wife and I have a sacred responsibility to our children: we must demonstrate to them the limitless possibilities before them for happiness, fulfillment, and success in the early twentieth century while simultaneously shutting down the various barbarous impulses… I humbly
suggest we know what we’re doing as parents and the birth parents would just get in the way.\(^{39}\)

Interestingly, Lauber’s blog was the only one authored by a birth parent. In addition, it was the only blog to have a significant number of comments posted by birth mothers. While most of the blogs had zero respondents who identified as birth mothers, “Reunion” elicited 35 out of the total 182 responses.\(^{40}\) Samuelson’s comment echoes other respondents who attempt to equate not knowing information about birth parents with not knowing details about their parents, grandparents, and ancestors.\(^{41}\) His statement defines what is important—“the experiences, character, and knowledge my kids develop as they grow” and “how they will tackle life in the future”—and what is not—knowing your birth parents. Deploying the concept of “bottom line” as a configuration of adoption as fundamentally “a good deed,” Samuelson also violently reduces the complexity of adoption to a simplistic theory that the past does not matter; it and birth parents are “no big deal.” He even expresses his elation that the “break” is indeed nearly absolute, explaining that such a presence would carry “a freight car full of baggage” (and trauma)


\(^{40}\) “Blood Ties and Acts of Love” was the next highest representation of birth mothers with four responses out of 117.

\(^{41}\) One person explained that while she does not want to ‘negate’ the loss of adoptees, she believes that ‘genes do not necessitate a family bond,’ providing the example that her father left when she was ten without the hope that her family would have a better life. Trina, comment #69 in “Blood Ties and Acts of Love,” 2007. Other commenters take a slightly different approach, saying biological connections can be horrible as well. For instance one respondent described: ‘This entire series makes me uneasy. … No, I am not adopted but so much of this sounds like people who belong in an Adult Children of Alcoholics group…. I would be so lucky to have a different father! But no, no matter how often I have asked my mom, she never veers from saying that he is mine. …Stop romanticizing the biological connection a bit, not to give it no importance, but perhaps to put it into perspective: For those of us who know all of our ‘blood,’ just because we are related by blood doesn’t mean that we love each other, look like each other or want anything to do with each other…. ’ Abby, Comment #66 in “Blood Ties and Acts of Love,” 2007. All of these examples demonstrate how adoptive parents and others trivialize or invalidate the experiences of adoptees by reducing their feelings to common sentiments. This universalizing rhetoric ignores both material and symbolic violence that is unique to adoption, and it again underscores the unspeakability and untranslatability of adoption because, as Edkins argues, the language of trauma is hijacked and monopolized.
and surely disrupt the linear narrative of his family. To further justify his position, Samuelson asserts cultural difference. While he and his wife are positioned as “sacred” and both the model and conduit for full self-determination, of “limitless possibilities”—or opposite future—in the form of “happiness, fulfillment, and success,” the birth parents, and by clear extension China, are defined as unworthy, beggars, and “barbarous.” In this most explicit statement, Samuelson articulates and supports what another respondent, who is a birth mother, intensely rejects—the concept that the birth mother is merely a “breeder,” “incubator,” or a “birthgiver.” For Samuelson, the birth mother and birth parents truly represent the affectable racial Other, being barbarous and only influenced by money, and because they, and those who share their cultural deficiencies, occupy a non-sacred space, they can be literally rejected and symbolically annihilated from his construct of family.

What these statements underscore is that although transnational/racial adoption supposedly transcends race, racial and cultural difference are present and reiterated. The comments reveal the way in which birth parents and adoptees, before adoption, differently emerged in representation and exist(ed) in social reality than adoptive parents.

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42 Samuelson’s concept for and fear of baggage was similar to what Sara Dorow found in her examination of narratives of “choice” by white parents. One major theme in choosing to adopt from China was the belief that Chinese children were “baggage free,” Dorow, Transnational Adoption.

43 The mother says, “One little nit - I don’t call my self [sic] a “b****”mother. That word limits my role in my child’s life to her birth. I was not and am not an object, an incubator, a birth thing, to be used and then discarded…. It means breeder. It means Handmaiden. It is a dehumanizing, marginalizing term meant to keep a woman in her place. In AdoptionLand, your place was to give birth and then disappear. … I reclaim the fact of my motherhood. I’m reject the term “bmother” I am a mother [sic]” Kidnap, Comment #94 in “Reunion.” In another example, an adoptive mother speaks about her Korean daughter, and while she says has “wondered about her daughter’s birth mother,” her conclusion is clear: “As Julia has grown it has mattered less and less how she began. Of course it’s part of her story, but the larger part of the story now is who she has become and is becoming. The world is full [of] possibilities that would not have existed for her in her homeland.” Manna, comment #4 in “Finding Zhao Gu,” 2007. Here, Manna’s take provides a similar explanation, suggesting that the past has less relevance, but she also adds the supplemental comment that establishes cultural difference, where Korea is a symbolic space of death, while the United States is a space of possibility and empowerment.
They highlight the adoptee in an extremely isolated and specific historical moment, a time of unproblematized a priori need, where the moment of adoption marks the beginning of relevant history for the adoptee. In ignoring and rejecting the relevancy of the past for their adopted children, adoptive parents achieve a series of moves through the trope and practice of the unmarked clean break that reinforces the birth parents as the affectable racial Other and then attempts to assert transparency and self-determination for the adoptee while reinscribing this status for the adoptive parents as well. Even though globality would suggest the adoptive parents already exist as transparent/self-determined subjects, it has to be continually and violently affirmed in order to deflect statements that situate adoptive families and adoptive parents as “illegitimate” and illegible. Moreover, despite adoptees’ new, privileged status—because of and in relation to their white adoptive families—they can never become fully transparent subjects because they remain “of color” and are still interpellated as different in society and sometimes even within their own families. Additionally this “inclusion” and reconfiguration of the adoptee, along with the solidification of adoptive parents, is executed simultaneously while those who are not adopted, including birth parents, are erased and/or maintained as culturally different. In short, such antihistorical statements effectively rehearse the trope of rescue by diminishing and disavowing the subjectivities, historical experiences, and global context that happened before adoption as irrelevant. Their only importance is that they justify the “need” for adoption. My intent is not to suggest that there is an attainable truth or origin that is being hidden or denied but to suggest that there is a past

44 Silva, Toward a Global Idea of Race.
45 See Dubinsky, “Babies without Borders,” and Briggs, “’Mother, Child, Race, Nation.”
that adoptees have never fully own and that it should not be foreclosed or negated. Denying the importance of and the desire to know about historical conditions, contexts, and experiences is what problematically allows for adoptive families to maintain a linear, complete, and just notion of family.

**Reifying the “Real” and “Unreal”**

Expressions and monopolization of the notion of “realness”—“I am my child’s real parent”—by adoptive parents was another theme that appeared throughout the blogs, where adoptive parents are the only signifiers of realness, and realness equals legibility. But what are the conditions that allow for these statements and practices to be made and embraced, and what do they do? Elizabeth Suter et al. reveal that adoptive parents frame the public’s perception of families who adopt transnationally as a battleground because the ways in which their families are stigmatization as less than, second-rate, and non-normative. The misconceptions and negative attitudes have produced what Beth Waggenspack calls a “symbolic crisis” for adoptive parents. Chapter one addressed the ways in which positive adoption language tried to address this crisis by enabling adoptive parents to displace birth parents from being “real” or “natural,” making themselves and their adoptive families more legitimate and legible. Pertman adds that adoptive parents have historically feared that bonds with their children might not be permanent, leading to insecurities about their own difference. The simplest way to alleviate this fear and uncertainty has been to efface birth parents by making them illegible, less than, and

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46 Suter et al., “Adoptive Parents’ Framing of Laypersons’ Conceptions of Family.”
impossible to desire. 48 This move of creating a linear and progressive historicity of closure, resolution, and finality is an anticipatory move of violence. 49 It considers love as a motivating factor, but it also requires that adoptive families deny or obfuscate what happens prior and external to adoption. 50 Rather than allowing history and the present—and therefore the future—to be open, statements of realness, similar to antihistorical ones, and actions by adoptive parents can negate and foreclose this possibility in efforts to maintain their family. Again, the violence that is produced and reiterated is not necessarily the explicit and sole work of the adoptive family; rather, the adoptive family grasps onto and employs such signifying strategies of realness and clean break because they are the ways in which society has presented the conditions of possibility for the adoptive family, that is, discourses on adoption and family have demarcated definitions of family and guides for legibility.

To be sure, both blatant and cloaked means of articulating realness pervade adoption discourse. In a very explicit case, one respondent says, “I go crazy when people ask me about our daughter’s ‘real parents’. Someone even once asked my daughter about her ‘other mother’ - she was so confused for a while after that (I wanted to wring that person’s neck). I tell people we are her ONLY parents - she is our daughter - we feel no differently about her than our other children!! ...” 51 Those close to adoption understand the frustration produced by probing and inappropriate questions, but this example

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48 Pertman, *Adoption Nation*, 149.
50 While Spyer uses this term in the context of sedimented violence between Christians and Muslims in Indonesia, I borrow from her to describe adoption practices as well that anticipate the “troubles,” “baggage,” or “disruption” that relationships and interactions with the birth family might engender.
demonstrates the way in which discourse governs how subjects are differentially legible.

In asking such questions and making these presumptions, the strangers are discrediting adoptive families. At the same time, they are also getting at the unresolved complexity of adoption, which often generates negative fears and anxieties that no matter how finalized, closed, secret, or far spatially, such as across oceans, an adoption may seem, there is always the specter of birth mothers.\textsuperscript{52} Instead of this specter being an illuminating force that compels us to engage the complexities of adoption and rethink family, it remains a negative fear. In another example, a medical doctor explicated that

Your ‘real’ parents are the ones that raised you, taught you, sat by your bedside when you ran a high fever, helped you with school work, taught you acceptable social actions and awareness, and were there to soothe the physical and and [sic] mental bruises which are part of childhood. 2) your [sic] genetic parents are or were the DNA donors who made you what you are biologically, and what you might become through a mechanism which has succeeded in prolonging the species due to eons of selectivity for success of the species. The above are two separate actions, often from the same individuals, but also often from two totally separate occurrences [sic]. The second is of perhaps biologic and inherited prediliction [sic] significance….the former has taken the raw material of childhood and given you the concept of love, devotion, caring, ethics and protection necessary for you to develop into a true humane human being. I suggest it is they that are your “true parents” whether or not they are also the biologic conduits of your genetics or not.\textsuperscript{53}

Important to this response is the fact that Dr. Naiman follows the long history of psychologists, sociologists, and social scientists in general who have framed adoption in terms of medical, behavioral, and genetic issues. As chapter one showed, such studies have attempted to determine if adoption creates normal families, and according to

\textsuperscript{52} This fear is startlingly revealed in a national survey in 2002, which found more than 80 percent of the public had concerns that the birth parents “might take the child back.” “National Adoption Attitude Survey,” Sponsored by Dave Thomas Foundation for adoption and The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, June 2002.

researchers such as Simon and Altstein, a vast majority of them have demonstrated this.\textsuperscript{54} What these studies suggest is that adoption is a healthy outcome for children, even children of color and children from other countries. Prior to the more recent understanding of adoption as being a valid way to create and/or expand a family, the biological was the heavily privileged form; from this perspective, nothing could substitute for blood or genetic ties.

Now, the pendulum has swung in the complete opposite direction, such as in the statement by Dr. Naiman, where genetics is disregarded in favor of love as a grand solution. Embedded in this statement is an argument about love. Dr. Naiman’s articulation negates any significance of birth parents, who are merely the means to the end. This is similar to the view of Samuelson, who said birth parents are “no big deal.” As Diane Turski, a birth mother and activist, says, birth mothers are reduced to breeders, incubators, or at best birthgivers.\textsuperscript{55} Using terms such as “genetic parents,” “DNA donors,” and “biologic conduits,” Dr. Naiman regurgitates this notion that birth parents are irrelevant, negating their social importance to the adoptee and adoptive family. They remain illegible because they cannot provide a particular type of love, while adoptive parents, again, occupy the space of “reality.” They are already legible and self-determined in which only they can provide loving care and instruction that enables adoptees to emerge into full subjectivity. He dismisses the importance and obfuscates the continued existence of birth parents in the same way as Samuelson and so many others by reducing the issue of adoption and ignoring the personal history of adoptees. Instead, he

\textsuperscript{54} Simon and Altstein, \textit{Adoption Across Borders}.

continues the linear narrative that simultaneously hides and produces unmarked representational violence that happens before and after adoption. While birth parents are “possible” signifiers of family and parents, such violent acts pre-determine the legibility of not just current birth parents but of birth parents in the future as well; these statements produce future violence. Because this statement is made in a global (the difference between birth mothers and adoptive parents) and historical (the reference to already existing) context, it is also a type violence that follows the emergence of the adoptee after the break. Such a statement *reiterates* what the earlier symbolic violence has already established—that birth mothers are unimportant and should remain illegible because of their status as merely “genetic” parents, and at the same time it becomes the foundation for future representational violence.

The negation of birth parents was not always overt either. In another instance, an adoptive mother and *author* of the blog “The Real Thing,” Tama Janowitz, ends her witty and edgy piece with this statement: “I figure, Willow, she’s my kid, she just got here differently. I don’t remember floating around in my mother’s womb, or coming out of the vaginal canal – but I still know that person is my mother, even if she is a little off. And my kid knows I’m her real mother. Not biological, but real. It doesn’t get any realer than this.”\(^5^6\) In this closing passage Janowitz statement makes a slight gesture to birth parents. It suggests that her daughter, Willow, is able to make the distinction that she has two sets of parents. In spite of that, the language of realness is clear with Willow supposedly affirming this as Tama Janowitz says: “And my kid knows I’m her real mother.” Ending with a validation of both her daughter and herself, she claims, “It doesn’t get any realer

than this.” This realness is juxtaposed to the biological, which in the case of adoption occupies the space of unreal and illegible. While the experiences that Janowitz describes in the blog may hold a level of “realness” to them, her statement follows the logic of linear time that Edkins critiques, where trauma and violence are hidden and erased to both create and maintain a certain social, or in this case familial, order. Reality, as Edkins states, though, is never linear or complete. Despite its attempt to define the meaning of family, Janowitz’s statement ironically demonstrates Edkin’s point. The comparison of her individual trajectory with her daughter’s is a faulty one because Janowitz assumes that they are both linear and progressive. Her statement that she does not “remember floating around in [her] mother’s womb” is somehow supposed to parallel Willow’s own individual experience in a way that Willow should not and does not care. Janowitz’s statement, however, belies the fact of a complex relationship among Janowitz’s mother, herself, her daughter, and her daughter’s birth mother. Although her title was very explicit, Janowitz’s blog was very subtle in conveying what realness meant. Dialed down rhetoric of implying realness allows adoptive parents to project a “progressive” stance but still define family in an exclusive way.

Another subtle example is given by Laura, an adoptive mother of two children from Korea. The blog that she responds to, “Tracing My Roots Back to Korea,” is one authored by Katy Robinson, also a Korean adoptee, who writes about her experiences of feeling different while growing up but getting a chance to return to Korea and meet her birth father. Robinson describes how difficult it was to talk to her adoptive parents about adoption issues, such as “Who am I? Where did I come from?” because she did not want

57 Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*. 
to seem “ungrateful” or “disloyal.” At the same time, she states that she has the “most amazing adoptive mother.”

Robinson does not mention the idea of realness in her blog, and none of the respondents prior to Laura had mentioned the issue of realness either; yet, Laura inserts this issue into her response:

… I am naturally concerned about my children’s thoughts and feelings that they don’t reveal to my husband or me. We talk often about how we became a family, and try to answer their questions about their birth parents when they have them…. So far, my daughter is more interested in her heritage than my son who claims ‘I’m American mom, I don’t want to go to Korea!’ Whatever happens, my children know that we are there for them at any time or place and will support them in any way they need us to. Hmmm… sounds suspiciously [sic] like something a ‘real’ parent would do doesn’t it?

Looking at Laura’s statement, it appears to suggest she and her spouse are open to the idea of what it means to have a complex family, but her reference to realness troubles this. Even though her statement is not as overt as the first example or Janowitz’s case, Laura’s verbalization about being open to talk almost seems disingenuous. Laura is nearly able to parrot all of the correct words, but there is slippage in her statement. Supposedly Laura’s daughter has expressed interest in her multiple identities and past, but Laura never goes beyond explaining that there is interest on her part. Instead, she highlights her son’s rejection of his “Korean” identity, which validates her own “balanced” approach. Interestingly, the child who is able to most maintain the adoptive family order is the one who is most legible in Laura’s statement. Moreover, Laura presumes that any discussion she and her husband have had with their children is sufficient for them to “know that we are there for them at any time or place.” Her statement discards the possibility that the adoptive parents could have a more proactive

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rather than reactive role in discussing adoption issues. Laura’s reaction speaks to Suter et al.’s discussion of the adoptive family as a battleground, where her claim to realness is an attempt to educate the public that realness can be disconnected from biology. In attempting to expand the notion of realness to include adoptive ties, Laura unwittingly returns the favor by insisting her realness in relation to the indistinct and unimportant birth mother.

To be sure, few adoptive parents overtly claim the mantle of realness like they have done in the past, but these statements still appeared in the blogs. Just as the face of racism has changed in the United States, so too has the way adoptive parents and adoption advocates have articulated positions of realness. This slight maneuvering, however, has not completely displaced overt statements of realness. The historical practice of privileging the biological has without a doubt pressured many adoptive parents to claim the trophy of realness in order to validate their own family to not just themselves but also to the skeptical public. Adoptive parents are required to show that what they have done, are doing, and will do, comes from a place of love and that they are indeed what constitute “real parents.” Hence, the question that emerges is not how are adoptive parents wrong but is what do these statements do?

The positioning of adoptive parents as real versus the biological does not occur in isolation. Too often the picture that adoptive parents portray in discussing realness condenses the frame or lens that narrows the perspective and eliminates any other possibilities. It makes other possible signifiers of family unintelligible. In monopolizing “realness,” adoptive parents make a positive statement that at once acknowledges the

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60 Suter et al., “Adoptive Parents’ Framing of Laypersons’ Conception of Family.”
existence of the birth parents (because there is an implicit naming of the “unreal”) but simultaneously negates them as irrelevant and unintelligible because of that very positioning as “unreal.” What these statements illustrate is that the continual attempts to forget, deny, or eliminate the influence of the historical and biological pasts are efforts to maintain a linear and teleological narrative that begins with abandonment or relinquishment and continues to adoption and an imaginary completeness of the family. In essence, identity and birth family are discursively produced as existing only in “the past.” Hence, they are both teleological and eschatological. They are the latter because of the ways in which adoption as a moment of containment attempts to displace (birth parents), appropriate (adoptees and “positive” aspects of their culture), and obliterate (“negative” cultural particularities).

**Adoptees Restating Realness**

The blog comments reveal that adoptive parents were not the only ones employing the language of realness. Adoptees oftentimes assign this notion of “realness” to their adoptive parents because it is the fundamental avenue, depending on the degree and fervor, for them to become legible subjects and remain loved. For many adoptees, adoption discourse posits their “full” emergence in relation to adoption, but their legibility is always in relation to the adoptive family and its symbolic community, which has the authority to rescind legibility through accusations of being an “ungrateful” and “angry” adoptee. In order to become a part of the family and included in the nation, adoptees historically have had to materially, by law, and symbolically, through

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61 Some birth parents, to become even minimally legible, also bestow this term to adoptive parents but to a much lesser extent.
assimilation, completely separate from the past and claim only one family as their own. Although most adoptees are no longer required to “fully assimilate” or “be white” in order to belong, many still employ the rhetoric of “realness” to attain and keep legibility and legitimacy and avoid ex post facto rejection. And while a nominal number of adoptees may sincerely possess these feelings that their adoptive parents are their only “real parents,” the important point is not that there are even some adoptees who truly believe in realness, but rather what guides or allows them to have these beliefs, and again what do these notions of realness do?

For many adoptees, there can only be one answer to the question of realness. In response to Janowitz’s blog, Sara, a Korean American adoptee, says, “I cannot tell you how many times I was confused growing up when people asked if I knew my real parents. Of course I knew them. I lived with them.” For Sara, the identification of realness seems obvious, but this is largely because statements of realness discursively produce birth parents to be unintelligible. But as the specter of birth parents constantly reappears, such as in the instances of inquiring strangers, it has to be constantly rejected. To be sure, the reappearance of birth parents complicates the neatly defined familial order that allows adoptees to be legible and intelligible subjects. Another adoptee, Lila, responds harshly to Jeff Gammage’s blog in which he writes about both the

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63 Lifton notes how ghosts haunt each member of the adoption triad. Lifton, Lost and Found, 1979. Dorow suggests that haunting of racial identity that so many adoptive parents try to avoid can be generative when it forces them to engage with whiteness and privilege. Dorow, “Racialized Choices,” 2006: 374. See also Eng, The Feeling of Kinship; and Yngvesson, “Placing the Gift Child in Transnational Adoption,” 2002.
unknowability but also the intense desire to know his daughter’s beginnings in China.⁶⁴

Repudiating Gammage’s desire, Lila says::

Am I the only one who detests this ‘find the roots’ idea? I’m an adopted child from Asia and while my parents instilled in me strong Asian values and let me know that I was free to explore my background as much as I liked, I never wanted to. My parents are the ones who took care of me and what happened before I was my mom’s did not interest me at all. That would only have served as a constant reminder of the fact that I was not her biological child and emphasized the differences between us, not the similarities. If you have an adopted child why would you chose to make this huge cleft between yourself and her/him? Why would you remind them of the fact they were abandoned?! That’s horrible! Instead, I was constantly reminded of how much I was loved and cared for now, the past was the past and my abandonment had no bearing on my present. I’m very glad that I was never subjected to reminders that I was not biologically my parents ‘own’ child and NEVER reminded that abandonment plays a role in the process of adoption. I find all this incredibly distasteful and disgusting.⁶⁵

In her statement, Lila articulates both a vehement rejection of her “Asian” identity and strong loyalty toward her adoptive parents. For Lila, acknowledging what is present but not always legible—“what happened before I was my mom’s”—would mean disrupting the linear historicity of her family. Such acceptance would highlight the “differences” rather than the “similarities.” Critiquing Gammage and other adoptive parents, Lila contends that they should not dwell on differences, the past, and abandonment because that only generates a “huge cleft” and should have “no bearing on [the] present.” Instead, love and care are the fundamental ingredients for a strong and stable familial order. Thus, again and this time even from the perspective of the adoptee, the only emergence of importance for adoptees is the one enabled by adoption and love of adoptive parents.

⁶⁴ Jeff Gammage’s memoir, China Ghosts: My Daughter’s Journey to America, My Passage to Fatherhood, discusses his engagement with the specter of his daughter’s birth mother and birth parents in general. Gammage, China Ghosts, 2008.
Denying both her personal history and her birth mother, Lila projects a type of political-symbolic violence onto herself in order to be legible as an adoptee who comprehends and can reciprocate the love given by her adoptive parents. But in doing so, she occludes any possibility that difference could have a positive value; rather, it only possesses negative and oppositional meaning, which led her to never “wanting” to “explore [her Asian] background.”

In another example, Amy, a Korean adoptee, responds to a previous commenter who argued that yes, there are “deleterious effects of institutionalization” but that there are also “harmful effects of adoption.”  

Amy replies in bewilderment at those who could have such feelings:

As a 20 year old adopted daughter from South Korea, I felt I must comment on this article. I have never doubted that my “real parents” are those that welcomed me into their lives and gave me a loving, caring home. I am an American, and proud and fortunate to be one. My family has loved me and my sister (also adopted, but from within the United States) unconditionally as any other parent should love their children. While I respect the feelings of adoptees that claim they think they “just don’t belong” or “feel like something is missing” because they aren’t an active part of their biological family, I can’t help but wonder how they could ever have these thoughts. … How could someone who was adopted ever not consider these people their “real” parents and know that this is their REAL family? 

For Amy, adoption is unequivocally associated with realness, where anything else is unfathomable. Adoption, in this sense, cannot have harmful effects or produce violence. She proclaims that her adoptive parents are her “real” parents and that she is a “proud and fortunate” American. Like so many other young adoptees from Asia, Amy identifies strongly as American only. Indeed, this has been a trend that has been revealed in surveys

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66 Disgruntled, Comment #2 in “South Korea and Its Children,” 2007.
67 Amy, formerly seonn keyong, Comment #20 in “South Korea and Its Children,” 2007.
on Korean adoptee identification in which a majority of transnational adoptees identify as American/European or Caucasian.\textsuperscript{68} What this survey illustrates in numbers and Amy’s statement demonstrates in words is that adoptive parents are not the only ones who contribute to the identity of adoptees. Adoptees’ participation in the language of realness reaffirms adoptive parents, but adoptees also have a degree of choice in determining their identity, which creates tensions and contradictions. The critical questions, however, are what allows them to make certain choices and what are the effects of these decisions?

Part of what allows adoptees to claim 100 percent Americanness is the way in which they reduce their identities to a local and present moment rather than a global/historical frame. Unaddressed in her statement is how identity is not only about self-identification but also how certain groups emerge differently in globality. Despite Amy’s signature as “Amy, formerly seonn keyong,” her birth in Korea, for example, means that in a U.S. context she will most often be identified as “forever foreigner” before American or even Korean American. Additionally, her consideration of only the present time ignores how people identify transnational/racial adoptees differently when they leave the safety and legibility of their adoptive families because they will no longer be defined in relation to them. Any alternative, for Amy though, is stark. To not claim realness is unimaginable, and she wonders “how [adoptees] could ever have these thoughts” because to do so would jeopardize the legibility of adoptees and risk the labels of “ungrateful” and “disloyal.”

What Amy’s statement does is attempt to deflect this possibility, but in doing so she merely perpetuates the false linear historicity of herself and her adoptive family,

foreclosing her own personal history and identity. Similar to statements by adoptive parents, statements such as Amy’s enact violence that delimits adoptees’ multiple identities and rejects their birth parents—it forecloses both the remembering and knowledge of the past and the possibilities and opportunities of the future.

Other adoptees reject the past because they, like many of the adoptive parent examples, contend that adoption produced their “true” emergence, which makes everything before that point insignificant. For example, one adoptee, “MW,” bemoans the tenor of a Lynn Lauber’s blog, “Reunion,” which describes the “shady side yard of adoption” and recounts a story of her separation and reunion between her and her daughter. In a critique of Lauber’s blog and some of the posted comments, MW argues that not all adoptees yearn for the past:

Thank you for sharing your story. … I want to note that it is certainly important to give voice to the birth-givers, but the families where children are placed have voices and feelings too. There is a tone to this story and moreso [sic], the comments that followed that seems intent on painting these families as ‘less than’, in comparison to the birtbers. All experiences will differ, but I in my case, I was adopted by my beautiful mother and father at 6 weeks of age. I have no connection to another, birther or not, my mother and father are the people that have cared for me for 30 years and truly gave me life, in their giving of a home and hearts forever. I can appreciate that my birther physically birthed me and allowed me to be placed with my parents, and I do. But that is where the connection ends for me. I want people to understand that every adoptee is not yearning for a connection with their birther and many of us are happy and blessed in beautiful families, and would not have it any other way.69

Despite the “thanks,” the acknowledgement of voice of the “birthgiver,” and the disclaimer that “all experiences will differ,” MW expresses disappointment in some of the responses to blog because “the families where children are placed have voices and

69 MW, comment #122 in “Reunion,” 2007. As a note, I am not sure whether this adoptee is a transnational/racial adoptee but the content and the frame of the statement are important nonetheless.
feelings too.” Rather than engage with the author’s “new” and varying perspective, MW negates it. MW’s comment revolves around the adoptee-adoptive parent relationship, effectively ignoring the birth mother and severing any relationship that exists with her. Moreover, MW exceedingly marginalizes birth parents to the extent that they are diminished to the role of “birther.” Again, for MW just as with other adoptees and adoptive parents, the adoptee emerges only in relation to adoption, occluding any role that birth parents and the global/historical play in the lives of adoptees. The term “birther” predetermines the birth mother as always illegible, and it ignores and invalidates the significant voice and presence of birth mothers in Lauber’s blog and the comment section. What is clear from the blog and the following comments, but not so clear to MW, is that birth parents do not always have a choice. Thus, MW’s “appreciation” might be an empty gesture because MW does not account for the violence that precedes adoption such as coercion, corruption, poverty, war, rape, or any other cause. While adoptees do indeed have different experiences and feelings, MW’s reduction of birth parents to the status of “birther” defines the family in a way that perpetuates violence that has already placed a majority of birth parents in social death in the first place.

Apparent in MW’s statement is the fact that there is a rejection of any tension or contradiction; MW creates a linear defined reality. The other possible signifiers of family are blocked, but the traumatic and specters of violence are always present (but illegible) and unexpectedly reappear. In my last example, J. Granich, an adoptee articulates similar feelings about realness as the previous examples, but there is also a noticeable ambivalence and tension present.
First, thank you for such a touching story. I was adopted in June 1982, by my awesome parents. They provided a life for me that comes 2nd to none. I am well adjusted, college educated, and have a [sic] excellent family life along with my brother and sister who are also adopted. For me, the thought of seeking out my birth parents is a selfish one. I thank god almost everyday [sic] that my birth mother, who was also adopted, chose to give me a better life than she could ever imagined. But there are questions I would want answered for myself. Of course medical history, a history of addiction, what do you look like, and if I have any siblings? Beyond these, I would not want constant contact. THE PEOPLE WHO RAISED and PROVIDED FOR ME MY WHOLE LIFE ARE MY PARENTS! I dont feel hate or negativity towrds my birth parents [sic]. But I was brought tears reading the otherside of my story [sic]. Does she ever think about me, does she want to seek me out and for what reasons? Is she even alive? Does she light a candle for me on my Birthday? Overall, I would not change a thing about my life, my adoption, or my parents… but to think that someone out there did something so great for me and that I can not repay her hurts [sic]. 70

Similar to MW, Granich begins her entry thanking Lauber for her blog. Granich continues by listing descriptors that demonstrate her “second to none” life, such as being “well adjusted,” “college educated,” “excellent family life,” and adopted siblings. In the middle of Granich’s entry, Granich clarifies and adamantly underscores, through capitalization, that “the people who raised and provided for me my whole life are my parents.” Notably absent, however, is the term “real,” which does not necessarily indicate anything other than that Granich has not explicitly prevented birth parents from being in the picture. And indeed, birth parents are considered in this case. While Granich claims that seeking out birth parents would be “selfish,” Granich does acknowledge them in a clear way that MW does not. Granich not only thanks them “everyday” but is also curious about the past, which includes common questions such as medical history, what do my birth parents look like, and if there are any siblings. After Granich’s declaration that the

70 Granich, comment #170 in “Reunion,” 2007.
adoptive parents are the parents and that constant contact with the birth parents is not a strong desire, Granich opens up again, revealing a tension. Not only does Granich’s use of “constant,” in describing what kind of contact, imply that some contact could be acceptable, but Granich also allows Lauber’s story to connect and stimulate new feelings and questions: “Does she ever think about me, does she want to seek me out and for what reasons? Is she even alive? Does she light a candle for me on my Birthday?” Rather than fully disavowing her past, Granich’s questions acknowledge her birth mother. Far more open and affective than informational questions such as medical history, they indicate a willingness and desire to know more, to engage, and not to foreclose. This act of remembering and questioning is, according to Edkins, intensely political by disrupting the coherency of linear time. Yet, near the end of her statement, Granich reiterates gratitude and loyalty, which indicates the difficulty of balancing the existing tension between linear history and her identity and complex past. Even her closing statement, which expresses the desire to repay the birth mother, underscores this tension because Granich thinks repayment is unattainable but wants to keep it open. As they did in the examples of adoptive parents, these examples underscore how the past reappears in the present; at which point, the adoptive parents and the adoptees have a choice to either negate it in a form of antihistorical statements and claims to realness or “encircle” traumatic violence and past as Edkins suggests.

The Violence of Love

Many adoptees are careful not to appear disloyal to their adoptive parents and family or seem ungrateful about their adoption. They, similar to Katy Robinson, experience difficulties growing up and exploring their identities. Robinson explains that
bringing up such topics would only highlight the differences between her and her family, but fear of projecting disloyalty was another significant factor: “I was afraid to seem ungrateful for the amazing new life I had been given, or to hurt my adoptive mother’s feelings by mentioning the mother who gave me birth. It wasn’t as if I was forbidden to talk about my Korean family; it just seemed disloyal.”71 Most adoptees love their adoptive parents very much. Just as adoptive parents want to protect their children, adoptees want to protect the ones they love as well by what Rachel Quy Collier calls “performing childhood.”72 Affirming that the ascription of realness belongs solely to adoptive parents not only demonstrates their unequivocal love but it also enables adoptees to avoid issues or questions that could disrupt the family security they have come to know. The undoubtedly “real” relationship from adoption is what has brought stability and reciprocated love, and there is a fear that if adoptees talk or ask too much then they could lose everything. Instead, many adoptees endure traumatic and representational violence that occurred in the past but that is also inflicted by their adoptive parents or even themselves, who may produce it explicitly (via rejecting the past and birth parents) or implicitly (through ignoring or never inquiring about adoption concerns) in order to maintain the linear narrative that allows them to be legible. Stated differently, adoption discourse that revolves around fixed binaries of real/unreal and

72 In an intriguing comparison, Collier relates adoption and adoptees to the “dying child” who is “forced to pretend he is not dying” in order to protect the parents’ “fragility and neediness.” Collier, “Performing Childhood,” 2006: 207, 213. See also Laura, comment #112 in “Blood Ties and Acts of Love,” who argues this point. The editors of Outsiders Within articulate these ideas well, “Some of us feel pressured to censor our own pain as an act of loyalty toward our adoptive families, fearing that it would cause them too much pain if we express our feelings of loss and grief. In the face of racist assumptions that we do not belong, or that a multiracial family cannot ‘work,’ we throw ourselves into maintaining a model family, proclaiming how wonderful our adoptive lives have been.” Outsiders Within, Ed. Trenka et al., 10.
past/present are symbolically violent. Thus adoptive parents and adoptees are not the only ones who contribute to the identity of adoptees; as the blogs and comments show, adoption discourse by all parties contributes to the production of who is represented as real and who is not.

By exploring the conditions and costs of legibility, I have in effect also investigated the violence of familial love and inclusion in adoption. Contemporary dominant adoption discourse on transnational/racial adoption in particular indicates one adoption trend is the inauguration of a new epoch that relegates color blindness and other poor practices as lessons learned and things of the past. Liberal multiculturalism’s embrace of cultural difference for adoption supposedly demonstrates this progress. The statements examined in this chapter, however, demonstrate the broader competing, overlapping, and contradictory narratives that exist hidden underneath the banner of liberal multiculturalism and incremental (or monumental, depending on the perspective) improvements, where well intentioned (but possibly misemployed) love is “always thicker” than anything. My goal here is not to make moral judgments about adoption or attempt to solve affective and psychic dilemmas of triad members but to understand family formation within adoption discourse and practice. These components of adoption discourse built on foundations of love individualize, dehistoricize, and flatten the complex global/historical context and social and material conditions of adoption in a way that produces and simultaneously hides historical, political-economic, racial, traumatic, and symbolic violence enacted onto adoptees and non-adopted subjects both before and outside of adoption. Reshifting the framework of the adoption debate from apolitical individual choice to a global/historical context that recognizes personal decisions but also
acknowledges the very political nature of adoption might be a first step in engaging violence that adoption produces for adoptees and other people affected by adoption.

What I hope to have illustrated is that adoption discourse remains something that must be interrogated because of the way in which it governs not only the unmarked political-symbolic representations of the subjects of adoption but also material practices. Love can be thicker than blood, as McGinnis states, but love does not always address the history, family, and violence. In fact, all too often it negates or forecloses them. I engage love and violence in a new way that examines the conditions and context that facilitate their production, operation, and effects. One respondent to McGinnis’ blog, Shilo, who is thinking about adopting demonstrates this form of violence, “I’ve felt worried about not being able to love him or her the way a child should be by its mother, just because we don’t share genetic material. Thank you for this. It has made it all very clear. … Love is thicker than blood. The former is the thing that binds my family together, [sic] the latter is just an accident of birth. I’ve seen this - and how simple it is” [emphasis mine].

Shilo’s comment indicates the power that these blogs have. After reading the McGinnis’ entry, Shilo was able to ascertain the power of the love as the guiding principle of adoption, alleviating all of her worries and fears. In fact, the role and power of love becomes so clear—in part because of her mistranslation of McGinnis’ “love can be thicker than blood” with “love is thicker than blood”—that Shilo is able to affirmatively assert that blood ties do not matter. After articulating her own worries, she displaces and negates the birth mother as irrelevant, indeed, as an “accident.” Numerous respondents comment with similar responses. One individual says that the phrase “is profound and

should be mantra for all adoptive parents!”\textsuperscript{74} Another person, MJ, proclaims, “Love is thicker than anything….”\textsuperscript{75} As adoption supporters have suggested, love has powerful potential. Nevertheless, collective transformative change requires more than this because a framework based on individual and abstract love can in fact make, remake, and simultaneously hide various forms of violence.

In this chapter, I tried to demonstrate the ways in which adoption has been narrated as linear and resolved, where the “clean break” represents the reference point because it justifies the adoption as one of “need.” The narration begins with the “transformative re-emergence” of the adoptee through the act of adoption that brings the adoptee from a place of violence and a time of need to site of love and safety. I explored how these narratives, which include antihistorical statements, articulations of realness by adoptive parents and adoptees, and grand theories of love, are deployed mainly by adoptive parents and adoptees to reaffirm the adoptive family as complete and resolved. This move of creating a linear and progressive historicity negates and forecloses not only that which happened before and outside of adoption but also the possibilities of the present and future in regards to a complex genealogy, multiple identities, and acknowledging birth parents. Rather than holding on to an ideal conception of the family as solely a thing of love, love might have a greater transformative effect if we instead addressed what names the “politics of acknowledgement,” which conceives the self as finite (rather than fully self-determined and transparent subjects).\textsuperscript{76} At this point individuals could ascertain the necessity of collective instead of individual love. And yet

\textsuperscript{74} Janeysbaby, Comment #18 in “Blood Ties and Acts of Love,” 2007.
\textsuperscript{76} Markell, \textit{Bound By Recognition}, 2003.
love alone—even collective love—is not enough for revolutionary change. To be sure, love does not stand alone but rather is relational. We only come to know love through the engagement of violence and other feelings; it is often a process, not an endpoint. Love is the acknowledgement of the limit of the self in conjunction with the embracement of new relations and community. The goal then for those who are connected by adoption can be to recognize and engage the violence. Adoption is inherently a violent process, one in which the problem of violence cannot be “solved.” But acknowledging one’s own limits and the limit of individual love along with confronting and “encircling” violence instead of ignoring or dismissing it are strategies that allow the past to exist and intermingle with the present and future so that its displacement and disavowal through negation and foreclosure are not the first and only options.

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77 Edkins, *Trauma and the Politics of Memory*. 
CHAPTER FOUR
‘Birth Culture’ and ‘Critical Adoptee Perspective’:
Desires and Pedagogies to Address the Violence of Adoption

The one thing as adoptive parents, especially if our children are adopted from another culture...that we can’t give them is that culture. We can’t give them that piece of their identity, which is a missing piece in their lives when they’re adopted. So that is what heritage camps does or tries to do.

–Pam Sweetser, Adoptive mother and Founder
Heritage Camps for Adoptive Families

I think birth culture is a real loss. ... That is something that the adoptee would have had that they no longer have access to. But I think that its importance is overstated by a large margin. ... The importance of birth culture varies among adoptees. It’s more important for some than it is for others, and that ebbs and flows over time in importance for every adoptee. But birth culture is one component of a much larger adoptee identity. That the adoptee’s identity is made up of all of those other things [such as] the unknown realm for [adoptive] parents, [adoptees’] thoughts on race, their thoughts on how they interact with adoption, and you know their thoughts on their birth family. There are other components to the adoptee’s identity that extend beyond birth culture. So yes, there is a loss. But it’s framed you know the end all be all for the adoptee’s identity, and that is not the case. Its importance is overstated.

–Greg, Camp Manager for the Adoptee Camp

Two summer camps

In the winter of 2006, I was in the middle of my last year at the University of Oregon, majoring in journalism and ethnic studies. A good friend of mine sent me an email about an opportunity to work at a unique summer camp (hereinafter Adoptee Camp) for primarily transnational/racial but also domestic transracial adoptees. Before college, I had never really given much thought to my identity as a transnational/racial adoptee. I knew a couple other adoptees when I was growing up, but we were not friends, in large part because they were younger. It was not just the age gap, though. I was less interested in my adoptee identity and more invested in being loved, fitting in, and

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belonging in my family, school, and community. By the time my friend sent me the email about the camp, I had written two essays on transnational/racial adoption and was intrigued by the existence of this service, space, and community for adoptees.

Indeed, summer camps for transnational/racial adoptees have existed for more than three decades with their main purpose being to introduce and instill adoptee “birth culture.” Since Kamp Kimchee was established in 1981, scores of heritage camps (also referred to as birth culture and culture camps) have sprouted in North Carolina, Illinois, Oklahoma, Colorado, California, New York, and have especially grown in the Minnesota area, along with many other states. Heritage camps, for the most part, were founded and are operated by adoptive parents. The larger camps such as Heritage Camp in Colorado and Dillon International in Oklahoma offer multiple essentialized and homogenized “heritage” options, including camps based on countries (China, Korea, India, and Vietnam) and regions (Latin American, African Caribbean, Russia/Eastern European/Central Asia). Camps range in size from dozens to hundreds of campers. Just like other summer camps, heritage camps are a site of leisure and recreation filled with activities such as horseback riding, zip lines, ropes courses, climbing walls, rafting, campfires, singing, skits, s’mores, and general fun. The difference is campers who attend Kamp Kimchee, Camp Moo Gun Hwa, La Semana Camp and the numerous other fill-in-the-blank national origin heritage camps get to participate in “culturally specific” activities such as ethnic cooking classes, traditional dancing, arts and crafts, music and

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2 There is no comprehensive list of camps. While I initially found twenty such camps, upon further searching I found 13 additional ones. This means there are at least 33 distinctive heritage camps online, four of which provide multiple and separate heritage camps for different cultures. I would estimate that there are at least 35 to 40 heritage camps for adoptees that will take place in the summer of 2013. For more information on one of the earliest heritage camps see “Kamp Kimchee History,” Kamp Kimchee, 2005, accessed March 13, 2013, http://kampkimchee.org/index.cfm/pageid/17.
games, and language sessions. In addition to these cultural activities, many camps provide an on-site ethnic market to purchase “authentic” cultural objects, art, and artifacts. These camps often culminate with a performance in cultural attire and an ethnic feast.

Heritage camps emerged in the mid-1980s as a response to the earlier (and in some cases still existing) assimilation model, where transnational/racial adoptees were encouraged or directed to deny cultural identity—by trying to erase, hide, and ignore difference—essentially to become white. This formula of ignoring or rejecting birth culture, however, was a precarious and painful way of addressing identity and family. Greg, who has had more than 10 years of experience working with both heritage camps and the Adoptee Camp, says culture camps were a selective new way to cultivate “healthier and happier” adoptees.³ As I discussed in chapter one, many of the outcome studies on transnational/racial adoption suggested that a principal concern was the maintenance (or lack) of “ethno-racial” heritage and identity. Even with the shift in the 1990s toward color blind adoptions in the legal and discursive spheres, agencies and adoptive parents understood the importance of birth culture as a key component of multicultural adoption practice that was missing yet could and should be cultivated for adoptees. By providing extended exposure to birth culture that was taught by “ethnic experts,” adoptive parents, as Pam Sweetser (Heritage Camps for Adoptive Families founder) suggests, were able to give their children the most significant missing piece of their identity.

³ Greg (Camp Manager), Interview, February 27, 2011.
This chapter emerged from my research on birth culture camps and is significantly informed by my work with the unique Adoptee Camp over a period of three summers in 2006, 2008, and 2010. Birth culture camps and the Adoptee Camp help foster adoption and adoptee specific communities that help adoptees and adoptive families negotiate the complexities of transnational/racial adoptions that involve transgressing ideas of blood, kinship, race, culture, and nation. At their foundational level, both types of camps are enjoyable for adoptees and their family members. Thus my research questions for this chapter ask: Why are these camps popular? What forms of desiring and pedagogical expressions occur within heritage camps and the Adoptee Camp? What do these camps provide, allow, and prohibit (or inhibit) in terms of their differential approaches?

I situate this chapter in relation to my dissertation by reflecting on how birth culture camps and the Adoptee Camp, as loving practices, attempt to address some of the violent aspects of adoptions and family-making but also consider the ways they might ignore or engender other types of violence. Thus, I make two related arguments in this chapter about heritage camps and the Adoptee Camp for transnational/racial adoptees and their families. First I argue that heritage camps use employ “birth culture pedagogy,” which allows adoptees to fill a “missing” aspect of their identity and adoptive parents to learn and share birth culture with their child, which works to normalize and affirm their family that society often considers non-normative. Second, I contend that the Adoptee

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4 From my research the Adoptee Camp is the only camp that is not based on birth culture and is not a family camp. There are two camps that address issues of adoption and race but they are both family camps.
Camp alternatively provides critical adoptee pedagogy as a means to privilege an adoptee perspective and address other desires beyond birth culture.

For part one, I provide a brief literature review of how culture has mediated kinship in transnational/racial adoption and why it is important to many adoptive parents, especially adoptive mothers who are perceived as the conduit for reproducing culture. Specifically, I explore how these camps serve more than a social or leisurely function by considering them as spaces of desire and pedagogy as well as complex sites for community, subject (adoptive and adoptive parent), and family formation. I argue that birth culture pedagogy in heritage camps is premised on both a deficit model and the desire to recuperate and resolve this loss. Heritage camps mediate layered possibilities and desires for adoptive parents and adoptees. Beyond being enjoyable, heritage camps are specifically appealing because they provide a substitute culture for adoptees and demonstrate “better”-than-previous-generations transnational/racial adoptive parenting. Additionally, as an alternative to engaging the specters of the birth parents, who are made invisible through this process, birth culture pedagogy presents birth culture as “safe” and “knowable” for adoptive parents such that they can be a substitute for birth parents. From cooking specific meals and reading cultural books to attending cultural festivals and heritage camps, birth culture pedagogy in general makes birth parents invisible and allows adoptive parents take on the role of reproducing and maintaining culture. It allows adoptive parents and adoptees to acquire cultural knowledge together while working to legitimize transnational/racial adoption from a non-normative to a “modern,” normative
family structure.\textsuperscript{5} Hence, both adoptive parents and the United States are positioned as figures and an exceptional space that can maintain and reproduce lost culture. Yet, in doing so, they reproduce problematic representations and practices that ignore the absent presence of birth parents, whose void is precisely the reason why birth culture pedagogy is presumably needed. Moreover, the birth parents’ ghostly presence points to the ways in which the linked structural-historical violence of adoption and the global relationship of the United States vis-à-vis sending countries are effaced by birth culture pedagogy. My aim is not to casually dismiss or negate the importance and generative aspects of birth culture pedagogy and heritage camps. Rather it suggests that birth culture is not just about adoptee identity but also about family and nation as well as the uncertain past and future.\textsuperscript{6} I contend that there are other productive positions (some of which are addressed by adoptee pedagogy) that are missed and foreclosed by intently and singularly spotlighting birth culture.

In part two, I turn to the example of the Adoptee Camp to suggest that it is different from the various heritage camps because it does not involve a recuperation of one’s “birth culture” and instead centers four themes as a way to address the violence of adoption: adoptee community, adoptee identity, adoption questions, and race. Rather than constructing substitute birth culture and trying to establish normative representations of family, I argue the Adoptee Camp, as a space of \textit{critical adoptee pedagogy}, is a transformative exercise that engages and facilitates empowerment and alternative adoptee

\textsuperscript{5} As I discuss in the introduction, I contend that this can still applies to many gay and lesbian couples, who can take on specific gender roles and whose decision to adopt can be influenced by the desire to be a “normal” family.

\textsuperscript{6} The ways in which nation are imagined through birth culture and the specter of the birth parents is important to note, which I also addressed in chapters two and three.
desires for an adoptee community, adoptee identity, and expanded notions of family by exploring and thematizing desires articulated by adoptees. The Adoptee Camp is still a strong site for developing social bonds, but critical adoptee pedagogy tackles the complicated pleasurable, haunting, and violent aspects of adoption—i.e. the love, hope, anger, alienation, known, unknown, and unknowable—of individual adoptive lives and the process of family-making. Linking my analysis of culture camps and the Adoptee Camp is an examination of the different ways in which desire is expressed and pedagogy is utilized for both types of camps. Additionally, I examine the specter of the birth parents as an absent presence within heritage camps versus a present absence in the Adoptee Camp. This means that similar to the absent presence, birth mothers are not physically present, but being a present absence also denotes that they are acknowledged instead of being overlooked or disregarded. While larger structures of violence between the United States and Asian geographies are not necessarily addressed because the Adoptee Camp is youth-centered, I contend that the present absent of birth parents at times points to that violence of global capitalism, war, imperialism, militarism, and uneven geo-political relationships. Together, birth culture camps and the Adoptee camp, and their respective pedagogies, demonstrate the complex personhood and mixed desires of adoptees and adoptive parents. They show how desire informs the production and maintenance of normative ideals of adoption, community, identity, family, and nation but that it can also disrupt them providing alternative possibilities for each.

**Methodology: Desire Instead of Deficit**

In order to understand adoptee and adoptive parent desires within heritage camp and the Adoptee Camp experiences, this chapter takes a different methodological turn
from my previous chapters by using ethnography with internet sources. For heritage camps, I mainly examined twenty cultural camp web sites and various online videos, using my interviews to supplement this evidence. I view the web sites and online videos for heritage camps collectively as both an online archive of what has happened at birth culture camps and a program for what is possible for the future. Web sites and videos are highly arbitrated forms of communication and knowledge production. Thus, I understand them to be a “sliver of a sliver of a sliver” of the varied purposes and experiences of heritage camps. Nevertheless, I consider them vital slivers because as informational and advertising tools, these web sites and videos attempt to capture the “essence” and benefits of heritage camps. The web sites present detailed descriptions, historical background, pictures, sample schedules, registration forms, and brief testimonials, while the videos offered visuals of numerous cultural activities and snippets of adoptee and adoptive parent perspectives on why birth culture and heritage camps were so enjoyable and important in their respective lives. While this methodological choice limits the possible depth of analysis for heritage camps, it does allow for broad examination of the camps’ shared goals and outcomes.

Additionally, I collected data based on participant observation of the Adoptee Camp and semi-structured, open-ended interviews with some of its previous camp counselors and staff members. My participant observation mainly occurred in 2008 and

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7 These twenty were the ones I was able to locate through a simple web search. Fourteen of the twenty camps were family culture camps, specifically meant for adoptees and adoptive parents (and in most case siblings who are not adopted) with two more encouraging parents to volunteer. Of the twenty culture camps seven were Korean specific of which four were open to non-adopted second- and third-generation Korean Americans; three were China heritage camps, and two offered both Chinese and Korean options. There were also two Latin American camps and one Vietnamese and one Ethiopian heritage camp. Three camps offered multiple cultural options.

8 See footnote in methods section of introduction for more on Harris. Harris, “The Archival Silver,” 64-65.
2010, which were the two summers that I moved from being a camp counselor, in 2006, to being on the leadership team. That first year as a counselor had evoked many questions and undeveloped thoughts, and in my second two summers I came in with the intent to observe the process and what was happening within the space of camp for campers, counselors, and adoptive parents. Specifically I was interested in what made it, as a few of the staff said, such a magical place?9 Interestingly, the Adoptee Camp used to be a culture camp. The camp director explained to the staff every year how the Adoptee Camp was now different and why it had decided to move away from birth culture, which was and still is a unique move. Thus, I also came in with the question of how it differentiated itself from birth culture camps. By 2010, with two summers of experience, I had formulated my own thoughts on what made the Adoptee Camp a unique and productive space, but I wanted to know if my judgments matched the staffs at which point I decided to conduct interviews. I sent an email request to previous counselors and staff members of the Adoptee Camp. This methodology matched one of the Adoptee Camp’s primary premises of adoptee voice and adoptee as an expert. In choosing to conduct interviews, I position adult adoptees not merely as objects of analysis but sites of knowledge and expertise. As Irving Seidman suggests, “At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience. … At the heart of interviewing research is an interest in the other individuals’ stories because they are of worth.10 Thus, the interviews generate partial and situated

9 Amber, Interview, January 4, 2011; Pam, Interview, September 1, 2010; and Greg, Interview.
10 Seidman, Interviewing As Qualitative Research, 2012: 9.
knowledges rather than objective, absolute, or universal truths about adoptee
subjectivities.11

In conducting three in-person interviews and seven through video chat, I asked
interviewees about their experiences as campers and heritage counselors (if applicable)
and as Adoptee Camp staff. The interview questions covered many areas, among others,
such as what they remembered and enjoyed most about their various camp experiences;
their role as a counselor for and the goals of the Adoptee Camp; if the goals matched the
lived experience of campers; was the Adoptee Camp different from heritage camps; and
had working with the Adoptee Camp influenced their own perspectives on community,
identity, adoption, or family. All the interviewees are transnational/racial adoptees. Eight
were Korean adoptees and one was a South Asian adoptee and another was a Latin
American adoptee.12 Six of them went to some form of culture camp when they were
younger,13 while five of them have worked at a culture camp (in addition to the Adoptee
Camp).14 At the time of the interview, interviewees had “volunteered” as a counselor or
leadership member for the Adoptee Camp for an average of more than two and a half
“summers.”15 One had only worked for one summer and one week and two had worked

11 Haraway argues that objectivity and universality are impossibilities only capable by a god. Human
perspective and knowledge are instead embodied, complex, and multiply “situated” within particular
geographic, social, political, and historical contexts. Haraway, “‘Situated Knowledges,’” 2004: 92.
12 I am purposefully vague in using South Asian and Latin American in order to better protect the identities
of the interviewees.
13 Gary and Frank went one year. Beth, Tami, and Greg went more than five years each. Pam went to day
culture camp, and Amy would have liked to attend camp, but when she was young there were no
camps for her South Asian heritage.
14 Gary, Beth, Tami, Paul, and Greg, while Ruby has many presentations at culture camps.
15 Counselors received room, board, and travel expenses as compensation for working with the camp but no
actual pay. In addition to having these expenses covered, all interviewees expressed working at the
camp, meeting new friends, and seeing old ones was what brought them back for multiple summers.
Working a “full summer” with the Adoptee Camp meant a week of training and four weeks of summer
camp, where the staff facilitated the same one-week camp at four different locations.
five summers each. Interviews lasted on average one and a half to two hours with the longest lasting three hours. I draw significantly from Greg, the Adoptee Camp manager, because he went to Korean culture camp for eight years, worked as a counselor and assistant director two years each, and then by the time of the interview had been camp manager and youth post-adoption services for a year.

I chose to interview the staff members for multiple reasons. It was logistically easier to interview adult staff members than it would have been to interview youth campers, for whom I would need parental consent. Like previous adoption research that has included adoptive parent involvement or presence, involving parents might have affected adoptees’ responses. Second, adult adoptees have the benefit of experiencing various life stages of being a camper (possibly), adolescent, young adult, college student, and counselor/staff member. The experiences as a young adult and college student are important because independent thinking for adult adoptees, like all young adults, grows stronger. They are also often the first times that transnational/racial adoptees have to (continually) contend with not having the visual context of their white adoptive families to help situate their belonging for daily interactions. Lastly, adoption discourse and knowledge has historically privileged professionals, researchers, and adoptive parents over the voice of adoptees and birth mothers. This trend has continued in many ways for birth culture camps because they are mainly organized and operated by adoptive parents who have the most say in what programming is included in heritage camps. The Adoptee Camp is sui generis because it is structured, organized, and run by adoptees for adoptees,

\[16\] Four interviewees were attending college, five had graduated, and one was taking a break from college.
which is why I chose not to interview adoptive parents, although their perspectives are included through web site quotes and online videos.\footnote{17}

My previous chapters employed critical historical methods alongside legal/government and new media discourse analysis to analyze the structural-historical, representational, and traumatic forms of violence that were both engendered and produced by discourses and practices of love in transnational/racial adoption. In this chapter, I use heritage camp web sites and online videos along with participant observation and interviews with staff from the Adoptee Camp to get at the possibilities and limits of birth culture pedagogy at heritage camps and critical adoptee pedagogy at the Adoptee Camp as means to address the violence manifested from adoption. By violence, I am mainly referring to social alienation and discrimination produced by the intersections of racial difference and non-normative family structures as well as traumatic separation from one’s birth family, culture, and past. As Pam Sweetser suggests from her quote above, heritage camps are most often premised on the notion that the most pressing “violence” for transnational/racial adoptees is an inherent loss and deficit of birth culture, which needs to be filled.\footnote{18} Adoptive parents are told by adoption agencies, social workers, and other adoptive parents that there is this loss, and to make up for it they must provide various birth culture opportunities.\footnote{19}

\footnote{17} The Adoptee Camp has a web site as well, but since I was able to conduct traditional ethnography for the Adoptee Camp, I did not analyze the web site.

\footnote{18} The majority of adoptive parents would not categorize this “loss” as a type of violence like I would. There is also a broader loss from adoption as Brodzinsky et al. describe: “Even children who were adopted in the first days or weeks of life “grieve not only for the parents they never knew, but for the other aspects of themselves that have been lost through adoption: the loss of origins, of a completed sense of self, of genealogical continuity.” Brodzinsky et al., \textit{Being Adopted}, 11-12.

To help explain the phenomenon and appeal and complicate the function of both heritage camps and the Adoptee Camp, I pair critical pedagogy with Native education scholar Eve Tuck’s concept of desire, which she advocates for instead of damage. Tuck argues that there is an obscured, “damaging” cost to premising research on notions that communities are pathologically broken, damaged, depleted, or in the case of adoptees deficient.20 A desire-based framework, however, attends to the nuance and complexities of individuals and communities: “Desire accounts for the loss and despair, but also the hope, the visions, the wisdom of lived lives and communities. Desire is involved with the not yet and, at times, the not anymore. In many desire-based texts there is a ghostly, remnant quality to desire, its existence not contained to the body but still derived of the body. Desire is about longing within the present that is enriched by both the past and the future.”21 She adds that desire is “an assemblage of experiences, ideas, and ideologies, both subversive and dominant, which necessarily complicates our understanding of human agency, complicity, and resistance.”22 Both heritage camps and the Adoptee Camp represent overlapping and contradictory desires for identity, culture, kinship, and community by adoptees and adoptive parents. Therefore, I frame both types of camps as spaces in which intersecting and conflicting desires inform different teaching strategies, where heritage camps emphasize birth culture and the Adoptee Camp stresses adoptee perspective, which I name birth culture pedagogy and critical adoptee pedagogy.

20 Tuck, “Suspending Damage,” 2009: 409, 413. Tuck defines damaged-centered research as documenting “pain or loss in an individual, community, or tribe. … It looks to historical exploitation, domination, and colonization to explain contemporary brokenness, such as poverty, poor health, and low literacy. Common sense tells us this is a good thing, but the danger in damaged-centered research is that it is a pathologizing approach in which the oppression singularly defines a community. Here’s a more applied definition of damage-centered research: research that operates, even benevolently, from a theory of change that establishes harm or injury in order to achieve reparation.” Ibid., 413.

21 Ibid., 417.

22 Ibid., 420.
I use this concept of desire in conjunction with Avery Gordon’s idea of complex personhood, which confers “the respect on others that comes from presuming that life and people’s lives are simultaneously straightforward and full of enormously subtle meaning.”23 It speaks to the contradictory relationship between everyday individual experiences and the larger historical architectures of the political of those involved in adoption. In this way, the purpose of this chapter is not to simply critique adoptive parents, birth culture pedagogy, and birth culture camps, while praising adoptee pedagogy, the Adoptee Camp, and those who worked with the camp. Complex personhood demonstrates how the desires, acts, and experiences of all adoptive parents and adoptees intersect and convey multiple intended, unintended, uncertain, and contradictory meanings.24 I analyze the interviews and internet sources through the lenses of complex personhood and desire, not to recuperate the adoptive family but rather to pay attention to the layered processes of kinship, identity, and community formation for adoptees and adoptive parents. This critical review of culture camps and case study of the Adoptee Camp offers an example of the ways in which the violence of love is not another simple binary but a complex relationship among discourse, ideologies, structures, desires, and practices.

Together, Tuck, Gordon, and critical pedagogy allow me to also consider the ghostly presence of birth parents in transnational/racial adoption and these camps.25 The

24 The extent to which the desires, acts, and experiences of birth parents are identified and analyzed in this chapter and dissertation are limited. For this chapter, they are mediated through the camp manager who talks about the exchange program and what birth parents have articulated in the letters they write their children who were adopted.
25 While my dissertation has noted the gendered aspect of adoption that places more emphasis on birth and adoptive mothers, the Adoptee Camp context usually referred to both birth parents.
alternative kinship formed through transnational/racial adoption brings to the fore countless questions and uncertainties about the “not anymore” and “not yet,” the “what was” or “what could have been” and “what could be” for adoptees. Summer camps are usually a space in which kids and parents can spend time away from each other, so I consider what it means to have adoptive parents plan, volunteer for, and participate in family birth culture camps and how this affects the way birth parents are situated. Adoptive parents and adoptees are continuously confronted, especially in the space of camp through cultural activities or adoption discussions, by the specter of birth parents. This absent presence of the birth parents can have an arrestive effect. Here, upon seeing the ghostly presence of the birth parents, the adoptive parents or adoptees try to ignore, negate, displace, or resolve the haunting, traumatic, and unresolved past. But it can also, as Gordon says, produce profane illumination, which moves not to resolve the unresolvable but to open up space for and acknowledge birth mothers, the past, and potential futures.\(^\text{26}\)

While this chapter follows this model of adoptee empowerment and adoptee voice, it still falls short of allocating space for the voice of birth parents/mothers as contributors to articulate for themselves how their existence might complicate and broaden our understanding of adoption, family, and community. This is certainly one of the many limits of my research. The very nature of transnational/racial adoption makes it difficult to access and convey the perspective of birth mothers, which means for this chapter, and in many ways the larger dissertation project, I try to situate them as a present absence. Thus the Adoptee Camp, as a case study, is not as a perfect model or the only

means of addressing the moments after and before adoption, but it can be a point of
departure and productive exercise to think about things differently in more open and
complex ways.

**Part I: Birth Culture Pedagogy**

Heritage camps emerged from adoption agencies and collaborative efforts by
adoptive parents to offer a “post-adoption” experience that allowed transnational/racial
adoptees to feel a sense of belonging and learn about their birth culture. They provided a
space for adoptees and even adoptive parents to make friends, create social networks, and
learn and celebrate heritage. Heather Jacobson has identified the variety of practices that
involve learning, connecting, consuming (through purchasing and eating), and
performing by white adoptive parents as *culture keeping.*

Culture camps are just one of the many practices captured by this social phenomenon of keeping “alive” and providing
“access” to ethnic pasts. The importance of culture has been formally promoted and
underscored as an inalienable birthright in the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the
Child, which states that “due regard shall be paid to the desirability of continuity in a
child’s upbringing and the child’s ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic background
(Art. 20). The Hague Convention has also identified the importance of considering
“ethnic, religious and cultural background” (Art. 16c) and promoting the development of
“adoption counseling and post-adoption services” (Art 9c) as part of the “best interests of

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identity and self worth; mitigate challenges of interracial, ethnic, adoptive status; and “replicate[s]
partially the cultural education” adoptees have lost due to transnational/racial adoption. Ibid., 2.
28 Ibid., 1-2.
http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CRC.aspx,
the child.”  

Rojewski, in his study of China adoptive parents, found that very few parents ignore or reject Chinese cultural heritage and most understood the importance and benefits of acknowledging it.  

The question of birth culture, however, remains. Why are we so fascinated with “imagined” birth culture? What does it do or enable? In this section I show that “birth culture” and culture keeping are sites of teaching and learning in the form of birth culture pedagogy, which helps to mediate desires for normative kinship and an adoption community. As a knowable and safe form of knowledge, birth culture acts as both substitute for “lost culture” for the adoptee and for the birth parents (and nation) who would normally possess the role of passing on and retaining birth culture, which are displaced by adoptive parents.

Heritage camps are a fun, supportive space, where adoptees and adoptive parents (many times even siblings and other family members) meet other adoptees and transnational/racial adoptive families with the purpose of establishing a sense of community and normalcy while also promoting and celebrating ethnic and cultural heritage. For example, in the F.A.Q. section of one web site, it states:

[There are] two #1 reasons to attend; identity building and self-esteem for your adopted child, and a greater recognition and understanding of where your child came from. It is the perfect way for your entire family to immerse themselves in the wonders of your adopted child's culture. This unique experience is entertaining and enlightening for your adopted child, non-adopted siblings (and cousins, friends, aunts, uncles, grandparents, etc.), and for you as parents to learn much about your child's birth country. It truly is a 4-day celebration of culture and adoption as presented

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30 Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption.
31 Rojewski, “A Typical American Family?” 159.
As the camp description notes, heritage camps are an immersion experience that draws on community experts to provide an “authentic” cultural learning experience. They strengthen adoptees’ understanding about their birth culture and identity and allow other family members to be a part of the learning experience as well. At the Chinese and Korean Culture Camps at Pearl S. Buck International, adoptees can participate in “fun hands-on activities” such as Chinese yo-yo, origami, painting, badminton, traditional dance, storytelling, kite flying, folk songs, and tae kwon do.

Adoptees enjoy learning “cultural bites” from where they came from. One Adoptee Camp counselor, Frank, who had attended culture camp when he was younger says it was enjoyable, “When I was a camper, I thought it was pretty interesting…what a honbok [traditional Korean dress] was and making bugolgi [a marinated beef dish] because you get to eat it.” Greg, the camp manager for the Adoptee Camp, acknowledges that birth culture was enjoyable for him when he attended a Korean culture camp for eight years of his youth, “For me, the culture aspect was fun. ... There is this level of connection to birth culture experiences that is different than other experiences. For example, when I was learning about Korean fan dancing or something like that I felt more of a connection than I would have if we were learning like Irish step dancing.”

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34 “Chinese Heritage Camp,” Heritage Camps For Adoptive Families. Web. Last accessed March 10, 2012 [Note: this web page has since been revised, and the FAQ section no longer exists.]
36 Frank, Interview, February 21, 2011.
Yet, usually more than food and cultural activities, many adoptees who attend culture camps discuss being around other adoptees. For many adoptees, birth culture camps provide the first opportunity for such an experience and relationships because they were often raised in racially and ethnically homogenous communities. They help create an environment where adoptees realize that they are not alone. This contributes to strengthening their identity, giving them a better sense of who they are. An Asian American teen adoptee volunteer at a Michigan heritage camp says, “It was being able to see people who looked like me and to recognize that I’m not alone because when you’re out in the world by yourself in a minority situation, it’s kind of discouraging sometimes, so that really helped me to find myself.”37 One Asian American camper for that same camp reveals, “The things that have come out of this camp, they’re timeless. You’ve become friends with people that [sic] have the same story as you do. … It’s fun to hang out with your friends that are of the same culture as you and you’re not like lonely or you don’t feel like you’re the only one. You feel proud to be who you are in a country that’s not where you’re from.”38

Birth culture camps are thus about the desire for belonging and sense of community with other adoptees who share a similar story and background.

Heritage camps also provide adoptive parents with a similar feeling of community and belonging—something that they desire too—from meeting and interacting with other adoptive parents and families, which had little to do with birth culture. Cathy Wood, an adoptive mother explains, “It’s nice to be with other adoptive parents because they share

38 Amy Wood, Ibid.
the same story as we do.” Another adoptive mother, Debbie Marsh says, “The support of the families, the support of the teachers and helpers has been a great experience for us. And to be able share just the miracle of adoption with other families who have been through the journey with us has been a great source of support and encouragement to us as families.”39 Adoptive parents' articulation of the “nice feeling” that comes from being at camp and having support speaks and goes back to the desire for legitimacy, intelligibility, and the negotiation of family difference. Just like adoptees, adoptive parents while at camp do not have to deal with stares, prying questions, or inappropriate comments that interrogate the validity of their family, providing a sort of unique “camp kinship.” Instead, they can simply enjoy cultural learning and sharing experiences with their children and other adoptive families.

For adoptive parents, heritage camps offer a space where they and their children can have fun, develop support networks, and specifically for adoptive parents, provide access to the “missing” cultural aspect of their child's identity. The latter two aspects, support networks and birth culture, are part of the desire and effort to be better parents than the older generation of adoptive parents, which for the most part ignored these concerns. The plethora of outcome and identity studies that pitted adopted children against the norm of biological children, along with constant media representations of adoption as “less than,” and “public interracial surveillance”—where strangers, friends, or other adoptive parents, both white and nonwhite, monitoring whether white parents are doing the right things to promote ethnic and racial pride for their children—has generated stress and expectations to be nearly perfect parents or at the very least improve from

39 Cathy Wood and Debbie Marsh, Ibid.
“past” parenting mistakes.⁴⁰ The parenting regime for adoptive parents includes professional pre-adoption education, informal adoption education through books and websites, home studies, and travel to the country of origin. Adoptive parents are expected to utilize all the resources that are available to them. Part of this includes following what adoption agencies, fellow adoptive parents, and general adoption discourse have recommended because that is what great parents do. Greg explains:

For adoptive parents … part of birth culture for them is that this is something that is lost to the adoptee and should belong to them. Therefore, they should provide it to their adoptee, to their child, if that makes sense. So there’s this loss, and to make up for the loss, we will provide you with these birth culture opportunities. We will take you to the Chinese festival every year and dress you up in some type of traditional Chinese garb.

As Jacobson notes, efforts to keep culture have become standardized in the discourse and practice of adoptive parenting by supposed experts and the adoption community. And they are saying birth culture is vital, actively encouraging adoptive parents to seek out cultural opportunities such as heritage camps that can be an excellent, integrated approach for the whole family to enjoy.⁴¹

Hence, the incorporation of birth culture is high stakes for adoptive parents who will be judged on their success or failure. White adoptive mothers especially have specific gender expectations to teach, model and maintain cultural experiences and identity for the entire family, which materializes in the form of meal preparation, holiday and religious shopping and facilitation or transportation to cultural language, and dance or art classes.⁴² More vital than the objects themselves is the act of consumption and/or

⁴⁰ Jacobson, *Culture Keeping*, 146.
⁴² In Jay Rojewski’s (2005) study, he examined if, when, and how much adoptive parents of children from China acknowledged and integrated Chinese culture into their children’s lives. Of the 79 respondents,
display to perform not only a *good* but *better* mother than previous adoptive parents through this intensive mothering. Thus the focus for adoptive families has been instilling birth culture and figuring out a balance between rejecting and failing to address it on the one hand and overstressing it on the other hand. Too much acquisition of culture would go outside the “limits of social intelligibility” by breaking the historic models of either one-way assimilation into “American” culture or “partial” cultural appropriations of “exotic” nonwhite cultures by the white majority.

Critical adoption scholars have described and critiqued the culture that is employed in “culture keeping” as “celebratory,” “weak,” “white,” “superficial,” and “hegemonic” multiculturalism or “staged authenticity.” Indeed, the culture that is taught, learned, and shared in the context of heritage camps is popular precisely because its construction and application are “superficial.” Yet, Jessica Lyons, President of Families for International Children, explains that heritage camps emerged from adoptive families who wanted to give their children the opportunity to learn about their cultures, “They wanted them to know the music, they want them to know language, they want them to know normal everyday things. When they are here in the States, they learn what

76 were white, and of those who were white, 74 were white females. Rojewski, “A Typical American Family?”


A family who adopts from China, for example, would not be as intelligible if it relocated to China in order to facilitate in the reproduction and maintenance of culture.


Pamela Ann Quiroz (2011) disaggregates cultural engagement into two types: superficial cultural tourism and more substantive culture keeping, where the superficial engagement forms what Mary Waters calls “costless communities.” (22-24). I would add here that even in culture keeping adoptive parents can espouse multicultural beliefs and disavow whiteness but then continue to maintain their investment in the latter by reinscribing racial and cultural difference that they either acquired or rejected. Quiroz, “Cultural Tourism in Transnational Adoption.”
the United States kids do, but they don’t necessarily learn what they do in Korea or what they do maybe in Mexico, Guatemala, or even in Russia.”

A description for another culture camp suggests that campers will learn about daily life and get a “vivid sense of where they came from, and therefore who they are.” The goals and description of these heritage camps point to the belief that the cultural education imported at heritage camps holds substantive value and is representative of lost birth culture. “Authentic” birth culture, in this case, is essentialized and homogenized—where countries and even whole regions are conflated to represent distinct cultures—and spatial by residing mainly in foreign countries rather than being fluid and existing within the United States, too.

Certainly the way in which the culture is simplified, aestheticized, and celebrated for this teaching and learning process is problematic. Many of the interviewees commented on this. Ruby, who has also worked in post-adoption services, attributed the appeal of culture camps to the fact that they emphasize all of the “really fuzzy warm stuff.” Gary, who has worked with worked in both camp settings for nearly as long as Greg, described the cultural activities as “kind of silly” and “childish.” Pam had been to and enjoyed a Korean culture day camp but mostly because she got to be around other Korean American adoptees. After living in Korea for a year, she said she realized the culture they learned at camp was more like “faux” and “museum” culture. This version of culture the interviewees describe has little relevance to everyday Korean, let alone Korean American or Korean American adoptee, or other transnational/racial adoptee,

51 Ruby, Interview, January 26, 2011.
52 Gary, Interview, August 7, 2010.
53 Pam, Interview.
experiences. While multiple interviewees agreed that birth culture has a place in adoptee identity and can, as Greg and Frank mention, also be fun, it is only one aspect of identity.

This critique made by interviewees and expanded upon by scholars who are problematizing “birth culture” is important because it speaks to the larger critical assessment of the politics of multiculturalism. Elizabeth Povinelli aptly elucidates that the liberal state depends on a politics of multicultural recognition that includes “social difference without social consequence.” As noted earlier, Johnston et al. observed that white adoptive parents practiced cultural socialization more often than education about racial bias, but both types of socialization were infrequent and not as applicable to everyday situations. Ruby explains why race can be subsumed by culture, “I think adoptive parents sometimes are scared to really touch on hard issues such as race. In today’s society race is still something that we talk about; we think that we’re in a post-racism society and where some stuff doesn’t happen but in reality racism does happen it’s just not overt.” The general critique is adoptive parents choose to address culture over race because it is easier and safer. Ruby’s suggestion goes back to Povinelli’s claim that it is easier to deal with cultural difference if the engagement ignores social consequences and uneven national relationships. The attentive acquisition of cultural objects and performance of cultural activities, then, may be from “good” intent to instill “pride” and “celebrate culture” for adoptees. However, the fixation on “authentic” birth culture and the exotic fetishization of adoptees through consuming “cultural bites” works only to contain, manage, aestheticize, reinscribe, and deracinate or absorb meaningful cultural

difference. Further, Homans reminds us of Homi Bhabha’s clarification about the impossibility of and problematic desire for recovering or attaining cultural authenticity for diasporic postcolonial subjects. Thus the point is not to critique heritage camps and birth culture pedagogy as inauthentic but to identify how they work as affective labor.

**Knowable and Safe: Substitute Culture**

The critiques about the practices of “culture” specific to adoption, however, seem to in many ways conflate adoption multiculturalism with general multiculturalism, missing key details of how its usage in transnational/racial adoption is unique. General or “hegemonic” multiculturalism suggests that all cultures are valued and should be celebrated. Certainly, heritage camps are premised partly on this aspect of multiculturalism. At the same time though, the birth culture that is taught at heritage camps, by “ethnic experts” from the community and/or adoptive parents who have already accumulated “cultural knowledge,” is different because the focus is on one particular culture, that of the child, instead of various cultures. This singular focus is important because learning culture is on the one hand a substitute for “lost” culture and an effort to instill ethnic pride for adoptees. Simply by sending their children to camp, adoptive parents can “fill” this “cultural deficit.” On the other hand, birth culture references the specter of the birth parents because they are the figure and inhabit the

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57 Homans, “Adoption Narratives, Trauma, and Origins,” 6. Homans states that “[P]arents construct a simulacrum of the ‘birth culture’ by providing ‘same-race role models’ and incorporating into family life cultural fragments (holidays, food, clothing) that are supposed to be authentic but that are, inevitably, translated and hybridized.” Ibid., 4.
58 Even in the cases in which general multiculturalism is focused only on a singular culture, like Black History Month, I would contend that it is in the context of valuing all “cultures.” There are a few culture camps that combine cultures, where children get a chance to learn about other cultures other than their own, but this is rarer, and I would argue still about the child mainly learning about his or her particular culture that was lost.
place of “origin” for the adoptee’s birth culture. Thus, birth culture is also about teaching and learning for adoptive parents as a way to acquire cultural knowledge in tandem with their child such that they can be a substitute for the birth parents and birth nation.  

Volkman claims that the adoptive parents’ strong sadness as well as their desire for and interest in birth culture can be attributed to the “absence of the [birth] mother’s body” and “lack of knowledge or possible contact with the birth family.” For Volkman, birth culture is a replacement for that longing and desire, but I contend that it is not the longing for but the fear of birth parents that imparts the desire for birth culture to be “studied, celebrated, performed, and embodied.” And while imagined and practiced birth culture may appear “weak” and “staged,” it carries deep meaning beyond the enjoyment culled by learning about a new culture because it works as both a substitute for and displacement of the past, reaffirming adoptive (mother)parenthood and family, and the United States as an exceptional space that can reproduce lost culture. Rather than having to address the issue of race and birth parents, adoptive parents can learn birth culture to negotiate motherhood and become the new conduit for reproducing and maintaining cultural heritage. If an adopted child feels connected to his or her birth culture and has ethnic pride, then this has the potential to mitigate feelings of difference and isolation, giving further justification to not worry about adoption issues beyond culture. For this reason, I contend, birth parents are an absent presence in most heritage

59 Interestingly, five of the birth culture camps were open to infant and toddler adoptees. This begs the question, in the cases for the youngest culture camp attendees, is the camp more for the benefit of the parents than the child?

60 Volkman, “Embodying Chinese Culture,” 42. Volkman’s assessment aligns with some adoptive parents who do desire origin stories, as I showed in Chapter three. At the same time, there are many adoptive parents for which the figure of the birth mother is not something that is desired or longed for but that needs to be displaced with the substitute of birth culture.

61 Ibid.
camps. Unlike general multiculturalism, where power is hidden, the specter of the birth parents is always presenting itself—on birthdays, “adoption” or “gotcha” days, questions about the past, and during engagements with birth culture. So in the case of transnational/racial adoption, versus general situations for which multiculturalism takes place, adoptive parents engage in a more explicit circumvention. Hence birth culture pedagogy is not the failure to address power but the sometimes purposeful and other times inadvertent choice to ignore or negate birth parents and the past.

Birth culture is fun and appealing then, especially for adoptive parents, precisely because it is “knowable” and therefore safe, acting as a substitute for and masking that which is often feared and unknowable. Greg summarizes it this way:

For the adoptive parents, they may know many things about the adoptee. They know that their child has black hair, that they like soccer, that they’re happy kids, that they’re adopted. They know any number of other things. … What they don’t know is a deeper understanding of their child’s feelings on adoption; how their child interacts with adoption as a part of their identity; their thoughts on things like birth family; their thoughts on other adoptees or race and things like that. That is unknown to the adoptive parent. Also included in that is the adoptee’s connection or knowledge of birth culture [and] how important is that connection to them.

These questions for adoptive parents can be “really scary” to bring up and talk about “because that opens up a whole can of worms.” Greg adds that birth culture, on the other hand, can be learned with greater ease:

[A]doptive parents can bring everything about birth culture into … the known realm rather than the unknown realm. Anything that the adoptee can learn about birth culture is something that the adoptive parent can also learn about. So unlike the depth of their feelings on race, for example, which they [adoptive parents] will never be able to understand fully, they can understand fully this concept of birth culture. So because it’s so safe,

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62 Adoption or Gotcha Day is celebrating the day that adoptive parents meet their child, whether it is upon the child’s arrival to the United States or when adoptive parents travel to officially adopt overseas.
let’s focus on that … at the expense of all of those other things that I named, all of those other elements that are unknown.

Despite Greg’s lack of engagement with academic adoption discourse, his experience working with heritage camps and interacting with literally hundreds of adoptive parents engendered an explanation that complicates what critical scholars have articulated about “superficial” culture within transnational adoption. In learning about birth culture, adoptive parents can bring something from the unknown realm into the known realm. Rather than being an “impossible contradiction” that is unresolvable and unavoidable,63 birth culture is accessible, safe, sharable, and thus desirable. This type of cultural teaching and learning works to re-present non-normative adoptive families as normative, showing that adoptive parents can take on the necessary parenting role of assisting adoptees to learn and maintain culture. Furthermore, birth culture pedagogy circumscribes the adoption community that emerges from this approach to those who participate in birth culture activities, which misses the ways in which others figures such as birth parents, social workers, foster parents, and friends might be a part of the adoption community too.

When asked if they thought adoptive parents liked one type of camp more than the other, half of the interviewees used the terms scary and threatening to partially explain why some adoptive parents may prefer heritage camps over the Adoptee Camp because the latter discusses issues of adoption and birth parents. Tami, who also attend culture camp for years, explains that it can be scary for adoptive parents “because their

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63 Dorow, Transnational Adoption, 17.
kids don’t necessarily talk to them about adoption.” Gary, who has worked with both heritage camps and the Adoptee Camp, noted, “[I]t can be threatening because I think for them [adoptive parents] they see a lot of strangers talking to their kids about subject matters that they’re scared to talk about.” Similarly, in the birth culture camps and retreats that Greg has observed, he says adoptive parents avoid the topic of birth parents, “[It’s] kind of like a slap in the face to them. It’s kind of a rejection of them as parents. Even just general curiosity on the part of the adoptee towards birth parents can sometimes feel like a rejection of adoptive parents, which of course isn’t what is happening when a child is just curious about their birth parents.” Ruby elaborates on this fear, “I think talking about birth parents is a kind of a scary subject for adoptive parents… If I talk about it, will my child love me any less? How big of a role am I supposed to give them… And not all adoptive parents think this way, but there is enough stuff in the media to produce fear.” Paul explains that there is a range of perspectives from adoptive parents, where some enjoy culture camp because it is safe and other parents “superficially” enjoy the Adoptee Camp because they can drop off their child who loves it so they are happy. Others though, he notes, fear that their child will reject their Americanness, “Some are just, I think they’re scared about it [the Adoptee Camp]. Like, they don’t want their kid going away with a bunch of other adoptees and birth family search fear. A lot of parents fear that their kid is going to want to go native back to Korea or where ever they were adopted from.” Greg elucidates that these uncertainties and possibilities about adoptee identity, experience, origins, and birth family can be intimidating because they bring to

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64 Tami, Interview, August 25, 2010.
65 Paul, Interview, October 4, 2010.
fore the question of separation and a traumatic, unknown past. This dilemma of the
specter of the birth mother and the adoptee’s past that disrupts the narratives of
motherlessness, abandoned, and free-standing orphan is “solved,” however, through
containing and absorbing cultural difference. Thus, birth culture pedagogy is used as way
to address the “loss” and “deficit.” It simultaneously normalizes culture and difference
that can help institute the adoptive family as legitimate for both the child and adoptive
parents and situate the United States as a nation in which this replication and preservation
of “foreign” culture can take place.

Hence, birth culture is a piece of their child that adoptive parents can bring from
the unknown realm to the known, making it a safe way to strengthen adoptive kinship and
be better parents. Ann Anagnost, in her study of China adoption Internet discussions,
argues that cultural difference is aestheticized and celebrated in ways that are detached
from immigrant histories in the United States,” mystifying how race operates for
adoptees and adoptive families. More importantly, she asserts that this private and
familial form of culture works to produce new racial meaning within the global economy
while simultaneously diluting a critical understanding of that meaning. 66 Amy Traver’s
examination of China adoptive parent’s consumptive practices of Chinese cultural objects
for display in their homes illustrates this point of producing new racial meaning: “[F]or
many China adoptive parents, the consumption and display of Chinese cultural objects
both signifies and solidifies an additional transformation; one in their own ethno-cultural

identifications.” Furthermore, in terms of culture camp specifically, Pam Sweetser demonstrates this point as well in her explanation why family camp is so special:

One mom made my point for me very clearly a few years ago at our Indian Nepalese Heritage Camp. She told me about sending her Korean-born son to a culture camp near their home, which was a “kid only” camp. He loved it, made many friends, and did come home with that sense of pride in being Korean. She thought it was great for him. Then, she came to our Indian Nepalese Heritage Camp with her Indian-born daughter, and not only did it have a profound effect on her daughter, but on her as well. She said she always knew how important camp was for her son, but could never share in it with him, and didn’t feel she knew about “being Korean” as much as she knew about “being Indian,” by experiencing camp with her daughter. She was a little sad to realize she didn’t have the same connection with her son’s identity as she did her daughter’s.

Sweetser adds that her own experience with culture camp has helped her assume new identities: “My husband and I have always felt so lucky to have Korea and India in our lives, through our children of course, but also through all the wonderful Korean and Indian people we’ve met at camp, and all the cultural awareness we’ve learned about. Except for the very obvious color of my skin or shape of my eyes, I honestly feel Indian and Korean sometimes.” Sweetser’s story of this mother’s discrepancy with the (dis)connections between her son and daughter and the account of her own expressions of “feeling” Korean and Indian relays how participation in cultural activities and heritage camp can assist adoptive parents in acquiring new ethno-racial identity. This illustrates how the substitute culture is not only about replacing what was lost for the adopted child.

67 Traver, “Home(land) Décor,” 202. Traver notes, that while it appears Orientalist, parents claim that cultural consumption and displays showed their children that they respect their heritage Traver explains that adoptive parents tended to “consume a relatively narrow base of Chinese art” such as "watercolor paintings, calligraphy scrolls, granite etchings, Chinese peasant paintings, jade figurines, blue and white pottery, and paper or silk fans are particularly popular objects.” Ibid., 206.
69 Ibid.
in terms of culture but also in terms of being the parental figure who can help reproduce and maintain culture. In this way, cultural learning is less about aesthetic appropriation and more about motherhood and family-making, where the re-imagining of ethno-racial identity allows adoptive mothers (and fathers) to replace the cultural connection that their child lost through adoption.

Thus, the desire to use birth culture to be good or better parents is more than enjoyment from participating in cooking meals, collecting artifacts, or learning dances and music and also beyond replacing a “missing” link for the adoptees. Rather birth culture, in many ways, follows Edward Said’s seminal work on “Orientalism.” Said describes Orientalism as a corresponding reality based on Western modernist desires to apprehend and practice it. Just as Orientalism helped define the West / Europe, defining and practicing birth culture identifies the transparent multiculturalism of adoptive families as normative (rather than abnormal), nuclear, final, and complete.70 This is to say, birth culture and its pedagogy are parts of a relationship of power and discursively produced by a multidimensional network of interests.71 The employment of “authentic” ethnic experts to produce “true” knowledge about birth culture, then, is not apolitical but instead an attempt to get at the interiority of and disguise the work of making culture.72 As Said contends, in knowing the other, Orientalists could have a firmer grasp on it; they could own it. Learning alongside their children, white adoptive parents can become an expert and insider, a mediator and repository of knowledge for their child in remembering

70 Said, Orientalism, 2.
71 Ibid., 4-6. Thus, birth culture is durable, where if the truth of it were to be revealed, it would not merely disappear.
72 Ibid., 93-4, 10.
how to be other and regaining what was lost. As Greg makes clear, “[A]doptive parents can gain just as much knowledge or more about birth culture than their children, that is what makes it safe. It’s something controllable, and it’s that they can look at as being a substitute.” This strategy of birth culture “transcends” cultural difference by absorbing “positive” aspects, yet in doing so, along with the rejection of “negative” cultural particularities, it reinscribes and normalizes difference without interrogating power. In other words, the past, in terms of the birth mother and what happened pre-adoption, and the future are unknown and scary. Hence the incorporation of birth culture, which becomes knowable, speaks to the kind of future child and family that adoptive parents wish to cultivate.

In this way, complex personhood is represented in the desire by adoptive parents to embrace and supply birth culture opportunities for their children. This desire can be understood as an act of and possibility for love that attempts to address the violence derived from “cultural deficit.” Adoptive parents, like all parents, want to protect their kids from potential physical and emotional harm. In this case, they are told that in providing birth culture to their children, they will prevent emotional harm. Moreover, the practice of “cultural socialization” or highlighting birth culture in general is not a universal by any means. Many adoptive parents consciously choose to be “color

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73 Many adoptive parents centralize their interests on the scene of abandonment of their child in hopes of collecting bits and fragments of their origin to make a whole story – the representational account that enables the containment and engulfment of the other, where either instance confirms the privileged status of the adoptive parent. This desire in many ways is about who produces this knowledge and representation, whether it’s one of the few that is actually found or like most, merely imagined.

74 Cultural socialization can include eating at restaurants, increasing the availability of cultural artifacts and books, attending cultural events, greater connection with Asian or Asian American friends and role models, moving to diverse neighborhoods and near diverse schools. In their study, Vonk et al. observed that adoptive parents primarily rely on cultural “socializations practices that require little to no contact with people of the child’s race/ethnicity.” Vonk, Lee, and Crolley-Simic, “Cultural
blind.”75 Thus, the adoptive parents who actively engage in birth culture, no matter how little or substantial, desire to cultivate a special identity for their child that previous (and still many current) adoptees do not have. By suggesting that cultural interactions between adoptive parents and their children is “weak,” “white,” “hegemonic,” or “staged,” the critiques of culture keeping and birth culture pedagogy are implying that these experiences are insignificant and have little meaning. But this misses this complexity of both desire and lived experience. Indeed, adoptive parents’ efforts to highlight culture could even be considered a form of strategic essentialism, where birth culture can lead to stronger cultural identity and pride as well as an collective adoption community that can celebrate and learn about “birth culture.”76 Birth culture is productive and filled with desire, i.e. love, hope, and visions of the future, which means it cannot be superficial.

Hence, my point for this section is not to pathologize adoptees and adoptive parents who enjoy birth culture or to argue that since culture is not fixed and there is no such thing as “authentic” culture that adoptees did not lose something in being adopted.

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75 One study found that 20 percent of adoptive parents are “purposefully uninterested in placing emphasis on their child’s race or birth culture,” valuing a color-blind approach. It also noted that the vast majority showed some interest in highlighting their child’s race and culture, although their level of actual engagement and participation with cultural socialization varied. Vonk and Massatti, “Factors Related to Transracial Adoptive Parents’ Levels of Cultural Competence,” 2008: 208. Another study revealed similar results that suggest transracial adoptive parents are “more likely than not to minimize racial differences and emphasize a color-blind approach.” Randolph and Holtzman, “The Role of Heritage Camps in Identity Development Among Korean Transnational Adoptees,” 80.

Greg also admits that birth culture is something that is lost, but it is not the only important aspect of adoptee identity:

I think [birth culture] is a real loss. There is no way to not consider it a real loss. That is something that the adoptee would have had that they no longer have access to. But I think that its importance is overstated by a large margin. … The importance of birth culture varies among adoptees. It’s more important for some than it is for others, and that ebbs and flows over time in importance for every adoptee. But birth culture is one component of a much larger adoptee identity. That the adoptee’s identity is made up of all of those other things that [such as] the unknown realm for [adoptive] parents, [adoptees’] thoughts on race, their thoughts on how they interact with adoption, and you know their thoughts on their birth family, things like that. There are other components to the adoptee’s identity that extend beyond birth culture. So yes, there is a loss. But it’s framed you know the end all be all for the adoptee’s identity, and that is not the case. Its importance is overstated.

Here, Greg illustrates why desire is better than a damage- or deficit-based framework.

When birth culture is highlighted as the primary issue, it narrowly defines adoptees’ experiences and desires, which suggests that if they do not have access to, engage, and recover that birth culture then they will not be whole. And while it is safe in some respects, the knowable always carries with it the threat of the unknowable, complicating the processes of culture keeping and birth culture pedagogy. Birth culture is also simultaneously as a mechanism that ignores or erases other types of structural-historical violences that produce family separation and the need for the uneven global processes of adoption. That is to say, intentional and desiring love can emerge from and have violent consequences that are complex and full of subtle, contradictory meanings.

The importance of birth culture varies among adoptees, and its significance fluctuates over time. Greg clarifies that birth culture is usually not the driving force bringing adoptees to heritage camp. For his own experience he explains: “I hated it when
relatives would ask me later about birth culture. And I understand now that of course
that’s because it was never what was important to me. What was important was being
among other adoptees and seeing my friends. It was never the birth culture. Birth culture
was never why I went to camp.” While birth culture may be relatable to adoptees in some
ways, it is only one aspect of their much larger adoptee identity and desire to be with
other adoptees. It does not singularly define them. Greg describes how in observing birth
culture camps he saw that campership falls significantly for adoptees who are 12 or 13
and older: “My theory is that for many of them, it feels contrived. And they don’t have
that connection to that type of education. That it may even make them feel uncomfortable
because it’s referring to something that’s not important to them or … because it
highlights how they are different from other people.”77 And as Pam suggests, centering
only birth culture “assumes that identity is strictly linked to ethnicity without appreciating
the other stuff.” For adolescent adoptees, these superficial cultural activities might be
“relevant only to a certain extent” because they are more self-aware of this disconnect
between what is presented and what is actually experienced.78 Education scholar and
post-adoption services social worker Steve Kalb explains that the adoption industry feels
that birth culture is the pillar to build healthy identity. He agrees that it does a good job of
describing difference and where adoptees are from, but once they get older the questions
are too complex.79 Amber summarizes it in this way:

For me personally, learning about my own birth culture is interesting, but I
don’t feel like I’m a part of it. I feel like it’s something that doesn’t relate

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77 The study by Johnston et al. matches Greg’s observation, revealing that engagement with cultural
socialization began to fall at age 10 to 12. Johnston et al., “Mothers’ Racial, Ethnic, and Cultural
Socialization of Transracially Adopted Asian Children,” 399.
78 Ruby Interview.
to me. But the idea of the adoptee community is something that I do feel a part of and that I belong to and that I am active in; and I know things. Like I don’t know much about birth culture, but I know my own feelings on adoption. … I just think that some parents have their own ideas and think that submerging their child in birth culture will help them you know figure out who they think that they are when really it’s more about being in the adoptee community.  

What Amber describes goes back to the idea that heritage and culture camps help create a certain environment for adoptees and adoptive parents that lets them know they are not alone as adoptees or adoptive families. Thus, more important than birth culture is what Greg calls the “invisible need” that adoptees especially have, which is the idea that the adoptee community is something that all adoptees desire and need but that they might not realize it until they have experienced it for the first time. The fact that so many adoptees enjoy heritage camp has led to the misattribution of birth culture as the main reason why these camps are so popular. Thus, the next section explores a different camp model that builds on the community aspect of camp yet does so in a way that examines broader desires of adoptee identity, knowledge of the past, expanded notions of family, and racial awareness rather than birth culture as the singular desire and defining deficit.

**Part II: Critical Adoptee Pedagogy and Perspective**

The Adoptee Camp had actually first began and continued as a Korean heritage camp for more than 10 years prior to the switch to its current structure. Greg rationalized that the Adoptee Camp no longer focuses on birth culture because there are at least “13 or 15 birth countries” represented at the camp, and it would be impossible to cover each or even most of them in a meaningful way. He added that there are also so many birth

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80 Amber, Interview.
81 Greg, Interview.
culture opportunities out there already.\textsuperscript{82} Other interviewees noted that the heritage camps they worked at created other dilemmas too. The camps that were multicultural rather than engaging with a singular birth culture often were unable to represent all of the countries reflected by the campers.\textsuperscript{83} Campers were also divided into their own country, which can be limiting too.\textsuperscript{84} Ruby summarizes it in this way: “While I think, yes, birth culture is important to learn, I think it’s also important to learn you know, ‘What does it mean to be an adoptee? What does it mean to be a transracial/national adoptee?’” As the first section showed, most adoptees enjoyed being around other adoptees more than the cultural aspects of heritage camps. The camp director who made the change from birth culture to the Adoptee Camp understood this concept of and desire for an adoptee (not just an adoption) community.

When I began in 2006, the Adoptee Camp had already changed to reflect the new model that moved away from birth culture. It was a five-day summer camp, where the three full days in the middle addressed the respective issues of identity, adoption, and race. By 2010, the camp had added “community” as a fourth theme to the first day of camp. This section discusses how the Adoptee Camp provided an alternative critical adoptee pedagogy that engaged adoptees’ desires through the camp’s four themes, which were used as a way to address some of the violence engendered by adoption, i.e. social alienation and discrimination produced by the intersections of racial and familial difference as well as traumatic separation from one’s birth family, culture, and past. This approach enabled adoptees to form an adoptee community and identity; imagine a space

\textsuperscript{82} Tami similarly stated that there were too many birth cultures to adequately address in one camp.
\textsuperscript{83} Gary, interview.
\textsuperscript{84} Ruby, interview.
for which birth parents could at the very least be a present absence—wherein they were not ignored or dismissed in discussions of the past and family; and empowered to negotiate the non-normative aspects of racial and familial difference.

I argue that the Adoptee Camp utilized a critical adoptee pedagogy to encompass the pleasurable (social), pedagogical, and political (empowering) aspects of camp. In other words, this term represents moments of teaching, thinking, discussion, and pleasure, in which adoptees could reflect upon and have dialogue about the four themes. The concept of pleasure, which bell hooks addresses in Teaching to Transgress, cannot be overstated because it was the driving component of the Adoptee Camp, while the educational aspect was secondary.\(^{85}\) As Pam jokingly stated, “No one wants to send their kid to [an] adoption learning center.” While the Adoptee Camp was certainly a social space, I show how it constitutes a transformative exercise that involved teaching, discussions, and empowerment as components of individual and collective change in the present way of thinking about community, identity, adoption, and family and a rehearsal for what could happen in the future.

Unique to the Adoptee Camp, the staff of counselors, leadership team, and the camp manager traveled across the country to four camp locations: East Coast, Midwest, West Coast, and Northwest.\(^{86}\) The extended nature of this camp meant that more resources could be allocated to “official” training for a week prior to the four camps. The training covered concepts such as the construction of differences between culture,
ethnicity, and race; individual and systemic racism; and various forms of privilege. These concepts were usually not discussed in camp with the campers, and instead they represented pedagogical exercises to offer an important foundation for counselors who were not fully aware of them. Also significant was that the Adoptee Camp was adoptee-run. Greg, the camp manager for 2009 and 2010, states, “It’s created by adoptees, and it’s for adoptees.” In fact this was one of most appealing aspects for Pam when she decided to work with the Adoptee Camp. Pedagogically, having adoptees organize and run the camp was a complete inverse from how most birth culture camps operated, in which the founders, the majority of organizers, and many of volunteers were adoptive parents. Moreover, fifteen of the twenty camps welcomed non-adopted siblings to participate in the culture camps. The director of the Adoptee Camp emphasized that this alternative structure drew from the belief that adoptees were experts in their own experience. Thus, the Adoptee Camp sought to listen to what adoptees wanted and tried to incorporate that into camp curriculum and activities each year. In other words, critical adoptee pedagogy began with privileging the adoptee perspective and voice.

Just like heritage camps for adoptees, the Adoptee Camp resembled other summer camps in that it included typical activities such as games, arts and crafts, swimming, camp Olympics, soccer, rock climbing, and archery. The nightly “camp fire” held indoors provided time for campers to receive mail, sing songs, perform skits, and compete in improv games. Campers also could choose from different evening electives such as sports, art, hip hop dance, creative writing, and drama. On the surface, the Adoptee Camp

87 Only two camps were sponsored by adoption agencies. The rest were adoptive parent founded and organized.
was like any other week-long summer camp, but for two hours each day the Adoptee Camp provided structured group discussions and activities that addressed the four main themes, which I frame as desires: community, identity, adoption, and race. The goals were to learn about the adoptee community; what it meant to have multiple identities; to think about adoption, our birth parents, and culture; and to engender discussion about how race affects adoptees. Together, the themes represented part of the critical adoptee pedagogy that addressed the challenging, complex, and in many ways violent, issues common to transnational/racial adoption. To be sure, the camp did not interrogate the idea of race beyond stereotypes and individual racism, but it provided an entry point for discussion and reflection.

Adoptees were split into three age groups—youngest, middle, and oldest.⁸⁸ Within these age groups, campers were further split into “cabin groups,” i.e. those who shared the same cabin accommodation. For two hours each day, adoptees participated in a morning and evening session built around the day’s theme. The morning sessions, led by the camp manager, were larger because they focused on an entire age group of campers to have a collective lesson and conversation. In the evening, campers engaged in a second but smaller cabin activity and discussion facilitated by their camp counselor.⁹⁹ These structured pedagogical sessions were what made the Adoptee Camp unique beyond the prevalent culture and heritage camps. I organize this section similar to the way in which the camp unfolded thematically because the chronological order of community, identity, adoption, and race was purposeful. “Adoptee community” highlighted the

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⁸⁸ In attempt to keep the identity of the Adoptee Camp undisclosed, I use these vague age groups.
⁹⁹ I do not cover all the activities nor the variations of each activity that slightly modified to be age-appropriate. Instead, I explain and analyze the most important and illustrative activities.
commonality that we as adoptees shared, and it was an entry point to discuss identity on the second day. Similarly, “identity” was used as a primer to discuss “adoption” and “race.” All of these concepts were presented such that they referenced in some way the complexity and overlapping nature of the present, past, and future. Thus, in examining critical adoptee pedagogy and perspective, my analysis looks both at the goals and structure of camp curriculum and the experiences, responses, and desires of the campers.

**Adoptee Community and Identity**

The four-day “curriculum” was designed as a thematic progression, where the first day centered the formation of adoptee and adoption communities. Greg identified adoptees’ desire for an adoptee community as what he called an “invisible need.” He defined this invisible need as the “idea that adoptee community is something that all adoptees desire and need but that they don’t know that they want or need it until they’ve experienced it for the first time.” To help define what the Adoptee Camp meant by adoptee community, the first discussion activity involved campers listing different types of communities in their lives (e.g. neighborhood, church, sports team, camp, and school) and naming key components of a community. Thus community was generally defined as a place that provided support, safety, and belonging, where people were similar yet still diverse. And community was characterized as fluid, where members could come in and out of and belong to multiple communities. There were three main goals for the first day. The first two included deliberately name the community as the “adoptee community” and recognize the Adoptee Camp as rare space to build and have this community. Nine of the ten interviewees explicitly mention the importance of community. Greg, the Adoptee Camp manager, summarizes it in this way:
All of the participants, whether they are the campers or their counselors or leadership is a person who is adopted and that creates a really unique atmosphere and a unique community. And [it] makes everyone involved aware of a much larger community of which we are all members. So by seeing that there are other members of the adoptee community, we then can infer that this community is much larger than we had ever anticipated before.

He further explains that unlike many heritage camps, which focus on adoptees from one specific “culture,” the Adoptee Camp community includes adoptees of both genders, different age groups, and from different birth countries, which validates their differences. The fact that the Adoptee Camp was composed of all types of adoptees contributed to fostering a heterogeneous adoptee community. Beth explains how her adoptive parents recognized the value in this unique attribute, “I’ve talk about [adoption] with my parents, and they told me, ‘We will never understand your experiences as an adoptee.’ Yes, they support me, and yes they love me very much. And we’re very communicative, but at the same time, sometimes they just aren’t able to provide the same kind of support that I need as an adoptee that I can maybe only get from other adoptees.”

Paul, suggests that heritage camps and the Adoptee Camp overlap in one major way, “in the end they [both] provide a giant swarm of adoptees being together.” For Paul, this commonality made both camps “great” in that they created a community of adoptees, but his analysis misses the way in which a camp of all adoptees generates a different kind of environment and level of comfortability. Beth explains further what being around other adult adoptees meant for her:

[The Adoptee Camp] is probably one of the most comfortable places, and it’s kind of odd since as a counselor and as a staff member you’re in a new state every week, and you’re with complete strangers [other adult

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90 Beth, Interview, July 30, 2010.
adoptees] that you might have met a few weeks ago. And yet you’re able to meet these people within a couple days maybe share some of the deepest experiences you’ve had and some of the darkest moments that you’ve had in your life with you know ease, and I think that really speaks to the experience of camp.

Indeed, this was another unique aspect of the Adoptee Camp. Of the twenty culture camps examined, none was composed of a staff solely of adoptees. This dynamic produces a sui generis environment for campers, counselors, and leadership staff who are all adoptees. Greg states that this unique feeling of comfort and community is part of the “invisible need” that transracial/national adoptees possess and desire. Frank shared a story in which one of his campers went online specifically in search for a community of adoptees. For adoptees who have lived most of their lives as racial minorities and possibly without anyone who fully understood their background as transnational/racial adoptees or with whom they could talk openly about adoption, even within their own families, the Adoptee Camp fulfills the desire to be connected with other adoptees. It allows them to form friendships and a supportive community. The unique environment is safe, comfortable, and familiar because no one questions who they are, their past, or their family structure, and they do not have to explain it. At the same time, they can share their story and thoughts without being judged or questioned.

The third goal was to tie the adoptee community to the larger adoption community. The way in which adoption community was defined under critical adoptee pedagogy, however, was different from normative understandings of adoption

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91 In many ways this is similar to what Eleanna Kim, has called adoptee kinship. In her ethnography of Korean adoptees, Kim introduces the idea of “adoptee kinship” to describe how adult Korean adoptees form a type of kinship that is based on “expressions of nonnormative, unnatural, and alien origins and is based on shared histories of displacement rather than on naturalized solidarities of blood, ethnicity, or territorial belonging.” Kim, Adopted Territories, 86.
community typically used by birth culture pedagogy and adoption discourse in general. Instead of just containing adoptees, their adoptive siblings, and adoptive parents, the Adoptee Camp adoption community also included birth parents, orphanage and/or foster families, social workers, case workers, and adoptee friends and allies. These other people represent significant figures in the lives of many adoptees. Their inclusion was an attempt to complicate campers’ understanding of the adoption community to think about how it began before adoption, continues to this day, and can hold different possibilities for the future. It also indirectly disrupts the teleological narrative of adoption by acknowledging the adoption community as a transnational formation. This first day was about adoptee and adoption community formation and was used to get campers to begin to think about and discuss their life context as adoptees, especially within these larger communities. It was intended to generate comfort, openness, and trust for the following days to come, which addressed identity, adoption, and race, respectively.

The critical adoptee pedagogy for day two highlighted the theme of adoptee identity formation, which can have overlapping, conflicting, and changing pieces. The concept of identity here was structured around questions about “who we are” and “what identities do we have,” or more specifically, “who am I?” Often fueled by a little or unknown past and ambivalent belonging in the present, transnational/racial adoptees contend with these questions. The difficult of defining one’s self under these complicated circumstances makes the desire for the answers to these questions that much stronger. In the morning activity for the youngest- and middle-age groups, each camper had a sheet of paper that was numbered one through fifteen for which he/she would write a different “identity” for each number. It became a competition of who could list the most identities.
Usually campers would come up with about 20-25 different identities such as sister, brother, adoptee, Chinese, Indian, religious, athlete, dancer, and musician.\footnote{A few campers were able to list more than 50 different types of identity.} This formulation of identity was more basic than identity in the critical academic sense of race, gender, class, sexuality, dis/ability, religion, and national origin, but campers included many of these identities as well. The only significant difference between the youngest- and middle-age groups was that the latter campers were also encouraged to discuss their feelings associated with these identities. The stressed goals of this exercise were to underscore how we have multiple and complex identities that can change over time (as we grow older) and space, depending on where we are, e.g. school, home, or church. Some identities we have chosen to emphasize and other we might not because society has placed them upon us. Most importantly, we emphasized campers and counselors have unique and individual identities but also share the commonality of adoption, helping to form the adoptee community.\footnote{Two interviewees, Paul and Amy, discussed that the identity activities were particularly educational for them as well as the campers. Paul, Interview and Amy, Interview, January 27, 2011.} Thus, the goal here was let adoptees know that they did not have to embody and choose a singular identity because they already possessed multiple, intersecting ones.

In the evening, the middle and oldest campers did an activity with their smaller cabin groups. Counselors distributed paper plates to the campers who drew a picture of their face on the “bottom” or “outside” of the plate. There, they listed descriptors of how people perceived them from just physical observation. On the “inside,” they listed aspects of their identity that were not immediately visible or were unknown to others, sharing
what they had written on both sides. This activity helped demonstrate how identity was informed by individual desires and self-identification yet also influenced and imposed by society. Campers were usually eager to share what they had written, illustrating how adoptees perceived and understood their complex identities beyond the cultural. Paul comments that he learned from the activity as well: “The identity stuff, multiple identities, changing identities. Yeah, I just never thought about that before … It definitely had a good impact on me. … You know we live it every day, but up until then I had never taken the time to kind of map it out and look at it in front of me.”

For the most part, campers appeared to use these activities simply as a chance to tell others about themselves. They shared their various identities in a relatively non-politicized tenor, but in many ways, it was empowering for adoptees to know that while society has a large role in how identity is ascribed, adoptees also have agency to formulate their own subjectivities in relation to or to contest the societal version. The purpose of these activities was to initiate thought and reflection about our complex identities in a way that pre- and adolescent teens could ascertain. Rather than reproducing a complete banking method of learning whereby the campers tried to absorb pre-assigned subject positions demonstrated in “culture keeping,” these sessions engaged critical adoptee camp pedagogy in a couple of ways. For example, the sessions not only allowed campers to get

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94 For the youngest group, the second activity was to make an iceberg instead of a mask, where the tip is what society sees and the rest of the iceberg is hidden.

95 Amy also noted that she really enjoyed this aspect of the curriculum as well. Amy, Interview.

96 Banking, as Freire presents it, is the passive method of recording, memorizing, and repeating in which students are merely “depositories” or “containers’ … to be filled by the teacher.” Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 2000 [1970]: 72. With the banking method, the teacher assumes all of the knowledge and power, where knowledge is unidirectionally transferred to students. It is about authority, discipline, and compliance, where teachers are the talking subjects and the students are listening objects. Ibid. 73. Thus, Freire and others critique the banking concept because it immensely inhibits creativity, critical consciousness, and transformative knowledge production and instead reifies oppression and is necrophilous.
to know one another, but they also enabled them to generate their own ideas of what identity was; how various ones could be important; and how it made them feel in their own lives.

**Questions and Desires about Family and Belonging**

While the second day centered the question of “who am I?”, the third addressed both that question and the one that asks “who could I have been?” Broadly, day three engaged these questions by concentrating on the issues of adoption and family structure. This was an important day pedagogically because it built on the first two days (again centering desire), and it was purposefully included into the space of the Adoptee Camp, in ways that most heritage camps have not, especially the deliberate incorporation of acknowledging and discussing birth parents. Discussions on adoption and race generated greater emotion, sensitivity, difficulty, and even controversy because of varying types of exposure campers have had in terms of discussing such topics in an open way. While some campers had adoptive parents who openly talked about adoption related issues and the challenges that come with being an adopted person of color in a white family and oftentimes white town, other campers received little to no direction on what experiences, feelings, questions, and reactions were common and valid. The small cabin “adoption” activity had campers from all age group reflect on which set of parents were responsible for passing down various physical and personality traits as well as talents and mannerisms. Categories included, among other things, favorite food, eye color, sense of humor, hair color and texture, accent, skin tone, voice, fashion, laugh, athletic ability, artistic talents, and name. Campers could select one of four choices: birth parents, adoptive parents, both, or myself. This simple yet important exercise allowed adoptees to
understand how both sets of parents influenced who they were as individuals. Thus, despite efforts by adoptees and adoptive parents to imagine family as normative to combat stigmatization and nuclear as one set of parents, this activity reaffirmed the unique positive aspect of having a non-normative family structure.

The middle and oldest campers, for the large morning session, participated in two related activities that specifically addressed adoptees’ desires to know more about their past, present, and future in regards to adoption. One activity was an anonymous question and answer (Q & A) session, where campers wrote on a piece a paper any question they had about adoption. Some of the questions were procedural such as how do you adopt? Why does it take longer in some countries than others? Others asked statistical questions such as how many adoptions occur each year, and how many adoptees are there in the United States and World? And still other questions were historical such as who started adoption? The camp manager who facilitated this session was not able to address the intricacies of these questions because of time and age-appropriateness. But in asking and in the brief answers, these questions did point to the global-historical context that delineated the parameters of transnational/racial adoption. This is to say, transnational/racial adoption, adoptees, and adoptive families emerged from already existing and varying contexts of poverty, familial desires (in both the United States and Asia), imperialism, militarism, and differential national relationships. The majority of the questions adoptees asked, however, carried different emotional and cognitive weight as
portrayed in the following list (which is just a sample of literally hundreds of
questions)\textsuperscript{97}:

\begin{itemize}
  \item Does everyone talk openly about the adoption with family and friends?
  \item Is it bad that I hardly ever think about adoption, my birthparents, or stuff
        like that?
  \item Have you ever felt out of place … to choose one side or another?
  \item Do you feel an obligation to be great or the best you can be because your
        [sic] adopted?
  \item Do you ever feel like your parents love their biological kids more than
        you?
  \item Have you ever felt like something was missing in your life?
  \item Have you ever felt like your life would be better with your birth mom?
  \item Do you sometimes not like your birthparents for giving you up?
  \item Do you like to be adopted? Is it better to be adopted?
  \item What do you think it would be like, or I wonder if my life would be better
        or worse if I wasn't adopted?
  \item Was adoption the best thing for the child?
  \item Why was I picked for adoption?
  \item How many kids that are put up for adoption actually get adopted?\textsuperscript{98}
\end{itemize}

The questions that were posed by the campers for the Q & A session ranged within camps
but often remained consistent across camps, and some appeared more frequently than
other questions. My point here is not to analyze the vast array of questions asked. Indeed,
the facilitator for these discussions would answer the more common or striking questions,
but there was not enough time to answer them all. Additionally, as Gary articulates,
“[T]he kids obviously ask questions that they know there are no answers to, but … the
purpose of talking about it is to let them talk.” Hence, my aim, here, is to show how
campers’ queries about whether other campers discuss adoption issues with their family
and friends; racial and general difference, feelings of loss, absence, or anger; possibilities
about another life; and if adoption is the best solution underscore the complexity of their

\textsuperscript{97} In 2008 and 2010, I transcribed these questions.
\textsuperscript{98} One camper asked, “Is the thought of suicide common in adoptees?”
thoughts, desires, and inquiries about adoption issues that often do not get formally addressed in the birth culture camp settings. Related to this question and answer session was another activity where campers are first instructed to imagine that their birth parents were all of a sudden outside the door. Campers were asked to share what they would ask their birth parents.

Selected questions for birth parents:
Why did you relinquish me?
Was it hard?
Did you look for me afterwards?
Do you remember me?
Do I have siblings?
Do you ever think about and still love me?
Do I resemble you in any way?
If you could, would you come to America?
If you had the chance, would you take me back?

This activity seemed to resonate with most adoptees even as some were resistant at first. One older female camper, for example, shared that she did not really think of her birth mother, in large part, because she claimed that her birth mother had abandoned her and thus was not worth thinking about let alone desiring to meet. At this point, and recurrent in all of the “adoption” discussions, the camp manager gave further social context to why many birth parents are forced to relinquish or unable to parent their children such as poverty, unwed status, family pressure, or some sort of crisis, which was an allusion to militarism and war. He often addressed many of the questions directed to birth parents.

99 Paul notes that adoptees at birth culture camp have these conversations informally. Paul, Interview.
100 The youngest campers did a different activity in which they were asked to name times when they felt adopted and when they did not feel adopted. Campers listed said they felt adopted with friends, at camp, on their birthday and adoption day, when interacting with Asian culture, when people ask questions, at school, and around other Americans. Places and times that campers did not feel adopted included when with parents, alone, at work, reading, at home. Interestingly some of the areas overlapped, for example, adoptees felt both when with friends and at camp and school.
101 Although the camp manager was aware of how war and militarism has engendered the “need” for transnational adoption, this was not considered age appropriate even for older campers.
by explaining the letter exchange service provided by the adoption agency that operates the Adoptee Camp. This service allows adoptees when they are eighteen years old to write letters to their birth parents.\textsuperscript{102} In the cases in which birthparents respond, the camp manager explained that they almost always stated the difficulty of the decision. In these letters, birth parents shared their feelings of love, loss, and sometimes shame or regret, but almost always the desire that their child was doing well.\textsuperscript{103}

The second part of the activity was the same, except this time campers imagined their adoptive parents outside the room.

\textit{Selected questions for adoptive parents:}
Why did you adopt?
How/why did you choose me?
Was I second choice?
Do you want to meet my birth parents?
Would you support or be offended if I wanted to see my birthparents?
If my birth parents wanted me back, what would you say?
How long am I going to stay with you?\textsuperscript{104}

These questions directed toward adoptive parents illustrate in many ways the silence in most adoptive families around delicate adoption questions. That so many adoptees do not know the answers to reoccurring (and sometimes basic) questions underscores the difficulty that adoptive parents and adoptees have in discussing the un-sugar-coated past and process of how they became a family as well as what the future might hold. Despite their initial appearance, most questions for adoptive parents by adoptees were not

\textsuperscript{102} While the agency cannot guarantee that the birth parents will receive it, the letter does get sent to a sister agency and awaits any birth parents who might check.

\textsuperscript{103} Eleana Kim notes that many Korean birth mothers today prefer (they are now given the choice) to place their child for overseas adoption precisely because they believed this would give them the best chance to see their child because, while changing, domestic Korean adoptions attitudes about preserving bloodlines has kept the fact of adoption secret for most Korean adoptive families. Kim, \textit{Adopted Territories}, 29.

\textsuperscript{104} One camper asked, “Can you parents unadopt you like in \textit{Blades of Glory} [the 2007 comedy]?”
rebuking or negating them. Instead, the questions had more to do with the non-normative family status of adoptees. Adoptees see in the news and entertainment media or hear at school conflicting reasons of why people adopt and horror stories of adoption dissolution (i.e. the adopted child is “returned”). The questions about birth parents shows how many adoptees are unsure whether birth parents would be welcomed by adoptive parents as a part of their child’s present and future. Additionally, they collectively reveal the value of the unique space of the Adoptee Camp as an adoptee community, where campers feel comfortable to share questions that they desire to know more about but might not feel comfortable asking elsewhere.

Adoptees also asked other campers very specific questions about birth parents and birth searches:

- How many of you want to meet your birth parents?
- Is it actually possible to meet your birth parents?
- How many [adoptees] successfully find their birth parents?
- How do you begin a birth search?
- If you had the chance would you go back and live with your birth parents?

Gary explained that birth parents come up because that is what campers want to talk about in the Q & A session. Thus rather than ignore or negate the ghostly presence of birth parents, the Adoptee Camp attempts to acknowledge them. While the questions that were asked invoked a flood of emotions for which there were no easy answers, the important thing was that there was space to ask such questions in the first place. They enable adoptees to openly think about and question their “phantom lives”—who could I

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105 This is also not to say that there are not “unhappy” adoptees who wish they had not been adopted. This was in fact a question that came up a couple times, “Has anyone wished they weren’t adopted?” 106 This question was read aloud and a closed-eyes raise-of-hands showed a little more than half of adoptees wanted to meet their birth parents.
have been, or as Elizabeth Honig describes, “lives defined as possible but unlived.”

These exercises also allowed for the presence and the common existence of both birth parents and adoptive parents who have historically been configured as mutually exclusive. Birth parents were a present absence rather than an absent presence in that the discussions were an attempt to allow the existence of the birth parents to be a profane illumination—that families could be greater or more complex than just the adoptive family—rather than an ignored arrestive threat. Thus, the purpose of this session was for adoptees to be given a space to share their experiences and desires, ask questions, have their voices heard, and speak about birth and adoptive families openly. The lists in particular that were created on this day, i.e. the action of listing, pedagogically contributed to this aim by enabling adoptees to produce dialogue about their own knowledge and lack of knowledge about birth parents, the past, and future. They participated in generating a learning experience that was complex because it was filled with uncertainty, pain, and loss. Thus, adoptees’ desire and feelings revealed themselves precisely through the questions they asked and the collective list that they compiled.

For many campers of all ages, the thought of contact with their birth parents (or even providing space for birth parents to exist in one’s thoughts) was not a fully conceptualized possibility. This was true for some counselors too, as Pam notes:

[T]here is this paradigm about your real parents, ‘who are your real parents?’ And the answer you’re supposed to give as an adoptee are [sic] ‘My parents are right here. They’re raising me.’ [But] the reality is that we have two sets of parents. … and that was kind revolutionary in my mind at least, to be able to say that aloud and not like feel bad and just acknowledging it as the truth.

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The discussion and ensuing revelation that birth parents could still be alive, sometimes desired and did seek contact with their children, and often expressed strong feelings of love, sorrow, regret, and happiness for the fact that their child was adopted, engendered an array of contradictory emotions such as awareness, peacefulness, sadness, hope and love, for both themselves and their birth parents. Beth echoes this sentiment, “I think there are a lot of emotions that play around birthparents: happiness, anger, resentment, sadness. And so I think it’s key that it’s brought up in camp because it is present in their thoughts, and it a part of who they are.” In essence, this was perhaps the most emotional and productive day for campers, and even counselors, in terms of learning about themselves, their subjectivities, and notions of family. It was emotionally intense, but the happiness, sadness, laughter, anger, and confusion were empowering because the environment facilitated by a critical adoptee pedagogy let adoptees engage their desires to simply feel, question, and just be without judgment. Importantly, the acknowledgement of birth parents did not mean resolving the complexity of questions, thoughts, and desires but that they were allowed to exist. Moreover, these activities and discussions did not insinuate a privileging of birth parents over adoptive parents. Instead they attempted to demonstrate that birth parents and birth nations did not have to be situated as de facto lesser or invisible pasts and futures.

For these reasons, when I asked what were the primary goals of the Adoptee Camp, seven of the interviewees stated that it was to provide a safe environment for adoptees. As Frank explains, one of the goals of the Adoptee Camp was to “normalize in their minds that it is okay to talk about adoption,” or as Amber adds, adoptees are
“welcomed” to have and “encouraged” to share their thoughts and questions on adoption. Paul describes it as a sanctuary:

I don’t think that they can get what they get out of camp anywhere else. And a lot of campers that I’ve talked to have testified to that. Like some that are going through hard problems, they talk about how they go to therapists, and the therapists don’t understand them. Their parents don’t understand them. Some go to God and church, and the Bible doesn’t help them. And then they can go to [the Adoptee Camp] and meet another [adoptee] who completely understands them, offers more help through their hard times or getting made fun of in high school than any of those professionals could.

By the third day, counselors have had the opportunity to get to know their campers better, and the campers were even more comfortable talking and asking questions individually. The discussions about adoption were important because they generated new ways of knowing and being for adoptees. But Tami clarifies that sharing was not the only productive aspect; hearing others share stories was also important because “the curriculum … allows the campers to take something out of it even if they don’t necessarily feel like sharing.” Through listening to other adoptees’ experiences and questions and thinking about possibilities that might have eluded them before, many adoptees refigured how they perceive themselves, their birth parents, and family.

Pedagogically, incorporating discussions about adoption and birth parents was vital because they happened organically anyway. Ruby describes that one night it was almost bed time, and as she tried to quiet the campers, they all stayed up talking about adoption, “[T]hey were talking about birth family, and they were interested in searching, and then they got onto a topic of going back to the country that they were adopted from.”

Tami had a strikingly similar response, saying “[Adoptees] are welcomed and encouraged to tell their story because other people want to listen to them and that their voices are heard at camp because it’s safe for them to share at camp.” Tami, Interview.
She explained to campers how she had worked with heritage tours and offered them information about different programs available for adoptees to see their birth country. For her, these “profound” and “intense” moments in between discussions about the usual topics of dating and fashion were what she enjoyed the most. Paul explains that one of the birth culture camps in the Southeast where he had worked at incorporated some curriculum pieces from the Adoptee Camp that were led by current Adoptee Camp counselors. Paul states that the campers had not discussed these issues previously during their many years at camp, “[Y]ou could tell that [older campers] had never had that component to camp [adoption discussions], and a lot of the veteran campers said, ‘We’ve never had any sort of discussions like that. We talk about being adopted to each other in the cabin, but we’ve never had a group discussion like that.’ So [the heritage camp] couldn’t offer that, and they only focused on the culture stuff.” While the incorporation of the Adoptee Camp activities and discussion were fruitful for the campers, Paul’s quote identifies the how birth culture camps have largely missed an important part of adoptee identity and desire that arises organically in these settings. For another heritage camp that Paul worked with he says that campers “gravitated” toward discussion of adoption issues during their free time. As Amy notes, the point was to provide a safe space for adoptees to talk about difficult issues:

[T]he point of it is to, again, just provide a space for the adoptees to talk about issues that they might not feel comfortable talking about with their adoptive parents or anyone else, especially about this issue because the kids feel like they can’t talk about their birth parents with their adoptive parents because they’ll feel like they might hurt their feelings, or they’re just not comfortable talking about it. So I think it’s a really good thing to talk about it at camp.  

109 Amy, Interview.
Campers were always given the option to share and the permission to feel what they felt. The goal was to provide an environment where if they knew it was okay to talk about possibly taboo subjects and common to have different feelings about their experiences, questions, and thoughts on adoption, then they would feel more comfortable discussing these issues at home as well.

**Race and Empowerment**

The desire to belong, both in terms of family structure and race, also emerged through these camp activities. From the Q & A session, adoptees asked many questions related to this particular desire:

- How do I deal with adoption questions?
- Why do people want to [know] if I'm adopted or not?
- Why do people make fun of us?
- Why do some people see adoptees differently than people who aren't (sometimes in a bad way)?
- Why do they apologize to us?
- Why do people feel bad for me because I am adopted?
- Why are people so seriously dumb about the way we are?
- Has anyone ever felt ashamed or embarrassed about being adopted or wished they weren't adopted?

The questions posed by campers revealed an understanding by them that their families were perceived as less than “normative” families, which evoked feelings of confusion, anger, and shame. Day four tackled the issue of race and belonging in simple but important ways with the goal of empowerment. For the middle and oldest campers, we discussed stereotypes. On large sheets of paper, we had different “racial groups” and then asked campers to shout out common stereotypes. This exercise was always interesting because while all the lists were lengthy, inevitably the list for Asian stereotypes would be the longest because most of the campers were adopted from Asian countries and had
directly experienced those stereotypes. After compiling lists, we brainstormed where and how we learn these racial representations and discussed how all stereotypes (both “bad” and “good” ones) are problematic because they generalize groups.

The large morning session also included basic, age-appropriate discussions about how race affected campers’ lives. Many of the discussion questions came from the previous day’s Q & A session, which included, have you ever felt different with your adopted family? Do you ever wish you were white? How do you deal with racism? For the younger campers, we also asked them: Do you think other kids notice your race? And do you feel different from your parents? Additionally, for the oldest campers, we asked: What is it like being nonwhite? Do your friends ever bring up your race? Day four was difficult in terms of participation because many campers were hesitant to share their experiences and thoughts, perhaps because some of them had been raised in a color-blind context. Eventually, one camper would share an experience of racism at school or in public, and then others felt more comfortable to follow suit. Some even discussed how they felt different from their family because either they were treated differently in seemingly minor (like punishment) or in/direct ways (such as racism by the immediate or extended family that would not target the adoptee but people of the same ethnic or racial background). Other campers expressed temporary or occasional desires to be the same race as their parents (white) because it would just “make things easier.”

While issues of structural racism were told or “banked” in a rudimentary way to campers, both days three and four were largely built around the idea that the campers generated the issues and talked about their own experiences. In this way, the campers were again making lists; engaging each other more dialogically rather than passively; and
producing generative themes that were based on their own realities.\textsuperscript{110} This did not mean that the discussion was always “critical” in the form of “critique” but it did mean that the campers were openly discussing serious issues that color-blindness, liberal multiculturalism, culture and heritage camps often neglected. Specifically, the role that race plays in the lives of transnational/racial adoptees became quite clear when adoptees shared their experiences as a group. Here, racism lost its individualistic quality, and instead, the intensity and realness of constructed difference emerged. These structured sessions activated smaller informal discussions, similar to the organic talks about adoption. Pam also noted how her campers often shared their similar “traumatizing experiences” of individual racism in the evening downtime. Again, through listening and thinking about stereotypes and other campers’ experiences, adoptees were able to generate new ways of knowing how histories of racism were linked with themselves and others.

Campers also unknowingly employed other critical pedagogical tools similar to those outlined by Augusto Boal in \textit{Theatre of the Oppressed} during the day-four evening session on “race.” In their cabin groups, they were encouraged to role play responses to individual acts of racism that they had faced in real life using F.I.T., which stood for \textit{funny, it’s private, or teach}, meaning they could make fun of the situation or respond with sarcasm, ignore the person(s), or use it as a teaching moment. Campers volunteered to act out these past yet common scenarios, and the other ones would collectively generate and give input on how that situation might be handled. In this sense, campers used what Boal calls “forum theater.” The discriminated became the protagonists, or as Boal says, the

\textsuperscript{110} Freire, \textit{Pedagogy of the Oppressed}, 106.
spectator becomes the spect-actor. This exercise was a rehearsal so campers, allowing them to reflect and articulate, through voice and movement, possible future solutions for the problems that were posed. Beth notes how the Adoptee Camp helped prepare them for these moments:

[A]nother purpose of this camp is to provide these kids with tools to deal with things that come up in their lives such as stereotypes, racism, and prejudice, and it also gives them knowledge that they have … support and that they aren’t alone and that they are a part of this community. And I also think that it gives … them an outlet you know a place where they can discuss and reflect and share experiences that they might not be able to share elsewhere.

The Adoptee Camp allowed adoptees to learn and discuss their adoptive and racial identities along with issues relating to adoption. While, I would not simply characterize the camp as an overt progression from unaware to collectively conscious, I do contend that campers used their own experiences and reflective knowledge to articulate their experiences, questions, concerns and ideas about the four themes of community, identity, adoption, and race.

The pedagogical value of the Adoptee Camp was that it appreciated and privileged adoptee perspective. Additionally, it provided a safe space for adoptees to openly discuss what it meant for campers to be part of an adoptee community, how adoptees negotiated a transnational/racial adoptee identity, what their feelings, desires, and thoughts were about adoption and birth parents, and how they did or could navigate racial difference. It was also about making connections. All the interviewees expressed that campers and counselors alike enjoyed “meeting new [adoptees] and seeing old

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friends”112 and “craving this social aspect of being with other adoptees.”113 Frank explains that he did not realize such a community existed, but once he had experienced it, he wanted to keep coming back. In terms of birth parents, the Adoptee Camp tried to acknowledge their presence in multiple activities rather than recognize superficially, ignore, or dismiss them. Tami elucidates why most heritage camp models were limiting in this regard, “I think other culture camps just doesn’t [sic] go as in depth with things relating to adoption. … Whereas at [the Adoptee Camp], it’s about identity, community, adoption, race, and all those things can involve birthparents, whereas culture aspects of a curriculum you know may or may not involve discussion of birth parents at all.”

Ironically, Tami’s quote underscores the way in which birth culture pedagogy ignores birth parents even as they are the absent presence aspect of “heritage.”

In addition to opening the definition of family to include birth parents, the Adoptee Camp also promoted adoptee empowerment. As Greg explains,

[Empowerment is] the entire model of the curriculum, and really what we focus on is giving adoptees this sense of power, you know, that they can respond to people when they make these racist remarks, that they feel empowered you know in their families in the sense that their parents may not be able to talk to them about adoption. ... And to be able to understand those feelings that they have, to just be able to identify these feelings of loneliness and isolation that they have in their community or even in their family as a person of color or an adoptee. That being able to identify something like that that’s powerful.

It produced a greater sense of awareness and confidence for many adoptees. This empowerment helped form a community based not on essentialized birth culture but on

112 Gary, Interview.
113 Amber, Interview.
lived transnational/racial experience. In addition, the personal and pedagogical work
done by the Adoptee Camp has a remarkable cumulative effect, as Greg said:

I can definitely say that, for example at the East Coast Adoptee Camp, the
interaction we have with [the older teenagers], who have been, you know
they’ve been coming to camp for years now since they were [young] and
they’ve been through our curriculum and they’ve experience this, … their
ability to discuss adoption and adoption related issues is so much more
sophisticated than kids who have never been to camp. So you know this
continued education, year after year, really gives adoptees an opportunity
to become more sophisticate in their thinking and in their speech about
adoption.

While “birth culture” is never actually a static essence, the ways in which it has been
deployed has extreme limits. Aesthetic substitute birth culture, unlike actual culture,
tends to remain fixed, which is why birth culture is appealing to some adoptees but only
to a certain extent. The growth and empowerment potential for the Adoptee Camp has a
somewhat higher ceiling because as adoptees get older, their identity and relationship
with the adoptee community may change, their interest in their pasts might increase or go
into a different direction, and their experiences with race may change as well.

Adoptive Parents Engaging the Unknown

The Adoptee Camp was also vital for adoptive parents. It was significantly
different from most heritage camps because the camp was for adoptees and not adoptive
parents (and families). Adoptive parents, however, were welcomed to participate in the
parent program on the last day, which included a one-hour overview of the camp
curriculum and a one-hour adult adoptee panel with some of the counselors and/or
leadership staff. Many parents simply dropped off their kids at the beginning of camp and
picked them up when it was finished. As Beth suggests, some of the parents were not
interested in what happens at the Adoptee Camp, “I also think there are parents who send
their kids to this camp in hopes that this will provide what they need and that they won’t have to address certain issues with their child.” Gary notes, however, that many adoptive parents did show great interest in what the Adoptee Camp had to offer, “[T]hen there are parents that really love camp because they see how their kids react to it. … [And] there is [sic] those parents that are really eager to learn more about what we do at camp because they see how positive it is.” These parents have come to realize how important the Adoptee Camp has been for their child. Beth adds, “I think within [the Adoptee Camp] we acknowledge that there are issues within transracial adoptive families and that these issues will arise but we also provide tools to handle it, and say that it’s okay that they arise. It’s okay that they happen. Here are some ways to handle it [and] address it. I think we acknowledge our differences.” In the adult adoptee panel, adoptive parents took that opportunity to ask the camp counselors questions or concerns about how they handled situations and what advice they might give to the parents. Important to this scenario was the dialogical format, and that the adoptive parents often attended with a willingness to learn and expand their own way of knowing and being—to engage the uncertainty that comes with transracial/national adoption.

While there seemed to be a degree of finality to the dialogic and pedagogical process offered by the Adoptee Camp because it comes to an abrupt end, the parents who attended the parent program were encouraged to continue these discussions with their children about adoption issues, including birth family and race beyond superficial contexts. Although not all parents participated in this aspect of the camp, most of those who did attend were receptive to these suggestions. One of the last activities of the Adoptee Camp was having all adoptive parents partake in group discussions with their
children and their respective counselor in which they talked about the things that campers learned and discussed and how these feelings and lessons can be infused and discussed in everyday life. This helped adoptive parents feel more engaged with their children after the camp and attempted to make initiation of further discussion easier such that camp was not the only safe space to generate important openness and dialogue. While it was not assured, these activities for the parents opened up a space to re-think, along with their children, the notions of community, identity, adoption, race, and family in a way that acknowledged that the life and family are complex, full of varying and contradictory desires.

**Conclusion**

In some ways the adoptee community created by the Adoptee Camp was romanticized. Pam, one of the most “politically aware” staff members who has been a counselor and on the leadership team, articulates that the notion of community can be empty at times, “[Camp is] so cool because it really is a thing. … Sometimes community is a word that people say a lot. They drop it a lot as if it means something, but it doesn’t mean anything unless there actually are those bonds and that network.” Pam recognized the limits of superficial community, placing the community that emerged from the Adoptee Camp as true community. Here, I think we have to observe Miranda Joseph’s cautions against the romanticization of community, where she states, “[T]he kind of critical theoretical work offered here is a resource for imagining, articulating, and constituting disruptive or displacing social formations, active collectivities, that do not depend or insist on the closures and oppressions of community or pretend that differences
in itself is resistance.” While Joseph’s critique centers on how progressive communities are too often implicated in exploits of capitalism, her argument offers a useful warning that could be applied to the adoptee and adoption communities. The limit of the pedagogical approach at the Adoptee Camp largely comes from the lack of overt “undoing” or deconstructing of race as a social construct, adoption and family as violent institutions, or community as possibly a problematic future. The alternative formulations of community, identity, family, and race that were desired, articulated, and practiced by adoptees at the Adoptee Camp was never flawlessly oppositional. The point of departure for the Adoptee Camp was not a severe critique of the government and the differential power dynamics of adoption as an institution or a critical examination of the construction of the nuclear heteronormative family. My dissertation conclusion tries to address some of the ways in which we might rethink our approaches and points of departure that could possibly embrace a nonnormative family structure and a community that supports adoptees and adoptive families but also aligns with disenfranchised single mothers, families, and communities.

At the same time, my goal for this chapter and dissertation has been to complicate our critique of adoption and family to understand that the adoption exists as not only a personal act but as a transnational legal and symbolic institution tied to agencies and nation-states that indeed overlap and should neither be separated nor conflated. Although camp was not a hugely revolutionary space, for most, it was indeed transformative and a critical pedagogical exercise that was based on love from the counselors, campers, and adoptive parents, and not just on the level of greater individual consciousness but also in

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addressing the presence, legibility, and importance of birth family. The Adoptee Camp was about self-discovery and empowerment through learning about basic yet crucial notions of race, identity, family, and community, and also influencing how we think about nation, the past, and the future. Part of the reason that the camp deployed a subtle method to address issues relating to the concepts was because campers were youth. For some it was likely one of the first times they have had the opportunity to think about and discuss these issues in an extremely open space. In addition, the delicacy of the real-lived situations of adoption requires adoptees to constantly navigate among their adoptive families, society, and their cultural, ethnic, and racial backgrounds. Pam articulates this tension and complexity: “I don’t know, I guess [the Adoptee Camp] kind of humanized, for me, like the experiences of others because it’s easy to kind of be like ‘Oh, I’m critical of adoption, but my parents are great, and I love them.’ I mean, which is true. … I was very willing to be condemning [of the adoption system] but it is certainly more complicated than that.” Here I do not think Pam was suggesting there is nothing to critique, but that we are in fact talking about actual families in conjunction with the institution of adoption. For me, the last day of camp was always very emotional because I got to witness how the campers had made such strong bonds, how they felt empowered because they had the chance to share with and listen to other adoptees, and what type of community the Adoptee Camp had helped foster. I also saw the love that adoptive parents have for their children. This love transcends heritage camps and the Adoptee Camp. And yet, the violence of love in transnational/racial adoption is still there. How we engage with this fact is vital.
A critical analysis of both heritage camps and the Adoptee Camp enables us to better understand what they do beyond offering pleasure and positive social networks. It demonstrates desires for and the pedagogical work of birth culture to fill a missing piece of identity; situates adoptive parents as capable of providing and keeping culture in place of birth parents; makes the non-normative family normative; and reaffirms the United States as a successful future while ignoring and concealing the structural-historical, representational, and traumatic of violence of adoption. Such an analysis also shows there is another model that we can use as an alternative point of departure. Critical adoptee pedagogy within Adoptee Camps can be used to develop alternative ways of knowing and being for adoptees, counselors, and adoptive parents. It can begin to help us rethink our notions of community, identity, adoption, and family, as well as nation, the past, and future. Here we can infuse desire, the social, political, pedagogical, and pleasurable to engage the violence. This, I believe, can help transform adoption practices from a largely private and personal form into a practice that embraces the political and non-normative aspects as well.
EPILOGUE

In this dissertation, I have investigated the ways in which the U.S.-Asia transnational/racial adoptive family has emerged and circulated as a form of knowledge in adoption discourse and considered the material and symbolic consequences of its formation. Transnational/racial adoption as a loving act and possibility appears to be in most cases an uncomplicated given and the presupposed solution to the problem of children in need. Likewise, statements and practices that affirm such adoptions are situated as unambiguously loving and always in the best interest of the child. This of course leaves adoption in an imagined vacuum with little context outside of poverty, homelessness, and the need of a loving family. Hence, the investigation of the violence attached to transnational/racial adoption, as a relational condition and effect of love, is a convoluted project. With the “violence of love” framework, however, I attend to the complexity and specificity of transnational/racial adoption in a new way. This framework, along with a global-historical context, has allowed me to take seriously adoption as an institution and individual act/possibility as well as a contested discursive formation and practice imbued with love, contradictory desires, racial meaning, and permeating violence.

In the first three chapters, I explore different ways in which adoption professionals, social scientists, legal scholars, lawmakers, adoptive parents, and even adoptees attempted to define the adoptive family as “normal,” “better,” and “real.” These strategies were instituted as a way to combat the stigmatization of adoption and adoptive status and justify the act of transnational/racial adoption. Chapter four illustrates how adoptive parents have tried to change previous practices by embracing their child’s
cultural identity through birth culture pedagogy in heritage camps. Collectively, the various acts and statements lovingly affirmed transnational/racial adoption; however, such adoptions oftentimes emerged from and enacted structural-historical, traumatic, and symbolic violence. In different but overlapping ways, they also reproduced normative familial, racial, and national boundaries and hierarchies. While this enabled white adoptive families who adopted transnational/racially to become normal and socially legible, this privileging reinscribed racial difference and relegated Asian birth mothers, families, and nations as that which can be ignored or disavowed.

Thus, rethinking heteronormative family structures involves engaging in strategies that keep poor families (of color), both in the United States and abroad, together. It means asking these difficult questions: What would it mean for us to meditate on our own implication in not just the disruption of a singular birth family but entire classes and communities of people? Transnational/racial adoption is also dependent on “free” flow of capital not just in the exorbitant adoption fees that inhibit domestic in-country adoptions outside of the United States but also in the larger adoption industry that benefits from the demand for pre- and post-adoption goods and services. How might we begin to think about possible coalitions of adoptive parents and adoptees who work alongside single mothers as well as impoverished, stigmatized, and criminalized communities—possibly even adoption agencies and social workers—in effort to keep families together and strategize ways to not supplement capitalistic profits from adoption? The goal for my dissertation is not to attack adoption and adoptive parents as callous and selfish agents within an irredeemable adoption industry. Rather, my hope is that we can continue to remember how adoption as a liberal and loving act, possibility,
and institution is imbricated in the political, which is to say that it emerges from a global-historical and structurally violent context that is also circumscribed by adoption discourse.

Despite the recent numerical downturn because of corruption and greater regulations, the future of transnational/racial adoption remains “hopeful” because it has stayed on a teleological and post-racial and -national path. Transnational adoption advocates continue to seek new countries and promote further streamlining in order to facilitate more adoptions. Thus there are multiple implications from my dissertation. First, my project pushes us toward a heavy reimagining of the value of single and unwed mothers, restructuring social services that might support them, and dismantling of global capitalism that would continue to exploit them. It means, as chapter two suggested, avoiding the reproduction of birth and adoptive families and nations as opposite futures for the “orphan,” and in fact producing new representations so that both families can be considered possible futures. Korean unwed mothers have taken on this project by appropriating the Miss Mama Mia figure of the independent woman with a child. The organization, which is now Korean Unwed Mothers’ Family Association, has worked to bring unwed mothers together and provide them with services and a support network.¹

Furthermore, adoptee perspective is an important stake in this dissertation, which has at different moments highlighted how professional, social scientific, government, legal, and parental voices have been designated sites of knowledge production. Adoptees

on the other hand historically have been infantilized by being framed as happy or angry.\(^2\) Through my own work and through the interviews in chapter four, I attempt to disrupt the marginalization of adoptee voice and perspective. Transnational/racial adoptions have been a productive site of inquiry for critical scholars, where transnational/racial adoptees can be symbols or examples of larger process (e.g. new immigrant figure, mediation of Cold War relations, displacement, etc.), but they are more than representational figures. Adoptees are also stakeholders, and adoption is unique from other experiences and requires particular (not just generic or universal) analysis. Transnational/racial adoptees are doing all sorts of transformative work. Adult adoptees are forming local and transnational social and political networks and doing advocacy work here in the United States and overseas. A new project being developed by transnational/racial adoptee Kevin Vollmers intends to turn his hugely popular Land of Gazillion Adoptees blog into a monthly print magazine and web site that brings adoptees who are community artists, activists, professionals, and researchers together in a space to share different types of important work. Vollmers’ work and others like it are valuable because it demonstrates the heterogeneity of adoptee voice, showing that adoptees can be “happy” and love their adoptive family yet still have an imperative critique of adoption. In doing this project as a transnational/racial adoptee, I assert myself as a stakeholder. I firmly believe we must continue to examine and critique who the stakeholders are in the adoption industry and ask whose voices are privileged as “experts” when it comes to the lives and experiences of those most centrally affected.

To be sure, the heteronormative transnational/racial adoptive family has become hegemonic, but if power, as Foucault contends, is not over-determining because it exists as relations of power, then how might adoptive parents and adoptees articulate and practice non-heteronormative family-making? As adoption scholars have noted, adoptees in the United States have focused on gaining access to their birth records and domestic adoptions have become increasingly more “open.” Openness can refer to varying degrees of after placement communication and contact between adoptive families and birth families such as “the exchange of cards, letters, pictures, gifts, e-mails, phone calls, or face-to-face visits.” The majority of openness, however, occurs via “low intensity contact” or non-face-to-face visits. Although both of these strategies have yielded material and symbolic results, giving adoptees access to their pasts and connections to their birth families, they oftentimes leave unchallenged the structure and representation of adoption. Furthermore, they have less relevance for the transnational/racial context in which open adoptions, unlike U.S. domestic cases, are extremely difficult because of physical distance, language, and class barriers.

One possible move for adoptive parents is to engage with the politics of acknowledgement, which I allude to in chapter three. Patchen Markell offers this strategy rather than the politics of recognition because the latter—while seemingly attractive and equality-based—produces a hierarchal binary of “offering” recognition to the “other” that...

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3 Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 82, 94.
6 Ibid., 85. In the study, there were 177 open arrangements between adoptive families and birth families, and 52 (or 29 percent) were face-to-face. Of the 52, only 28 had face-to-face contact more than once per year. Ibid., 89.
often results in misrecognition of “one’s own fundamental situation.” The politics of acknowledgement also has implications for the other, but unlike recognition, acknowledgement is ultimately about the finitude (limit) of the self:

So acknowledgement is in the first instance self-directed; its object is not one’s own identity but one’s own basic ontological condition or circumstances, particularly one’s own finitude; this finitude is to be understood as a matter of one’s practical limits in the face of unpredictable and contingent future, not as a matter of the impossibility or injustice of knowing others; and, finally, acknowledgment involves coming to terms with, rather than vainly attempting to overcome, the risk of conflict, hostility, misunderstanding, opacity, and alienation that characterizes life among others.

In a normative scenario, adoptive parents might make claims to multicultural and post-racial transparency for which they and their child exist as universal subjects unaffected by racial difference and inequality. Love and self-determination enable them to navigate their experiences unhindered by the various complexities of transnational/racial adoption. A politics of acknowledgement, however, would produce an alternative scenario in which adoptive parents might understand their own finitude, which could allow for new knowledge and new formulations of family to inform how they think about and practice adoption. For example, some adoptive parents have unbounded the definition of “real parent” to include birth parents, who are then situated as a necessary component in the lives of adoptive families and in particular that of the adoptee who is no longer a “free-standing” orphan but a subject connected to another person and family.

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8 Markell, *Bound by Recognition*, 2-5.
9 Ibid., 38.
10 See Barthollet, “Commentary”; Kennedy, *Interracial Intimacies*; and Fricke, “Interracial Adoption.”
Others have acknowledged that they cannot “solve” all the problems of adoption and “make it better.”\textsuperscript{12} In these cases, they, as Jenny Edkins has suggested, “encircle” and engage rather than efface or ignore the violence of adoption.\textsuperscript{13} Micky Duxbury notes that adoptive families who are involved in “high intensity” open adoptions understand this aspect: “Many people are navigating the waters of openness not because they think it will make the pain of adoption disappear, but because they believe it will enhance the child’s sense of self. They have come to believe that it is part of the children’s birth right to know more about those who created them: their history, their decision-making about adoption, their concern for their child, and their dreams for the future.”\textsuperscript{14} Fully open adoptions involve taking risks as well as sharing an uncertain and previously unimagined future that has the potential to engender expanded family connections.

Transnational/racial adoptions, however, present difficult challenges for openness and are too often chosen precisely as a mechanism to avoid such a relationship with the birth family in the first place.\textsuperscript{15} As chapter four reveals, many adoptive parents of children from overseas have turned to birth culture as a way to engage the violence of losing one’s culture. While some adoptive parents acknowledge their own limits to pass on birth culture and thus use heritage camps as a tool to provide something they cannot offer, such camps can also facilitate a type of Orientalist knowledge production and acquisition. This effect of birth culture pedagogy not only reinscribes essentialist notions of culture but it oftentimes ignores birth parents. Thus, there is only a partial engagement

\textsuperscript{12} Myers, “Love and Violence in Transracial/national Adoption,” 155.
\textsuperscript{13} Edkins, Trauma and the Memory of Politics.
\textsuperscript{14} Duxbury, Making Room in Our Hearts, 8.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 144.
with the violence and complexity of adoption, which wittingly or not reconsolidates normative family structures.

It is here that adoptive parents and adoptees could also look to José Esteban Muñoz’s concept of “disidentification” as a way to (dis)engage adoption ideology that brackets the heteronormative adoptive family. Muñoz defines disidentification as that which is between the “identification” practiced by the “Good Subject” and “counteridentification” that is taken on by the “Bad Subject”:

Disidentification is the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology. Instead of buckling under the pressures of dominant ideology (identification, assimilation) or attempting to break free of its inescapable sphere (counteridentification, utopianism), this “working on and against” is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance.16

Following Muñoz’s call might allow adoptive parents and adoptees to develop alternative “disidentificatory desires”17 to embrace open adoptions that have complex and fragmented family structures with multiple parental figures. As I explained in the introduction, which aligns with Muñoz’s complicated idea here, it is generative to keep the descriptors birth and adoptive. On the one hand, the term adoptive family, in particular, still works from the basis that “family” is something desired. In its normative context, adoptive ties even attempt to trump biological ones as is the case with readers of Hollee McGinnis’ blog, where “love is thicker than blood.” On the other hand, embracing these descriptors we could—similar to black, brown, and queer communities before—re-

17 Ibid., 34.
imbue them with new meaning that intensifies alternative familial relationships rather than re-stigmatize them through our own rejection of the terms. A close reinterpretation of McGinnis’ statement from the epigraph in chapter three further demonstrates this process of disidentification. Although many respondents (mis)read McGinnis’ statement as “love is thicker than blood,” we could possibly re-read it as “love can be equally thick, powerful, and important as blood.” This re-reading would disidentify with the hegemonic family form and instead considers the importance of both unique aspects of non-normative adoptive families. In this way, adoptive and birth families do not have to be mutually exclusive and oppositional entities. Hence, one of the main implications for this study might be to think about alternative ways to conceive “family” that acknowledges adoption’s complexity and does not (re)produce symbolic violence as a means to gain legibility. Reshifting the framework of the adoption debate from apolitical individual choice to a global-historical context that recognizes the personal decisions but also the very political nature of adoption might be another step in engaging the violence that adoption produces for adoptees and other people affected by adoption.

Lastly, I contend that the violence of love in transnational/racial adoptive family is not just limited to the setting of adoption. Indeed, my dissertation contributes to the ways that critical ethnic and gender studies have examined violence within the institution of family and the domestic sphere. Intimate racial violence has long existed within

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18 As Duxbury suggests, the commitment to provide a permanent, secure, and loving home for a child does not necessitate a disconnection from the birth parent or family. Duxbury 2007: xii.
“loving,” intimate spaces of the empire and at “home.” Settler colonialism, imperialism, slavery, and im/migrant labor have been the conditions of possibility as well as the sites for which racialized forms of intimacy have been imagined and legally enforced. For example, the state has policed gender, sexuality, and families at the border and in the home, deciding which subjects and family structures can be loved by and included in the nation and which ones must be excluded, surveyed, or expunged. Most recently, transnational adoptive families have been a favored form of family—whereby adoptees receive automatic citizenship—which points to the violence enacted on families who exist “outside” of adoption. In short, the violence of love materializes in all types of family and “domestic” formation. What makes transnational/racial adoptive family-making unique from other types of family and domestic contexts, however, is that violence is not only reproduced but the adoptive family in fact finds its possibilities in violence. Hence, this dissertation points to new ways we can consider the complex relationships among domestic workers, marriage, and adoption and the contradictory means for which family and the “home” are constituted.
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