

Introduction

Abigail Johnson sits in the conference room of Clerestory Adoptions, a private adoption agency offering a multitude of international and domestic adoption programs.¹ The room looks like any generic conference room, with a large oval table and several matching chairs around it. The office is by no means luxurious, but the room is tidy and professional. This could be any corporate office, but instead of forecasts of annual sales and profit margins, the charts on the wall detail a roster of adoption programs offered by Clerestory Adoptions and the number of parents currently enrolled. As this book shows, the numbers do not look good.

I am at the agency to interview Abigail, a relatively young social worker who got her start working in adoption right out of college. She is an earnest person, and her brown eyes are thoughtful when she pauses to answer my questions. As someone whose job it is to run information sessions describing the range of adoption programs her agency offers, Abigail is used to fielding inquiries from anxious prospective clients. But the questions I want to broach differ from those of would-be adoptive parents.

Whereas most people seeking out Clerestory Adoptions are looking for a way to expand their families, and therefore want to know pertinent information like how long the adoption will take and how much it will cost, I am here to interview her about her thoughts and insights about whether and how private adoption operates as a marketplace and her role in it. Although the formal adoption of any child by American parents usually involves the irrevocable transfer of parental rights and responsibilities, private adoptions

via domestic and international placements distinctly differ from public foster care adoptions in that they operate on a fee-for-service model. This fiscal reality puts these adoption workers in the awkward position of having to generate sufficient revenue to cover their operating costs while still focusing on serving children and families.

Because adoption operates in a bureaucratized system overseen by a matrix of laws regulating the exchange, to locate and legally transfer a child from one family to another, prospective adoptive parents must rely on third-party facilitators. These adoption attorneys, counselors, and social workers are charged with administering the adoption process. In this sense, private adoption workers operate under a model of client services in which the revenue that they take in from paying customers forms the foundation of their organization's long-term solvency. Thus, adoption professionals take on the role as the *de facto* adoption sellers, who must promote their services to discerning customers. However, these social workers also have to live up to their roles as child welfare professionals, charged with advocating for the best interests of children. This dual mandate can pose a potential conflict of interest, since workers must simultaneously serve both adoptive parents and children, suggesting that workers sometimes have to compromise one priority to meet the other.

Although most adoption social workers espouse the view that the child should be the central client, this book shows that when adoption is pitched, the needs of the paying customer (i.e., the prospective adoptive parent) get elevated. If the parents are the clients, this means that the child, at least temporarily, becomes the object of exchange. Recall the old adage that adopted children are "chosen children."² Under this purview, the child gets positioned as something to be selected, or in other words, he or she embodies a dual role as subject and object.³ As subjects, they are the recipients of vital social services geared toward placing them in permanent families. But these children also take on an objectified role because to be chosen, it inevitably means that another child gets passed over. This selection process is counter to the idea that children are supposed to be universally priceless, but as I detail, some children embody a greater market value than others.⁴ Thus, the process of choosing and being chosen is one of consumption. Prospective parents can choose their children, but some parents have more limited choices in terms of what is available to them.

Knowing full well that some prospective parents face curtailed market options and that some children are in greater demand than others, adoption workers face the task of making families while also keeping the interests of the agency at the forefront. Describing this quandary, Abigail details how these logistical considerations shape which children get served and why. She says, "I think that some programs are easier than others. Not only because there is a need, but it is not the scariest place to go work. We just started up

our Chad program.⁵ You have to look at which places you are able to work in. There are tons of kids in need of homes in places where social workers don't want to go work in or where it is going to be too expensive because you have to pay off too many people." In other words, helping needy children becomes somewhat of a numbers game, and if a region is too "scary" or involves paying off "too many people," the program is abandoned in favor of an easier place to set up shop.

International adoption is not the only segment of the adoption marketplace touched by these issues. In private domestic adoption—that is, the adoption of an American child who has never been in the foster care system—the influence of the market is palpable. Like international providers, domestic adoption agencies have to recruit sufficient numbers of customers whose fees keep the agency afloat. But there is a key difference, because in private domestic adoption, they must also enroll sufficient numbers of pregnant women wanting to make adoption plans. Keeping up a "supply" can be difficult, considering that there are more people hoping to adopt babies than there are expectant women wanting to relinquish them. So adoption agencies often struggle to refill the pipeline. Given this market imbalance, many providers have to devote a considerable proportion of their revenue to advertising and outreach. For example, the annual report from one adoption agency discloses that it spent almost 20 percent of its \$3.78 million budget on advertising. This figure brings into stark relief the paradox of private adoption: it is a profession devoted to child welfare but sustained by advertising for children and customers.

As Abigail attests, her agency has to balance competing priorities, and they are often pulled between fiscal and family considerations. First and foremost, their mission is to serve kids in need of a home. However, other factors about a country must be considered, such as the perceived safety of the country and the economic sustainability of running an adoption program there. They do not need to make a profit from a program, but they have to make enough money to pay the bills. Abigail reveals how the bottom line affects the decision-making process, stating, "We are opening and closing programs to see which ones we can afford. It is an industry at the end of the day, I suppose." Once the words were out of her mouth, Abigail stops abruptly, realizing that she may have crossed a line. Next she ruefully utters, "I am totally going to get fired for this conversation."

Her blunt assessment that adoption "is an industry" further underscores the paradox of private adoption. It is a practice devoted to child welfare, but to serve children, adoption workers have to take into account market factors such as supply and demand to determine which programs stay open. I begin with Abigail's quote because it illustrates that despite the reluctance to talk about money and markets in adoption, they matter—a lot. She worries that by calling adoption an industry she has somehow crossed a line, illustrating

the hesitancy some workers feel when talking about child welfare in such crass terms.

During the course of my research, I learned that many dedicated adoption workers, like Abigail, were drawn to adoption because they possessed a deep commitment to child welfare. They were less interested in the financial considerations involved in sustaining a small business. This quixotic approach to private adoption was all right when business was booming, because these workers did not have to worry about paying the rent or making payroll. Perhaps secure in their solvency, it was easier to focus solely on the child welfare aspects of their profession. However, over the course of the last decade, there has been a shift in the adoption industry as workers have been faced with new regulations and a decreasing supply of young and healthy children. These babies and toddlers were once the mainstay of private adoption, but the number of children available—especially overseas—trickled to a halt. Hence the market changed, and the business aspects of adoption began to take precedence as providers struggled to adjust to these new conditions. One social worker I spoke with summarizes this new era, stating, “This is a business, and we have to make business decisions.”

The goal of this book is to provide a closer analysis of these business decisions by analyzing the uncomfortable spaces where love and markets intermingle. In doing so, I argue that private adoption offers a window into the social construction of racial boundaries and the meaning of family. In the broadest terms, I aim to answer two questions: What does privatized adoption teach us about kinship, and what does it teach us about race? To answer these questions, I focus on adoption providers and the markets in which they operate. I illustrate how these workers are sellers of kinship, tasked with pitching the idea of transracial adoption to their mostly White clientele.

Once establishing the utility of the market framework, I push forth two arguments. The first is that most prospective parents come to private adoption hoping to replicate as many aspects of biological reproduction as possible. Put another way, applicants who are willing to pay the higher costs associated with private adoption are often hoping to locate the youngest and healthiest child possible. Indeed this was the rationale that helped catapult intercountry adoption to its heightened popularity. Even though there are still plenty of parents who are willing to endure the long waits and high fees associated with private adoption, the supply of young and healthy children is diminishing. Thus, prospective adoptive parents have fewer options. Cognizant of these constraints, adoption providers have had to adjust their sales pitch when promoting their services. With fewer desirable children to go around, many social workers advise their clients to take on a consumer mentality and rank their priorities. By detailing how adoption providers frame these decisions, I show that adoption providers promote and sell transracial adoption as a means to maximize other market variables. Whereas transra-

cial adoption often gets idealistically depicted as a family form where “love sees no color,” the goal of this book is to complicate this assessment: it is not that color does not matter; rather, color indeed does matter, but how it matters depends on how race commingles with other market variables.

This brings me to my second argument: that transracial adoption serves as a powerful indicator of racial boundaries. When White parents choose the race of the child they are willing to adopt, they are literally marking their own version of the color line, delineating who they could accept as a son or daughter, and conversely who they could not. Thus, my goal is to mount the argument that the racialized practices in private adoption serve as a powerful reflection of race in America. I aim to illustrate that not only do adoption agencies’ practices mirror the racial divide, but these policies are complicit in redefining the racial boundary, essentially reconfiguring a delineation that positions monoracial native-born African Americans on one side and other minority children on the opposite side.

One contribution of the book is that my research captures how adoption providers respond to the downturn in international adoption. Adoption demographer Peter Selman calls this period “the ‘beginning of the end’ of wide-scale intercountry adoption.”⁶ During this era, private adoption underwent a massive transformation since there were fewer Asian and Hispanic babies available for adoption. This shortage meant that adoption providers had to rethink how they sold transracial adoption, putting more emphasis on the placement of foreign-born African children and U.S.-born biracial (i.e., part White) Black children. I am able to show how the market shift helped reformulate the racial boundary, effectively expanding it to include these children. Adoption workers played up these distinctions by differentially pricing, labeling, and allocating biracial Black children. Likewise, adoption agencies also perpetuated the idea that the placement of foreign-born Black children would be different from adopting a native-born Black child, permitting White parents to characterize their African children as “not Black.” Taken together, these racialized policies and practices actively bolstered the delineation between children who are full African American and those who are not.

Having built the argument that it is vital to take into account the shrinking marketplace to explain the increase in transracial adoption, this book moves to its final goal: to identify the implications of this practice. I am particularly interested in how this customer-centric approach can potentially undermine adoption workers’ authority to prepare adoptive parents for the responsibilities and complexities of adopting across race. If adoption providers are concerned about maintaining market share and do not want to lose potential customers to competitors who offer an easier and less invasive process, it becomes more challenging to maintain the standards that adoption social work was built on.

Although there has been a growing consensus among adoption scholars that the market framework provides a fruitful tool for analysis,⁷ this approach is often decried by adoptive parents. Such pushback against the market metaphor makes sense given the stigma that still surrounds adoption.⁸ These parents and their children are vulnerable to intrusive questions such as “How much did he cost?” The unacceptableness of bringing up money in adoption is so high that there are several posts on popular adoption blogs advising adoptive parents how to respond to this inquiry and other “stupid things people say about adoption.”⁹ As one blogger writes, “What an awful question to ask someone. We are talking about a child. She cost nothing. Do I ask you how much your biological child cost, with her hospital fees, doctor visits, shots? Yes, we had adoption fees and travel costs, but ‘she’ did not cost anything. She is a child, just like my biological child.”¹⁰

Notice how the author adamantly argues against the market framework and redirects the narrative by equivocating the costs incurred via adoption as similar to the financial outlay biological parents pay for prenatal care and delivery. This rhetorical strategy reinforces the predominance of what Judith Modell calls the “as if begotten” model in adoption.¹¹ Under this practice, once legally adopted, the son or daughter becomes *de facto* biological kin such that “the adopted child is granted an entirely new birth certificate, with the names of his or her adoptive parents on the document and the name of the birth parent nowhere in sight.”¹² By rewriting the *birth* certificate, adoptive kinship is likened to biological kinship and the adopted child is seen as “just like my biological child.”

The message equating adoption to biological kinship emerges early in the adoption process. For example, at preadoption conferences geared toward audiences of prospective adoptive parents, it is common to see vendors selling T-shirts with catchphrases like “adoption is the new pregnant” or “pregnant on paper.”¹³ Although it is understandable why a prospective adoptive parent would want to celebrate the formation of her family through a visible declaration of impending maternity, the reliance on a pregnancy discourse has troubling implications. The blogger who insists that adoption fees are like delivery fees implicitly puts forth the argument that a child’s existence begins at adoption, instead of at birth. The adoption fee does not bring the baby to fruition; the birth mother (sometimes called first mother) already devoted the time, energy, and labor to bring about this occurrence.

Perhaps one reason for the overreliance on the adoption-as-birth metaphor is that the alternative—the market metaphor—is untenable. Even though private adoption routinely requires the transfer of thousands of dollars from one party to another, any allusion to private adoption as baby buying threatens what sociologist Viviana Zelizer calls “the exaltation of children’s sentimental worth.”¹⁴ However, as Zelizer shows in her landmark study tracing the desirability of babies put up for adoption throughout the

twentieth century, private adoption has always been a marketplace where some children were in greater demand than others. Whereas in the 1900s, would-be adoptive parents sought out older children who could contribute to the upkeep of the household, in contemporary adoption it is the babies who are the most valuable. Zelizer argues that this change catalyzed a new demand for babies and “stimulated a new kind of baby market.”¹⁵

Of course, in the legal adoption marketplace children are not purchased outright. Instead, it is useful to conceptualize the adoption marketplace as a socially constructed arena that is necessary to facilitate the exchange of a child. Within this arena, adoption becomes both child welfare and child commodification. As Margaret Radin and Madhavi Sunder write, “Market relations reflect, create, and reinforce social relations. But they are not the whole of those relations.”¹⁶ In this regard private adoption is a peculiar marketplace, where parents are not reducible to pure consumers and children are not merely objects. But the paradox is that to transfer children from one family to another, supposedly priceless children are inevitably marketed and priced. One could argue that there has to be a price associated with adoption because how else could one pay for the costs associated with this circulation? This explanation rings true, but it is only part of the story. If it were the case that all children were equally priceless, then the total cost for an adoption would be the same regardless of the child. But that is rarely the case, and as this book details, in private domestic adoption children are differentially priced according to their market value.

Several scholars have noted that race plays a key role in determining a child’s market value, with Black babies garnering a lower fee than White babies.¹⁷ This practice has been well known among adoption practitioners, but it was rarely, if ever, discussed among the general public. This changed in 2013 when National Public Radio launched the Race Card Project, asking listeners to weigh in on race and cultural identity in six words or less. An uproar occurred after a woman submitted the phrase “Black babies cost less to adopt,” effectively outing this fairly common custom.¹⁸ The reporter covering the issue spoke with adoption workers about the rationale behind this two-tiered pricing structure. The brief news story details how many social workers viewed the fee differential as a child welfare tactic that increased the likelihood of placing Black children in permanent families. Despite being founded on good intentions, many workers were clearly distressed with the scrutiny it garnered. No adoption worker would go on record about the practice, leading the reporter to conclude, “No one is comfortable about this.”¹⁹

As debates surrounding transracial adoption and the marketplace swirl, the voices of adoption workers have been largely absent from the discourse. There is a plethora of blogs written by members of the adoption triad with adoptive parents, adopted persons, and birth mothers (and to a lesser extent fathers) weighing in on their experiences.²⁰ Yet there are few, if any, blogs

written by adoption social workers. Granted, many probably do not actively publish via this medium since they have to uphold the confidentiality of their clients. But the lack of input from adoption providers is also mirrored in the research literature. Despite the fact that adoption workers could presumably be afforded a layer of protection as confidential informants, there are few studies leveraging their expertise.

This book is unique because it is one of the only studies to explicitly focus on adoption providers. Instead of their voices being a side note, I argue that hearing from these workers provides a rich opportunity to plumb sociological questions about the intersections between markets, kinship, and race. By highlighting the perspectives of adoption workers, I am able to uncover the ambivalence many feel about their seemingly contradictory roles as child welfare advocates and client services personnel. These workers view private adoption as an integral component of social service work. Yet many of these women also feel conflicted, citing concerns about the ethics of treating child adoption as an “industry.” Although members of this profession may be reluctant to risk their jobs by going publicly on record, once guaranteed a confidential space where their names and identifying information would not be revealed, these workers had a lot to say.

After Abigail voiced her concern that her comments would ultimately get her fired, I offered to omit that portion from the transcript. But she demurred, saying, “No, no. I think that it is very important to discuss. It is important for the fact that when these kids are like fifteen, sixteen, seventeen years old, you know that it is going through their minds. Or when they are thinking about building their own families. We can frame it in all of the positive language in the world, but kids are smart.”

As Abigail alludes to, in contemporary practice there has been what the sociologist Pamela Anne Quiroz calls “a shift in the discursive practices of adoption to broaden the acceptance of adoptive families. Old terminology (e.g., blue-ribbon babies, natural parents, illegitimate, unadoptable, feeble-minded) has given way to a set of kinder, more inclusive terms.”²¹ With this softer language, the adoption narrative gets reformulated such that a first mother gets recast as a birth mother, not the “real” or “natural” mother. These expectant women are said to make an adoption plan, not “give up their child” for adoption. And subsequently, the children brokered in adoption get referred to as in need of care, not “available” for adoption.

But despite these efforts to reframe private adoption as an empowered and altruistic decision made by an autonomous birth mother, the market aspects are still unavoidable. Although Abigail is adamant that “you’re not buying a child; it is not like that,” private adoption is a form of social service where the parent paying the bills becomes the *de facto* client. Some critics of adoption refer to this business model as finding children for families, rather than the child welfare model of finding families for children.²²

The former positions the child as the object, while the latter frames the child as the client.

This distinction resonates with Michele, another social worker I interviewed. Unlike Abigail, who is relatively new to the field, Michele has been working in adoption for more than twenty years at a large full-service agency that offers a plethora of international programs as well as private domestic adoptions. Michele sees her adoption agency as one of the good ones, separating her practices from that of other agencies that “are not operating aboveboard.” Michele surmises, “There are agencies that basically find children for parents. Our agency finds parents for children.”

Although the differences between these two phrases are subtle, the stakes are high, especially since children are seen as priceless, and thus attaching price tags to them is discomforting, to say the least. According to Zelizer, the allusion to child markets is so fraught because, as critics argue, “Some goods and services should never be sold, and . . . some market arrangements are inherently pernicious.”²³ Maintaining the distinction between a commercial enterprise and an altruistic one is essential, since these approaches occupy what Zelizer calls “hostile spheres.”²⁴ Any overlap between the two is risky because it threatens the sacredness of children. Thus, any baby market is seen as a dangerous “black market” rather than a socially sanctioned arena of exchange.

For adoption stakeholders, the very idea of combining the terms “market” and “baby” is rife with controversy because the idea of commodifying children threatens the underlying foundation of the adoptive family. As Debora Spar notes, “The debates in this field are passionate, with adoptive families and adoption agencies pitted against those who condemn the process.”²⁵ She identifies one side of the debate as “those who see adoption as a purely social interaction: it is about building families and rescuing children and assuaging the pain of missing people.” In contrast, critics of adoption argue that “adoption is not only a market but indeed a market of the worst possible sort” that commodifies innocent children by putting a price on their heads.²⁶

Of course, it is folly to create a forced choice either extolling private adoption as an altruistic child welfare practice or condemning it as baby selling. As Joan Williams and Viviana Zelizer argue, the questions of whether the commodification of children exists and whether commodification is good or bad are oversimplified. They contend, “Economic sociology shows that we need to steer away from the question of ‘to commodify or not to commodify,’ and appreciate instead that people strive to define the moral life in a wide variety of social contexts that involve *both* economic *and* socio-emotional relationships.”²⁷

Notably, adoption is not the only transaction where markets and altruism intersect in a bureaucratized system. In his research on organ donation,

sociologist Kieran Healy emphasizes the value of acknowledging the economic and social aspects of the exchange. He probes how organ donation agencies create what he calls the “cultural account of donation,” or in other words, “sets of ideas and stories, meant for public consumption, about the nature and meaning of what they are doing.”²⁸ Since the message of organ donation grows out of an altruistic framework (e.g., providing the gift of life), workers are especially wary of sully the narrative with allusions to the business of donation. But Healy reminds us that there can be no organ donation without a “procurement organization” that oversees the logistics of the transfer. These operational aspects tend to be ignored, since the few extant studies tend to focus on organ donors and the recipients.²⁹ Likewise, adoption research tends to focus on adopted children and parents and not on the organizations that bring these parties together. These workers serve as middlemen (and women) charged with facilitating the placement.

Like Healy’s work, this book is built on the idea that an industry can be both altruistic and transactional. Thus, in the adoption marketplace, child commodification and child welfare can both occur. With these caveats in mind, my aim is to push forward the conversation by examining how a sociologically informed market lens help us further understand where adoption, race, and kinship intersect. Williams and Zelizer remind us that the market framework is particularly useful for this type of inquiry, since “markets often work *too well*: among the many things they deliver efficiently are race, gender, and class privilege.”³⁰

These privileges are especially apparent when considering the circumstances that lead children to be placed in the adoption pipeline in the first place. In countries where there is a wider social safety net and greater access to contraception and abortion, very few women voluntarily relinquish children for adoption. For example, domestic adoptions in Sweden are quite rare: according to the last available data, only *forty-one* couples were able to adopt domestically in 2016.³¹ Barbara Katz Rothman writes of this improbably small count, reflecting that few “Swedish women found themselves in a situation where placing their babies out for adoption was their best option. When you take away most of the social forces operating upstream that put women in that awful position, you are left largely with personal idiosyncrasy, personal reasons.”³²

Unlike in Sweden, where a minute proportion of newborns are placed for adoption,³³ the social issues operating upstream in countries such as Guatemala and China create a much larger supply of children. For example, demographers estimate that at the height of Guatemala’s adoption trade, a staggering one out of one hundred live births resulted in a newborn sent to the United States for adoption. In China, the percentage is not as high, but the magnitude of the effect is significant, such that at its peak almost 14,500 babies a year were sent abroad to a handful of “receiving” countries—more

than thirty-nine a day.³⁴ Under these conditions, the factors leading tens of thousands of birth mothers to relinquish their children are not about choice; more accurately, they suggest a profound lack of choices for these disenfranchised women.

The popular adoption narrative focusing on the benefits bestowed to adoptive parents and children ignores those whom Rickie Solinger calls the “beggars” in adoption—that is, the women who relinquish children.³⁵ Solinger powerfully states that socioeconomic inequities are often obscured and replaced by the euphemistic narrative of choice, stating, “The argument that simple ‘choice’ actually underlies the very popular (though much denied) idea that motherhood should be a class privilege in the United States—a privilege only appropriate for women who can afford it.”³⁶

Writing from the perspective of a sociologist and adoptive mother, Rothman expounds on this idea:

Those of us who adopt, and the culture of adoption that supports us, like to think that birth mothers act out of choice, that—especially in contemporary, more open adoptions—we are the “chosen people” of those birth mothers. It begs the whole question of what “choice” means, where individual agency comes into play. It’s hard to imagine a woman who “chose” to place her child for adoption in the same way I “chose” to adopt: out of no need but her own desire to do so. True enough, once pregnant, once well on the way to a motherhood that she does not want, adoption may be only one of a woman’s options, and any given adoptive family only one of her choices. But even under these most ideal of circumstances (not faced with a strong desire for sons in a country with a one-child-only policy, not faced with war and famine and heartbreak of all kinds), it’s hard to imagine a woman choosing to become a birth mother without the circumstances pushing hard in that direction.³⁷

Like Rothman, historian Laura Briggs recognizes that choice is often a misnomer in adoption and argues for “a history of adoption that pays as much attention to the position of those who *lose* children in adoption as to those who receive them.”³⁸ Her work offers a context to help us understand the political backdrop that pushes women into adoption. Briggs advocates, “We need to widen our lens beyond the largely White and middle-class women who are the subject of that primary narrative and pay attention to how Black and Native women in the United States, and those outside the United States, came to give their children up for adoption, or lose them involuntarily.”³⁹

One goal of this book is to pick up where other scholars left off by drawing attention to other voices that are usually sidelined in adoption. By

focusing on adoption workers—that is, those who work in the marketplace—I am able to paint a more thorough picture of how the market operates. I am particularly interested in the boundary of race and how the color line plays into what races prospective parents are willing to adopt. There is an old saying advising prospective parents that if they would not marry someone of a certain race, then they should not adopt a child of that race either. Nora, another social worker I interviewed,⁴⁰ brings up this point: “The rule of adoption is you don’t adopt a child of another race unless you like the grown-ups. Your kids are going to grow up and be one of those grown-ups. Do you eat in those restaurants? Do you mingle in those neighborhoods? Do you shop in those stores? If you don’t like the grown-ups, don’t adopt one of their children.” Likewise, Gretchen states, “There is that old joke about, if you wouldn’t marry one, don’t adopt one.” She admits, “Of course, that is a very crass comment, but I think it really holds true in a lot of ways.”

The maxim comparing transracial adoption to interracial marriage makes sense considering that for years sociologists have looked to intermarriage as a gauge of softening racial and ethnic boundaries. First, intermarriage signals that the social distance between the White and non-White spouse has eroded enough for the couple to be able to marry.⁴¹ Second, intermarriage serves as a catalyst for generational assimilation for the children of intermarried couples.⁴² For subsequent generations, ethnic differences become less salient in everyday life, and as the assimilation process occurs, ethnicity becomes less a master status and more a symbolic identity.⁴³

This model is often referred to as “classic assimilation” as it was developed to characterize the experiences of White ethnic immigrants in the early 1900s.⁴⁴ One oft-cited example of this phenomenon is the test case about how the Irish became White.⁴⁵ Whereas Irish immigrants once were “an intermediate race located socially between black and white” and were routinely discriminated against in terms of employment and housing,⁴⁶ after subsequent generations the “No Irish Need Apply” signs disappeared as these immigrants and their descendants assimilated into the American mainstream.⁴⁷

Following this model, some contemporary racial scholars argue that a similar process is occurring for new waves of immigrants who came to the United States following the landmark Immigration Act of 1965.⁴⁸ This legislation was monumental since it opened the doors for Asian immigrants who had been largely banned since the Chinese Exclusion Act and greatly increased the pathway for immigration from Latin America.⁴⁹ Since its passage, the foreign-born population has steadily risen such that more than one in ten Americans is foreign-born.⁵⁰

Yet there is a huge distinction between the cohorts of Italian, Irish, and Polish immigrants that composed the former wave of U.S. immigration and the cohorts of Asian and Hispanic immigrants who largely make up the latter. Namely, most of these post-1965 immigrants are not White. Based on

this crucial racial difference, many argue that these newcomers and their children cannot possibly follow the same path as the White immigrant families did before them.⁵¹ With this in mind, there is a fierce debate among immigration scholars regarding post-1965 immigrants' trajectories of assimilation and whether they will follow the classic path of upward assimilation or whether the prospects for the second and third generations will be segmented or even downward.⁵²

Since not enough time has elapsed for successive generations of post-1965 immigrants to make their way through the assimilation process, it is impossible to know exactly what the assimilation process will look like for these relative newcomers.⁵³ Part of the debate about assimilation rests on whether there is a changing conception of race in the United States. While the color line used to be roughly based on a White–non-White divide, many argue that this boundary is evolving toward a Black–non-Black one.⁵⁴ If this is the case, this new demarcation will greatly shape the assimilation prospects for Hispanic and Asian immigrants and their children.

The nuances of the assimilation debate go beyond the scope of this brief overview, but for our purposes it is important to pay attention to the underlying argument that there is greater latitude for Asians and Hispanics to assimilate than there is for Blacks. Drawing on evidence from surveys on racial attitudes and demographic data on housing patterns and interracial marriage, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva argues that East and South Asians, as well as light-skinned Hispanics, are becoming “honorary whites.”⁵⁵ In other words, even though these racial minorities are not White, they occupy a more privileged position compared with dark-skinned Hispanic and Black Americans. Along the same line, George Yancey argues that even as Hispanics and Asians become largely incorporated into the American mainstream, Blacks are further left behind: “Because nonblack racial groups can avoid the label of being ‘black,’ they can eventually be given a ‘white’ racial identity.”⁵⁶ Unlike these non-Black racial minorities, “African Americans are in a quasi-caste system by which they occupy the lowest level of social prestige in the United States and it is in the social interest of all nonblack racial groups to keep them at the bottom.”⁵⁷ Herbert Gans describes how this segregation is the foundation of what he labels African American exceptionalism. “Although a significant number of African Americans have become middle class since the civil rights legislation of the 1960s,” Gans argues, “they still suffer from far harsher and more pervasive discrimination and segregation than nonwhite immigrants of equivalent class position. This not only keeps whites and blacks apart but prevents blacks from moving toward equality with whites.”⁵⁸ Whereas the color line seems to be expanding to make room for most Asians and some Hispanics, African Americans remain the consistent exception to the assimilation narrative.⁵⁹ In fact, the proportion of White intermarriages with Asians outnumbers the proportion of

White-Black intermarriages despite the fact that the Black population in the United States is more than double that of Asians.⁶⁰

Evidence of this new racial division is especially apparent in rates of intermarriage. On the basis of an analysis of 1990 census data, Qian and Lichter find that Blacks are among the least likely to marry Whites compared to Asians or Hispanics. Characterizing this trend, they conclude that “fair skinned minorities are more likely to marry Whites than darker skinned minorities.”⁶¹ Furthermore, in a study of 2005 American Community Survey data, Jeffrey Passel, Wendy Wang, and Paul Taylor find that among the newly married, Whites who intermarry tend to choose Hispanic and Asian partners, and are the least likely to intermarry with Blacks.⁶²

Although intermarriage among Whites has stood as the gold standard for evaluating racial boundaries, in some respects adoption may be a far more racially deliberative process. Certainly, research on assortative marriage shows how variables like race and class shape who marries whom.⁶³ But these patterns do not take into account the subjective elements of love and romance based on shared values and mutual attraction that also fuel romantic pairings. These factors may soften the effect of racial difference. For example, in her qualitative study on White-Black interracially married spouses, Heather Dalmage finds that some couples did not actively set out to form an interracial union, but they “fell in love and that was it.”⁶⁴

Moreover, forming an engagement to marry requires the consent of both participants and therefore is more likely to reflect changing racial attitudes of the White and non-White person forming the union. On the other hand, transracial adoption is more one-sided. Unless the non-White child is old enough to consent to the adoption—a rarity in private adoption since the children tend to be quite young—the decision to adopt across race is initiated by the White parent(s) and not the child.

The difference between intermarriage and transracial adoption is even more pronounced considering that romantic partnerships are largely based on mutual attraction and compatibility among couples. In contrast, in private adoption prospective parents will often commit to a child—especially a young healthy child—without having met him or her first. Thus in private adoption, prospective parents usually are not choosing a child based on his or her personality. Extending the marriage market metaphor, if anything transracial adoption could be seen as an arranged marriage where one party is the chooser (the prospective parent) and the other is the proverbial chosen child. Based on this model, adoption workers act as matchmakers of sorts, helping their clients weigh variables of race, age, and health to identify the profile of the son or daughter they hope to adopt. Thus, when White parents adopt across race, they literally mark their delineation of the color line.

Recently scholars have examined how adoption serves as a window into the racial hierarchy and how Black children are relegated to the bottom of

the spectrum. Kazuyo Kubo summarizes a review of the literature, arguing, “The common discourse that is engendered from their stories is that the racial division between white and black is too wide to cross, in contrast to the differences between whites and Asians.”⁶⁵ Similarly, Rothman concludes that cohorts of Chinese and Korean children may become “successfully moved into whiteness.”⁶⁶ But in contrast, the color line does not yield as readily for African American children. She continues, “Children of African descent cannot cross racial lines. As long as the idea of race continues in America, black children will grow up to be black adults, no matter who raises them or where.”⁶⁷ Along the same line, Sara Dorow’s work contextualizes the surging interest in adoptions from China. She finds that White parents adopting transnationally from China highlights the importance of racial boundaries in the decision-making process, finding that “blackness serves as a mediating backdrop” in White parents’ decisions.⁶⁸

We see this grim hierarchy also play out at the national level. For example, in Hiromi Ishizawa and colleagues’ research on intercountry adoption using census data, they find that the majority of White parents adopted an Asian child, suggesting that this phenomenon is “rooted in the choice to adopt black versus nonblack where white parents feel Asian children are more assimilable to mainstream white culture than black children.”⁶⁹ Similarly, White transracial adoptive parents are three times more likely to adopt Asian and Hispanic children than Black children.⁷⁰

These studies illustrate a remarkably consistent racial hierarchy that positions Whites at the top, Asians and Hispanics in the middle, and Black children at the bottom. With this in mind, Pamela Quiroz argues that private adoption practices serve as a type of racial project that reproduces the color hierarchy.⁷¹ She attests, “Racial projects have found their way into the adoption arena affecting children of color” such that “private adoption practices provide a window into the shifting dynamics of race in the United States demonstrating that rather than moving towards a color-blind democracy, we instead live in a context where race continues to matter substantially.”⁷² This leads Quiroz to argue, “Nowhere is America’s schism with race more evident than in private domestic adoption.”⁷³

Frontstage and Backstage Perspectives: Focusing on Adoption Workers

This schism with race became readily apparent when, several years ago, I interviewed Hannah, an adult Korean adoptee, about her experiences growing up with White parents. During the conversation I asked Hannah if her parents ever mentioned why they decided to adopt from Korea. Her response was quite candid as she disclosed that her parents told her they chose to adopt from Korea over Vietnam, another country where healthy infants were

available, because “Vietnamese children looked Mexican.”⁷⁴ Not wanting a child who could be mistaken for Latina, Hannah’s parents pursued adopting from Korea. Although Hannah’s parents were surprisingly forthcoming about their racial preferences, prior research indicates that few adoptive parents are willing to frame their decisions in such stark terms.

This reluctance makes sense, considering that in her study of White transracial adoptive parents Kathryn Sweeney finds, “Parents may be race conscious, yet struggle with explaining their choices within the confines of language that is considered non-racist and non-colorist.”⁷⁵ Prior studies indicate that rather than reduce their adoption journey to a series of rational calculations about skin shade and racial profiling, adoptive parents tend to draw on narratives of fate to explain how “the universe conspired” to bring them their son or daughter.⁷⁶ Given the palpable hesitancy to explicitly own how racial hierarchies factor into the decision-making process, adoptive parents may not make the best informants regarding this line of inquiry. For example, Patricia Jennings argues that most of the transracial adoptive mothers approach parenthood from a color-blind perspective, lamenting, “Only a small number of women in this study had a critical grasp of race relations.”⁷⁷

With this in mind, my research follows a different path of data collection, focusing on adoption workers. Specifically, this book analyzes what sociologist Erving Goffman might call the frontstage and backstage of private adoption. He argues that on the frontstage a public performance is enacted which is “molded and modified to fit the understanding and expectation of the society in which it is presented.”⁷⁸ In the case of private adoption, the presentation of the adoption information session serves as a type of performance where adoption professionals are tasked with marketing adoption to prospective customers. Yet, given the moral prohibition against the commodification of children, the actors must sell adoption while adhering to a more socially palatable script. This is easier said than done since the information meeting is the time when private adoption veers to the commercial because adoption workers are tasked with selling adoption—describing the array of programs they offer, detailing the characteristics of the children placed, and discussing the associated fees.

Nora bluntly acknowledges the fine line that exists between an information meeting and an infomercial, stating, “It is like a marketplace, absolutely. But there is no way around that. Or else the adoptive parents wouldn’t come.” She continues, “Even one could argue that the photo listings are shopping, like a Sears and Roebuck catalog. It has to start like that. There is no other way to give people the information that they need.” Interestingly, Nora raises the question of what type of information is considered the most pertinent to convey during the initial meeting. Is the goal to educate prospective parents about the complexities surrounding becoming an adoptive

family, or is the goal to inform prospective clients about their consumer options? Should social workers warn prospective parents of the challenges and responsibilities inherent when parenting across race, or should they table the discussion lest they scare away potential customers? These questions are important, especially since prospective adoptive parents often look to adoption workers to set the tone of the discourse.⁷⁹

In her research on Korean adoption, Kristi Brian examines these issues through her analysis of adoption information sessions.⁸⁰ She identifies how adoption facilitators tend to discuss adoption in terms of applicants' consumer options, writing, "I expected to find international adoption, in general, promoted in a manner that appealed to prospective parents' sense of altruism or international relief efforts. Much to my surprise, I found instead that adoption facilitators focused primarily on appeasing adoptive parents' expectations in the area of customer service."⁸¹ While her work is valuable in identifying the inherent tensions which portray international adoption as an altruistic but consumer-friendly process, since Brian analyzes only three adoption agencies specific to Korea, it is unclear whether and how the consumer approach applies to other segments of the adoption marketplace.

In Dorow's comprehensive ethnographic study of transnational adoptions from China, she includes a subset of interviews with adoption workers, examining the behind-the-scenes labor involved. She writes, "The work of facilitators begins in the pre-adoption phase of preparing and shepherding parents through the many steps of the process, in anticipation of crossing borders."⁸² A crucial element of this work includes the "cultural training" geared to "prepare parents for transnational and transracial kinship."⁸³ As Dorow notes, these trainings often coalesce around the idea that adopted children should have some knowledge of their heritage, and White parents should be introduced to the idea that their Chinese children will experience racism. However, many of her respondents were wary of treading too deeply into the discourse of racial difference with their clients, since "none of them wanted to scare parents off with a lot of intervention." She describes how "even those who were committed to thorough pre-adoptive training admitted they were wary of doing 'too much' around race and culture issues."⁸⁴

Dorow's informants frame their reticence to introduce tough conversations about race and adoption as a pedagogical strategy, rationalizing that it is usually after placement that parents are more "ready to hear it."⁸⁵ But the hesitancy to introduce uncomfortable topics also likely stems from a desire to placate the parent-customer who may already be reeling from the seemingly unending bureaucratic steps that an overseas adoption mandates. Since agencies compete to recruit applicants who can likely choose among several organizations offering adoptions from China, few agencies would want to impose additional hoops, especially if they believe that "the other stuff is almost more immediate."⁸⁶ Dorow highlights a conversation with Carrie, an

adoption social worker, who frankly discusses this conundrum: "My salary, and Norma's salary, is paid by a secondary client, whose goodwill we must maintain."⁸⁷

Dorow's findings raise fascinating questions about the role of adoption facilitators as the arbiters of transracial adoption. Fueled by a belief and perhaps a business strategy that pushes difficult discussions about race down the road, Dorow argues that there is "the professionalized emphasis on finding the 'right' level of Chinese culture."⁸⁸ Notably, her informants espouse the idea that some White parents can do "too much," whether that be move to a more Chinese neighborhood or enroll their family in Mandarin classes. For example, Carrie declares, "I have concerns about the families who become totally Asian. . . . [D]on't they have any self respect about their own background?"⁸⁹ The idea that parents should do something with Chinese culture but not too much reinforces what Dorow calls the "tacit normalcy" of Whiteness that often operates in the background of discussions on racial socialization among social workers facilitating Chinese adoptions.⁹⁰

Notably, Dorow conducted her research during a time when transnational adoptions from China were booming. The pace of business was so fast that one social worker she interviewed ruefully referred to her agency as "China-R-Us."⁹¹ This book serves to juxtapose how the slowdown magnifies this consumer mentality, raising new questions as to whether a discussion of race at the preadopt stage will go even further underground as social workers have greater incentive to cater to the needs of the paying clients and not scare off potential customers before they are "ready to hear." Thus, this book contributes to the existing literature by describing how adoption workers promote transracial adoption during a market downturn as opposed to during the boom years.

Beyond Brian and Dorow's work, Quiroz's study of adoption agency websites is one of the few other systematic studies of private adoption institutions addressing issues of race and the color line.⁹² Based on a sample of private adoption agencies' websites, she positions these texts as racial projects and analyzes how Black children are segregated into lower-tier programs. Describing this separation, Quiroz writes, "Regardless of the functional, benign, or even altruistic motives claimed by adoption agencies, racial distinctions are perpetuated and the color line protected when African American and biracial children are separated from virtually everyone else in adoption programs."⁹³ Although Quiroz's research was instrumental in establishing how racial hierarchies infiltrate adoption, her research is also limited since it is based on content analyses of polished and vetted text.

Only a handful of studies explicitly focus on adoption social workers' attitudes, usually investigating best practices in the wake of new policy initiatives such as the Multiethnic Placement Act (MEPA) and the Interethnic Placement Act (IEP). These two pieces of legislation prohibited adoption

providers from taking race into account when making adoption placements for taxpayer-funded adoptions, such as through foster care.⁹⁴ In response to these new regulations, Jan Carter-Black interviews ten African American social workers working in foster care and finds “overall, a concern for the potential harm of MEPA-IEP.”⁹⁵ However, the sample only includes social workers who facilitate foster care adoptions, since private adoption tends fall outside MEPA’s purview.

Similarly, in response to the ratification of the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption, a treaty that set uniform ethical standards for cross-national placements, Jo Bailey interviewed thirteen international adoption workers asking how the new requirements would impact the industry.⁹⁶ The new rules stipulated that, to receive Hague accreditation, agencies must have a governing board, possess two months cash reserves, and carry a minimum threshold of liability insurance commensurate with the size of the agency.⁹⁷ The workers Bailey interviewed presciently predicted that smaller agencies will be adversely affected by these regulations and may say, “We’re done, we’re finished, or we’re gearing down to close our doors.”⁹⁸ But since Bailey conducted her interviews in 2007, well before the downturn in international adoption hit a crisis point, for some agencies it would be several more years until the threat of bankruptcy really set in.

In addition to interviewing adoption social workers about their views on specific policies, other studies have sampled social workers about their opinions on transracial adoption. Derek Kirton examines British social work students’ opinions on transracial adoption, finding that support for cross-race adoption is generally strong but even stronger among White students.⁹⁹ A more recent study of U.S. social work students echoed a similar trend, suggesting that support for transracial adoption is a shared philosophy, especially among White social workers.¹⁰⁰ While these two studies identify consistent support for transracial adoptive placements among White social work students, it is unclear how many sampled students actually go on to administer transracial adoptions.

Missing from the analysis is a multifaceted analysis of the frontstage and backstage of private transracial adoption. The aim of this book is to bridge this gap in the literature by illustrating the reach of the market. I show how the business of adoption permeates the way that adoption professionals talk about their work when backstage and how it shapes their actions when they are pitching their services to potential clients frontstage.

To study the frontstage, I acted as a participant observer at information sessions and preadoption conferences geared toward audiences of prospective adoptive parents. Over the course of two years, I attended forty of these presentations, sitting in the audience among prospective adoptive parents who, like me, were frantically taking notes and trying to discern how adoption works. Considering that the average age of parents using private

adoption is forty years old,¹⁰¹ as a graduate student in my early thirties, I was only a few years younger than many of the audience members, who were just starting their potentially multiple-year journey toward adoptive parenthood. Since adoption is a largely female-driven process, I did not look out of place as a lone woman. But given that more than four out of five private adoptive parents are White,¹⁰² I may have stood out as one of the few women of color in the audience. Had I disclosed my social location as a mother of a child born to me, I likely would have stood out all the more, since the vast majority of applicants pursue private adoption only after facing significant barriers to biological reproduction.

Another aspect of my social location that is important for readers to know is that I am a Korean adoptee. Born in Korea but raised by White parents in the United States, I am one of the two hundred thousand children sent abroad to the United States and Western European countries in the post-Korean Conflict period.¹⁰³ Long before “rainbow families” were in vogue, I grew up in a transracial family with a White mother and father, a White sister who is my parents’ biological child, and a brother adopted from India. Thus, I come to this project with somewhat of an insider status, since my social location as a Korean adoptee shapes how I think about race and adoption.¹⁰⁴ But I am also an outsider, since I am not a social worker and have never worked in adoption. Although my position as an insider-outsider may be of interest to readers, I want to stress that I write from the perspective of a race and family sociologist as much as, and probably more than, from the perspective of an adult adoptee.

As Paul Hodkinson writes, “Holding a degree of insider status clearly can have implications for the achievement of successful and productive interactions with participants.”¹⁰⁵ One aspect I noticed throughout my fieldwork was that my status as a transracial Korean adoptee likely gave me additional “backstage” access to respondents who may have been otherwise reticent to discuss their work. Goffman characterizes the backstage as a space where one can let one’s guard down. He gives the example of the corporate executive whose office provides a space to “take his jacket off, loosen his tie.”¹⁰⁶ Moreover, the backstage is a space where performers can go “off script” and deviate from the dominant narrative. Even though I identified myself as a sociologist and researcher, because of my social location as a Korean adoptee, I had the sense that adoption professionals saw me as one of them. In other words, I was a potential colleague who had a deep understanding of the adoption process. As someone who grew up in an adoptive family, I did not have to be convinced that adoptive families were just as legitimate as biologically related families. I could attest that love was thicker than blood.