THE END OF INTERNATIONAL ADOPTION?:
ALTRUISM, REPRODUCTIVE MARKETS, AND THE “HEALTHY CHILD”

A dissertation presented

by

Estye Fenton

to

The Department of Sociology and Anthropology

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in the field of
Sociology

Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
April, 2016
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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

Over the past fifteen years, international adoption in the United States has entered a new era. The number of international adoptions in the U.S. has dropped significantly since its peak in 2004, against the backdrop of allegations of fraud and corruption in a number of “sending nations.” While international adoption has always functioned as a demand-driven reproductive market, shifts in diplomatic relations and public opinion have reshaped the supply of children available for international adoption. This project explores the ways that the most recent cohort of international adoptive mothers has negotiated the massive political and bureaucratic changes to international adoption. I conducted 43 open-ended ethnographic interviews with mothers (and a few fathers) who adopted children internationally since 2004. Overall, the mothers I interviewed came to see themselves as consumers within a complex reproductive marketplace. As they came face-to-face with the commercial aspects of international adoption as an institution as well as with allegations and evidence of fraud in their own adoption processes, these mothers were forced to reconsider a straightforward vision of international adoption as a benevolent way to “grow” their families by “saving” children from abroad. At the same time, these mothers navigated the intersection of race and ability/disability in their decision-making surrounding adoption, suggesting an opening to think about shifts in our cultural understanding of altruism, carework, race, kinship, and what makes a “healthy” baby in the new economy.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my advisor, Linda M. Blum, who has supported me continuously for the past six years. Linda went above and beyond, listened to me patiently, and offered extensive critiques of all my writing. Linda has truly been a role model. It has been an honor to work with her, and this project would not have been possible without her.

I would also like to thank the other members of my dissertation committee who were so generous with their time and thoughtful contributions: Lorraine Bayard de Volo, Jeff Juris, Doreen Lee, and Liza Weinstein. I am very grateful to the entire Sociology and Anthropology department – faculty, staff, and fellow students – for being part of an environment that was so supportive of this work and of me as a graduate student. In particular, I would like to thank Professors Michael Brown, Alisa Lincoln, and Judy Perrolle for their kindness, humor, and encouragement over the years. Finally, I would like to thank my husband Eli for all of his help, as well as for his tremendous forebearance.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Over the last ten years, international adoption in the United States has entered a new era. For several decades, international adoptions were characterized by a ready supply of adoptable children, a lack of contact between adoptive parents and adopted children’s biological kin, and relative bureaucratic ease. Throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century, however, international adoption became increasingly difficult for adoptive parents in the United States, as many systemic changes took place both within “sending nations” – the nations that send their children abroad in international adoptions – and within the U.S. as a “receiving nation.” Many former sending nations have closed their programs altogether, and regulations that restrict international adoption have increased across the board. This project looks at parents in the United States who adopted internationally in the past decade amidst this shift in practices, discourses, and international politics. Specifically, I investigate the experiences of a cohort of adoptive mothers who are forced to negotiate their desire to mother in the context of a growing societal awareness of international adoption as a deeply flawed reproductive marketplace.

International adoption began in post-World War II America as a response to war orphans in Europe and in Korea and our views of international adoption emerged from a postwar ethos. The historian Ellen Herman (2008) characterizes our view of international adoption as “triumphal narrative,” whereby U.S. parents, and the United States as a whole, function as benevolent actors that “save” children from desperate circumstances while, at the same time, making the U.S. a more inclusive, multi-racial, and multi-ethnic society. Spikes in the numbers of international adoptions in the United States have often followed cries for humanitarian aid in diplomacy and in the media – the end of the Vietnam war, the fall of the Soviet Union, reports of abandoned female infants
due to China’s One Child Policy, political conflicts in Latin America, the AIDS epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa, and a handful of other political and natural disasters, including, more recently, the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. But despite these real crises, international adoptions in the United States have remained fundamentally demand-driven; war, poverty, and social dislocation alone do not cause U.S. parents to adopt children from overseas. Overall, the number of international adoptions in the U.S. has increased alongside the broadest and most basic changes in American family life over the past fifty years: the entry of middle and upper-middle class women into elite professions, the delayed marriage and childbearing that followed, and the ramping-up of those delays – among women and men – that has accompanied the increasing instability of work life, which characterizes the new economy.

Thus, demand for international adoption, as the century turned, remained steady while the “supply” of adoptable children became exceptionally volatile. Over the fifteen-year period from 1995 to 2010, one sending nation after another “shut down” amidst concerns over human rights abuses, corruption, and outright fraud, or over diplomatic disputes with the United States, or over the political, social, and ethical implications of systematic migrations of children along traditional lines of global inequality. The debates that have emerged surrounding international adoption weave a complex web of internally contradictory concerns: preserving a child’s cultural heritage by keeping him in his natal country; placing a child in a family, rather than an institutional setting; protecting the rights of birthmothers in the face of unscrupulous adoption brokers; balancing adoptive parents’ desires for infants against more vigorous (and time-consuming) efforts towards family reunification. Many parents, activists, and scholars have questioned whether the inequality inherent in international adoption renders the entire system suspect.
In the face of these debates, international adoption has not only become more pragmatically difficult, but has also become more politically and ethically fraught. This has presented international adoptive families in the United States with new threats against their legitimacy. The mothers whom I interviewed for this project have found themselves navigating the unsettled waters of contemporary American family life in a new and unexpected way, caught between the double-bind of work-family life and a new paradigm of thinking about the way – international adoption – that they have sought to remediate it. Indeed, international adoption – as well as adoption, in general – points directly to many of the profound contradictions within our contemporary ideas about family, childhood, and motherhood, particularly when considering “non-traditional” family forms and the involvement of reproductive technologies. Adoption brings to light our own families’ entanglements with commerce and class, with complex debates about the relationship between genetics, biology, and “nurture,” and with a broader cultural anxiety surrounding race, citizenship, and belonging. This project aims to uncover the ways in which the debates surrounding international adoption may help to clarify the workings of these cultural anxieties, as well as the profound contradictions that these anxieties reveal in our collective thinking about families.

**International Adoption in the Scholarly Literature**

There is a vast literature on adoption, including international adoption, in sociology, as well as in anthropology, social work, psychology, and law. The primary themes in the social work and psychology literatures address children’s adjustment and family dynamics following adoption (Barcons et. al. 2014, Brand and Brinich 1999, Grotevant and McDermott 2014), including in transracial adoptive families specifically (DeBerry 1996, Lee 2003, Manzi et al. 2014), as well as
best practices, both in terms of adoption processes (Hollingsworth 2008, Siegel 2013) and therapeutic interventions (Schwartzwald et al. 2015, Wrobel and Neil 2009). Additionally, some scholarship has emerged within social work that addresses the macro-level ethical issues involved in international adoption (Gibbons and Rotabi 2012, Rotabi 2010a, 2010b, 2012, Rotabi and Bunkers 2011, Selman 2009). Within sociology, the literature has classically addressed questions including adoptive parents’ motivations for adopting (Bausch 2006, Fisher 2003, Smock and Greenland 2010), their “satisfaction” post-adoption, particularly in cases of adopting children with special needs (Nalavny et al. 2009), their experiences of open adoptions in a domestic context (Goldberg et. al. 2011), adoptive parents’ attitudes surrounding biology and the nature of kinship (Hamilton et. al. 2007), the experiences of single women and LGBT adoptive parents (Battle and Ashley 2008, Berkowitz and Bock 2000, Marsiglio 2007, Kinkler and Goldberg 2011, Mannis 1999, Raleigh 2012). A substantial body of work in sociology addresses the racial and ethnic identity formation of children adopted into interracial families (Samuels and LaRossa 2009, Shiao and Tuan 2008, Trask 2013), including the work that mothers, in particular, perform to foster their children’s racial and ethnic identities, which differ from their own (Jacobson 2008, Johnston et al. 2007).

A more recent body of literature, inspired in equal measure by Viviana Zelizer’s work on the economic and social value of children (1985) and by a broader approach to the dynamics of reproductive markets (Cahn 2009, Goodwin 2010, Markens 2007, Nash 2014, Spar 2006, Swanson 2014), has taken up the question of how international adoption functions as a reproductive market and how various international adoption markets are generated (Briggs 2012, Dorow 2006, Dubinsky 2010, Leinaweaevah 2008). The consensus among most critical scholars in sociology, anthropology, and the law is that international adoption has functioned as a commercial enterprise

The literature on a range of reproductive markets – not only adoption, but also sperm banks, egg donation, and gestational surrogacy – has focused on how demand for children is generated in one place while mitigated by the supply (and the supply-chain) in another (Almeling 2011, Cahn 2009, Goodwin 2010, Markens 2007, Nash, 2014, Spar 2006, Swanson 2014). There has been a long-held assumption in the cultural conversation surrounding adoption, as well as in the scholarly literature, that demand for international adoption in the United States has been driven primarily by infertility and secondarily by altruistic motivations (see Fisher 2003, Smock and Greenland 2010). Despite perceptions, stereotypes, and media portrayals, a relatively small amount of demand for international adoption has been driven by lesbian and gay parents. Although the numbers of lesbian and gay couples raising children has increased substantially over the past two decades,
anti-LGBT policies in sending nations have always made international adoption extremely difficult for same-sex couples and LGBT individuals alike (Biblarz and Savci 2010, Moore and Stambolis-Ruhstorfer 2013, Stacey 2006). Nonetheless, there is overwhelming evidence that the growth in international adoption throughout the 1990s and early 2000s was demand-driven. Heterosexual couples have sought out adoption in the context of their own delayed marriage and childbearing, and more and more single women have chosen to raise children without a partner. Delayed childbearing due to the reorganization of young adulthood as a time of exploration and career advancement, shifts in the culture of work, and changing attitudes surrounding single motherhood have grown the demand not only for international adoption but in all kinds of reproductive markets.

The increasing acceptance of single motherhood that enabled some single women to become mothers “by choice” has also caused a substantial decrease in the number of infants available for private, domestic adoptions in the United States. This, as Briggs and Marre argue in the introduction to their edited volume *International Adoption: Global Inequalities and the Circulation of Children*, led directly to an increase in international adoptions. Briggs and Marre write, “The same social changes that allowed unwed mothers to keep their babies… also resulted in delayed childbearing, as middle-class women sought to become established in a career before having a child…. Some turned to transnational adoption to remedy this ‘structural’ (i.e., labor force-induced) infertility” (2009: 17). In this vein, Briggs and Marre also clearly articulate how increased interest in international adoption is a deeply gendered phenomenon. They refer to the increasing demand for international adoption as “structural infertility,” a term borrowed from the legal scholar Judith Darr (2008), who distinguishes between biological infertility experienced by heterosexual couples and the structural infertility experienced by single people and same-sex couples who turn to assisted reproductive technologies. Briggs and Marre, extending the notion
of a structural impediment to reproduction to include the structure of the labor market, argue that “the increasing insecurity of work life until late into adulthood; the salary differentials between women and men… the lack of policies designed to balance family and work; the failure of heterosexual men to assume half the burden of familial and domestic labor – all conspire to make delaying or ‘outsourcing’ childbearing seem [like] rational or even forced choices” (2009: 18).

**Motherhood, Markets, and “Choice”**

Underlying our thinking on reproductive markets is a fundamental tension between an unspoken, persistent ideology of compulsory motherhood and a neoliberal discourse of “choice.” Moreover, in the contemporary context of reproductive markets, that tension between compulsion and choice is fueled by reproductive technologies on the one hand, and a system of stratified reproduction on the other. A classic understanding of “compulsory motherhood” sees motherhood as the default, normative, and utterly expected achievement for all women, whose status is defined by patriarchal control over their bodies and reproductive lives. While perhaps reductive, this perspective takes on a new meaning in the context of reproductive technologies and markets. In her study of single mothers “by choice,” Rosanna Hertz uses the construct of compulsory motherhood to explain the choices to become mothers that single women make. Hertz argues that, in addition to broadening social norms surrounding single motherhood, new reproductive technologies and exponentially expanding choices in international adoption have not rendered motherhood more optional, but, rather, all the more compulsory. She writes, “compulsory motherhood has strengthened its hold as new reproductive technologies and the globalization of adoption have put children within every woman’s reach” (2006: 5). She goes on to suggest that this deepening of an ideology of compulsory motherhood is particularly relevant in the lives of
single women, who can now, thanks to a variety of reproductive technologies, conceived children “naturally,” without bearing the stigma of extramarital sexuality. While sexual mores have indeed shifted, reproductive technologies nonetheless allow single women to become pregnant in ways that are culturally sanctioned and entirely divorced from their own sexuality. Ultimately, Hertz argues that this cultural sanctioning of single motherhood, lesbian mothers, and reproductive technologies themselves strengthens the cultural obligation for all women to be mothers, and reinforces the notion that motherhood remains women’s most “natural” achievement.

In this respect, Hertz echoes Angela Davis, who also argues, in the context of infertility, that “motherhood lies just beyond the next technology. The consequence is an ideological compulsion toward a palpable goal: a child one creates either by one’s own reproductive activity or via someone else’s” (1993: 360). Here, Davis clearly articulates how contemporary kinds of reproductive technologies generate a range of reproductive “choices,” as well as how the discourse of choice and an ongoing ethos of compulsory motherhood are mutually constitutive. More importantly, though, Davis introduces as a given what Hertz glosses over: medical technology and international adoption alike are not within “every woman’s reach.” Before reproduction is commercialized, it is already stratified. Shellee Colen first defines “stratified reproduction” as the phenomenon by which “physical and social reproductive tasks are accomplished differentially according to inequalities that are based on hierarchies of class, race, ethnicity, gender, place in a global economy, and migration status and that are structured by social, economic, and political forces” (1996: 78). Even outside of an explicitly commercial context, stratified reproduction can be understood as a “power relation by which some categories of people are empowered to nurture and reproduce, while others are disempowered” (Ginsburg and Rapp 1995: 3). Indeed it has always been the case in the United States that poor women – and women of color, in particular –
have faced very different kinds of reproductive scrutiny and control than white women, from the availability of welfare benefits (Quandango 1996) to the scrutiny of the child welfare system (Reich 2005, Roberts 2002), to portrayals in the media (in particular Collins 2000, Collins 2004), to ugly histories of forced reproduction, forced sterilization, and unequal access to reproductive health care (Collins 2000, Marsh and Ronner 1996, May 1997, Roberts 1997).

But with specific respect to the markets for reproductive materials and services, affluent women do not systematically sell their eggs to fertility clinics that make a lot of money implanting embryos in the wombs of working class and poor women. In fact, the opposite is true, and poor women, overall, lack access to assisted reproductive technologies (see, notably, Bell 2014, Wilson 2014). Wombs are not valued equally – the services of a gestational surrogate in India costs a fraction of what one might pay in the United States. And within the United States, as well as globally, gestational surrogates are not the economic equals of the women who retain their services (see Cahn 2009, Markens 2007, Spar 2006, Twine 2011). Furthermore, eggs and sperm themselves are not valued equally; as Barbara Katz Rothman writes, “In a system in which banking provides the dominant metaphor, of course eggs and sperm are sorted by ‘worth.’ Increasingly,” she continues, “we are being forced to confront, in no subtle way, what makes for worth in human beings” (1989: 175). Speaking about adoption, as well as about the trade of eggs and sperm, Rothman argues, “class and commerce… go hand in hand in procreation” (1989: 175). In thinking about adoption as a reproductive marketplace, therefore, it’s crucial to confront the ways that reproductive markets themselves strengthen the hold of compulsory motherhood for women of means, while simultaneously exploiting inequality among women.

At the same time that a straightforward notion of compulsory motherhood may gloss over inequality among women, it also negates women’s experiences of pleasure and desire surrounding
motherhood and mothering. Arlene Stein (1997) famously describes how, despite the goals of second-wave feminism, many women – including many lesbian women – never shook their “desire” to become mothers, which she primarily attributes to what she calls an “ethic of care.” Many other critiques of a compulsory motherhood are rooted in arguments about women’s deeply felt desires to mother and for caring, inter-dependent relationships (see, notably, Chodorow 1978, Rothman 1989, Ruddick 1995). The literature on infertility, both in historical and contemporary contexts, suggests that women participate in reproductive marketplaces because of a combination of social compulsion and free choice, the latter driven by the desire to mother (Bell 2014, Cahn 2013, Marsh and Ronner 1996, May 1997, Wilson 2014). Yet, again, in the context of new reproductive technologies, it often appears that a deep compulsion underlies that desire. Infertility treatment has been described as a “treadmill,” which keeps women coming back for one cycle of treatment after another, even when cycle after cycle has failed (Harwood 2007). This “fertility work” is deeply gendered (Bertolli 2013); it is women, far more than their male partners, who take what are often extraordinary actions in pursuit of a pregnancy. And even beyond the immediate pursuit of a pregnancy, Martin (2010) describes women’s pursuit of egg freezing as an exercise in “anticipatory infertility” and the mitigation of future risk. In this vein, Franklin (1995) argues that “choice” becomes a trap, while Goodwin (2005) argues that any appearance of choice is “illusory” because women do not escape the double bind of maternal responsibility. Indeed, the argument that an ethic of care can mitigate, rather than strengthen, the compulsory nature of motherhood relies on a presumption of choice.

The sociological literatures on childbirth preferences, breastfeeding, and other types of embodied maternal decision-making provide further illustration of how this dialectic of obligation versus choice operates. Further, these examples illustrate how, as a result of fundamentally
“forced” choices, motherhood can serve as a site of our societal emphasis on personal responsibility and personal “choice” in a neoliberal context. Blum (1999) describes breastfeeding as an embedded social institution that has historically been manipulated both by commercial interests and by the state (through public health). She argues that while breastfeeding can be a way to “revalue our bodies and force a public reevaluation of caregiving,” it also functions as “acquiescence to dominant regimes of self-sacrifice, overwork, and surveillance” (1999: 198). Wall (2001) specifically frames breastfeeding and the accompanying maternal responsibility as an example of our culture’s neoliberal obsession with personal responsibility, which is sold – in this case, to mothers – as a promise of individual “choice.” Avishai (2007), citing Wall, argues that breastfeeding is indeed a “compulsory choice” and, as such, signifies the expectation of “work and self-discipline” that our society exacts on mothers, in particular. In the same conceptual vein, Malacrida and Boulton (2014) describe women’s childbirth preferences as another place, in the realm of motherhood, where mothers’ “choices” stand in both for the “selfless[ness] of maternal nurturance” and for neoliberal risk management. Reich (2014) makes a similar argument in terms of mothers who oppose vaccinating their children. She argues that for these “anti-vax” mothers, “individual maternal choice” serves as evidence of commitment to their children and to intensive, proper, ideal, and what Blum (1999) calls “exclusive,” attached, dyadic mothering. In all of these cases, motherhood and mothering function both as locations of choice and as sites of control.

Thus, while all of these technologies, from breast pumps to IVF, clearly create new forms of choices, they simultaneously create new forms of control over women’s reproduction. And where compulsion goes, inequality follows; in her 2002 book Beggars and Choosers: How the Politics of Choice Shapes Adoption, Abortion, and Welfare in the United States, Solinger argues that our societal emphasis on reproductive “choices” not only subjects women to new forms of
control, but also turns women’s reproductive lives into a consumer enterprise. While our choices are highly constrained, they exist in a stratified marketplace of options and alternatives. Ultimately, Solinger argues that “the contemporary language of choice promises dignity and reproductive autonomy to women with resources. For women without, the language of choice is a taunt and a threat” (2002: 290). And so motherhood, thanks to the discourse of “choice” surrounding it, functions simultaneously as freely chosen and tightly controlled, “forcing” women into a stratified marketplace. It is at this nexus of compulsion and choice, and of pleasure, desire, obligation, and responsibility, that I would like to situate the mothers interviewed for this project and the demand that has been generated for international adoption in general. The experiences of the women interviewed for this project illustrate how seemingly clashing understandings of motherhood – either as compulsory or as freely chosen – are in fact fused together, along with the inequality inherent in reproduction and reproductive markets. The women interviewed for this project also remind us that the reality of reproductive choices, for many mothers, lies between these two philosophical poles and is grounded in the more mundane (yet still deeply gendered) circumstances of everyday life. The women whom I interviewed for this project also describe highly complex decision-making processes surrounding international adoption specifically, and motherhood more generally. What drove these women to pursue and complete international adoption processes – to pursue motherhood – in the face of tremendous logistical, financial, emotional, and relational challenges is one of the more practical questions animating this research. The narratives of the adoptive mothers interviewed should offer a suggestion of what has shaped international adoption as a reproductive marketplace as well as how we might approach a range of reproductive markets going forwards.
Methods and Data

Recently, a body of scholarly work and investigative journalism has argued that the demand for international adoption in the United States was directly responsible for the creation of a “supply” of children in sending nations (Dubinsky 2010, Graff 2010a, 2010b, Joyce 2011, Joyce 2013d, Kapstein 2003, Rotabi 2010a, 2010b, 2012, Smollin 2006, 2010). Several scholars have addressed the structural phenomena in sending nations that have led to the creation of a supply of adoptable children. Briggs, in particular, makes the argument that any large-scale international adoption program relies upon “war or economic upheaval that so tears the social fabric that those who wish to raise their children cannot, and those who do not wish to raise their children cannot find help or friends or family who can take them in” (2012: 10). Such critiques plainly implicate the United States as complicit in war and economic imperialism throughout the world, fundamentally disrupting any “triumphal narrative” behind international adoption. Rather than a triumph of American altruism and openness, international adoption, in this context, becomes a deeply problematic exercise of American power in the world.

This implication is understandably threatening to well-intentioned American adoptive parents. But the emergence of this perspective, on a large scale, is also rather recent; the cohort of international adoptive parents whom I interviewed for this project had fundamentally different experiences than previous cohorts. This project, grounded in the critical literature, explores the experiences and narratives of these recent adoptive parents. These families are in many ways the last of their kind; many began their processes of adoption under assumptions about international adoption that were based in an older paradigm of thinking about the institution. I conducted open-ended ethnographic interviews with forty-three families who began a process of international adoption no earlier than 2004. That year represents a significant cut-off date for two reasons. First,
it was the year that the overall numbers of international adoption peaked and, after two decades of growth, began to decline, at first gradually and then, after 2010, much more precipitously (U.S. Department of State 2013a, U.S. Department of State 2013b). Second, it was in 2003 and 2004 that the U.S. Department of State raised the first of a series of alarms about irregularities, corruption, and fraud in sending nations where the U.S. had active adoption programs (Graff 2014, Rotabi 2012). A concurrent wave of investigative journalism appeared in a variety of media outlets at that time, including a first-of-its-kind 2002 cover story in The New York Times Magazine about adoption irregularities in Southeast Asia (Corbett 2002). In retrospect, 2004 marked a turning point in the approach to international adoption within the U.S. Department of State and much of the media, and this shift signals the moment that a wholly “triumphal” narrative of international adoption came under far greater scrutiny.

The primary focus of these interviews was on parents’ decision-making processes leading up to the decision to adopt internationally, as well as throughout their process of international adoption. Interviews also addressed parents’ responses to the media attention and political debate surrounding international adoption, as well as the practical issues that families faced throughout their adoption processes. Each interviewee also completed a short demographic survey. Most interviews took place in the family’s home, a small handful took place in a public place (restaurant, coffee shop, etc.), and a few were conducted remotely, using Skype. The vast majority of the interviews were conducted in the Boston and New York metropolitan areas. I recruited participants through snowball sampling and began snowballs by posting in several local online adoption discussion groups, as well as reaching out through my personal network. Of the 43 families who participated, 37 of my interviews (86 percent) involved mothers alone, whether they were single or married. Of the remaining six interviews, I conducted four with both the mother
and father present, one interview with a married father without his wife present, and one interview with a single father. Thus, when I refer to “mothers” throughout my writing, it is not a diminishment of the fathers who did participate in the interview process, but, rather, my purposeful attention to the particular ways that the ideologies and experiences surrounding motherhood are informing this analysis on both a pragmatic and a theoretical level.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Characteristics of the Sample Families</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marital Status</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>single</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>married</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of Children</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>1</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>2</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>3</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>4</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>5 or more</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Of the 26 married couples, the family included…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“full” biological children of both spouses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>biological children of one spouse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no biological children prior to adoption</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of the 17 single parents, the family included…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>biological children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no biological children prior to adoption</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parents’ Education</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no college degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BA or BS</td>
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<tr>
<td>MA or MS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>terminal Master’s degree (e.g. MBA, MSW)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Annual Family Income</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>under $50,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>$50,000-$100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$100,000-$150,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$150,000-$250,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>over $250,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Includes 69 parents associated with the study
Of these 43 families, sixteen (37 percent) were headed by single mothers, twenty-five (58 percent) were headed by married, heterosexual couples, one was headed by a married, lesbian couple, and one was headed by a (gay-identified) single father. One of the single mothers in the sample had adopted her daughter together with her ex-husband. Several of the married adults in the sample had previously been married, but all of their divorces took place before the international adoption(s) of their children.

All together, these 43 families had 95 children. The median number of children in the family was two; thirty-four families (79 percent) had one or two children, four families (9 percent) had three or four children, and five families (12 percent) had five children or more. Of the 95 children in the sample, 28 (29 percent) are the biological children of one or both parents in the family and 67 (71 percent) were adopted. Of the 65 adopted children in the sample, eleven children (16 percent) were adopted from China, six children (9 percent) were adopted from Russia, six children (9 percent) were adopted from Guatemala, and 25 children (37 percent) were adopted from Ethiopia. Additional children in the sample were adopted from Nepal (3), Brazil (2), the Democratic Republic of Congo (2), Colombia (1), Haiti (1), Kazakhstan (1), Korea (1), Mongolia (1), Rwanda (1), and Vietnam (1). One child in the sample was adopted through a private domestic adoption, and four were adopted through state-run foster care systems. Of the 65 adopted children in the sample, parents categorized six (9 percent, all adopted from Russia) as “white,” 32 (48 percent) as “black,” 18 (27 percent) as “Asian,” “Eurasian,” or “Asian-American,” and 11 (16 percent) as “Latino/a” or “Hispanic.”

Of the 28 non-adopted children in the sample, only two were conceived using reproductive technologies, both of those children having been born to single mothers through anonymous sperm donation and intra-uterine insemination. One single mother in the sample had a biological child
from a previous relationship prior to adopting a second child as a single mother. Nine out of the 25 married heterosexual couples in the sample were raising “full” biological children born prior to the adoption of a younger sibling. An additional four families (9 percent of the total sample and 15 percent of the married couples in the sample) included mothers raising their partner’s biological children. Only about a third (32 percent) of the married, heterosexual couples in the sample pursued international adoption as first-time parents. Of the 26 total married couples in the sample, three included one non-white partner (two of East Asian ethnicity and one Hispanic, though none of those partners participated in the interview process). Other than those three partners every adult in the sample was white.

Table 2: Characteristics of the Sample Children

Of the 95 children in the sample, number of…

| adopted children | 67 (71 percent) |
| biological children of one or both parents | 28 (29 percent) |

Of the 67 adopted children, number adopted from…

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>11 (16 percent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethiopia</td>
<td>25 (37 percent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>6 (9 percent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>6 (9 percent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>elsewhere in Africa</td>
<td>3 (4 percent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>elsewhere in Asia</td>
<td>7 (10 percent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>elsewhere in Latin America/Caribbean</td>
<td>4 (6 percent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>private domestic adoption</td>
<td>1 (1 percent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>foster care</td>
<td>4 (6 percent)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the 67 adopted children, parents identified their race as...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>6 (9 percent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>32 (48 percent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino/a</td>
<td>11 (16 percent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>18 (27 percent)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In terms of socioeconomic status, the sample was decidedly upper-middle class. The sample was well-educated; of the 69 parents in the sample, 66 (96 percent) had a 4-year college degree or higher, and 32 (46 percent) had a terminal degree (JD, MBA, MD, or Ph.D.). Family incomes were high; the median annual family income was between $100,000 and $150,000 for
single parents and between $150,000 and $250,000 for married couples. Out of all those interviewed, only two single mothers, both unemployed at the time of their interviews, reported an annual income under $50,000. Three married couples reported an annual family income of over $250,000. The vast majority of families (40 out of 43, or 93 percent) owned their homes. When questioned about college and retirement savings, only four families reported that they were falling short of their financial goals, while six out of the 43 sample parents (14 percent) reported that they had already reached their savings goals for their children’s education and their own retirement.

Each participant also completed the Duke University Religion Index. I included these questions in the demographic survey because of the high-profile involvement of several Evangelical Christian organizations in international adoption and the stated mission of many Evangelical organizations for their members to adopt children from overseas. I did not actively recruit on any religious basis, nor did I exclude participants based on religious affiliation or belief. Based on the index, of the 43 families in the sample, 34 (79 percent) identified as secular, non-practicing, or liberal Christians or Jews, or as irreligious all together. Five families (12 percent) identified as Evangelical Christians, and four families (9 percent) identified as “very religious” non-Evangelicals (including two extremely devout Catholic families and two Orthodox Jewish families). I also asked each participant to identify their position on abortion (“pro-choice,” “pro-life,” or neither) and their political affiliation, if any. Of the 43 families interviewed, 38 (88 percent) identified as “pro-choice” and 5 (12 percent) identified as “pro-life.” Those identifying as “pro-life” included both of the two “very religious” Catholic families and three of the five “very religious” Protestant Christian families. The mothers of the two Evangelical Christian families who identified as “pro-choice” both emphasized that they were politically in favor of access to abortion despite their strong personal opposition to the procedure. In terms of political orientation,
33 (77 percent) of those interviewed identified as “Democrat,” “liberal,” or “progressive.” Four (9 percent) identified as “Republican” or “conservative,” and six (14 percent) identified as “Independent” or as unidentified with any political party. One mother identified herself as an Independent and her husband as a Republican, noting, “but he’s not here, is he?” Other than that single case, no couple identified differing political or religious beliefs, and no respondent specifically identified as apolitical. The religious and political profile of my sample is on par with the overall demographics of the Northeast, if slightly to the left, politically (Pew Research Center for Religion and Public Life 2015a, 2015b).

As noted above, almost a third of the children in the sample were the biological children of one or both parents in their families. Indeed, of the 43 families in the sample, 26 (60 percent) chose to pursue adoption without experiencing infertility. Of those 26 families, ten (38 percent) included a biological child of one or both parents. Five (19 percent) of the families who did experience infertility had a biological child prior to their experiencing infertility. Of the seventeen families (40 percent of the sample) that pursued adoption after experiencing infertility, nine (53 percent) described “giving up” on medical treatments before they had pursued all available medical options. Several mothers described having watched their friends exhaust their savings, only to be met with one failed round of in-vitro fertilization after another. Two mothers I interviewed, both physicians, explained that their in-depth knowledge of the relevant procedures, risks, and outcomes of various fertility treatments and procedures led them to decide against pursuing a pregnancy. Others described a feeling that, in the words of one mother, balanced against the number of children in the world who are living outside of a family, the effort of “making one from scratch” wasn’t “worth it.” Only eight out of the 43 families in my sample (19 percent) could be described
as adopting as a “last resort” after exhausting all (or even most) available methods to have a child who was genetically related to the parents.

Table 3: Infertility as a Factor in International Adoption

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Of the 43 families in the sample, number who…</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>had biological children prior to adoption</td>
<td>15 (35 percent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chose to adopt after experiencing infertility</td>
<td>17 (40 percent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chose to adopt without experiencing infertility</td>
<td>26 (60 percent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of the 26 families that did not experience infertility, number who…</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>had biological children prior to adoption</td>
<td>10 (38 percent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of the 17 families who experienced infertility, number who…</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>had biological children prior to adoption</td>
<td>5 (29 percent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pursued all available medical options</td>
<td>8 (47 percent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stopped short of pursuing all medical options</td>
<td>9 (53 percent)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While my sample is clearly not representative of a larger population, it does suggest that common assumptions about couples turning to adoption only after long and exhaustive struggles with infertility are not universally valid and may, indeed, have represent a minority of adoptive families in the timeframe of this study. On some level, this questions the existing literature. Writing in the *Annual Review of Sociology*, Fisher (2003) cites infertility as “clearly the most common reason” that adoptive parents choose adoption (2003: 338). He makes this claim, however, based on the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth, which found that 15 percent of women who reported treatment for infertility also reported contacting an adoption agency or lawyer, versus 3 percent of women who had not experienced infertility. Fisher also cites a 1996 study (Berry, et al.), which found that two thirds of the sample reported infertility as their primary motivation for adoption. Fisher notes that altruistic motives are a significant secondary motivation for those experiencing infertility, as well as the primary motivation for a significant minority of adoptive parents. This is, in some ways, consistent with my sample, in which all but two mothers
(both of whom indicated that they were primarily motivated to adopt by religion) reported that their primary motivation for adopting was their desire to parent another child. Echoing Fisher, however, they reported that the potential for altruism, for “helping someone,” was, as several mothers put it, a “bonus.”

Fisher also notes that parents motivated by altruism are far more likely to adopt “hard-to-place” children – older children and those with special needs. Fisher is, however, writing about motivations for domestic and international adoption together, as well as relying on data that are quite possibly no longer relevant, given the swift and dramatic changes to an ever-expanding range of fertility treatments. Smock and Greenland (2010), cite data that show that a quarter of those using “infertility services” ultimately adopted a child, and that 10 percent of childless women who have ever used such services were, at the time of the study, currently pursuing adoption. Smock and Greenland imply that infertility is the main motivation for adoptions of any kind, and they cite the small number of U.S.-born infants available for adoption (approximately 1 percent of babies born in the U.S.) as the primary – and, by implication, only – motivation for adopting internationally (2010: 580). Interestingly, they also cite studies that show the increasing effectiveness of IVF but claim that the numbers of those engaging in IVF are too small and the process too new to draw conclusions about the role of IVF in broader patterns of family formation. Indeed, my data, coupled with the ongoing and dramatic advances in fertility medicine, suggest an opening for further research into motivations for adoption in light of changes both in the fertility industry and in international adoption.

Despite efforts to avoid lengthy or difficult adoption processes, the processes that those interviewed for this project experienced were, as a rule, not easy or quick. Regulations changed mid-process for many parents I spoke with, and many parents interviewed experienced program
shut-downs, both temporary and permanent. For the parents I interviewed – and for all international adoptive parents today – international adoption never yielded a newborn baby. My sampling did not in any way seek out participants who experienced difficult adoption processes. Rather it was limited to participants who began their process of international adoption no earlier than 2004 when, as we now know, processes of international adoption began to lengthen and overall numbers of international adoption in the U.S. began to drop. The 43 adoptive families that I interviewed went through 58 distinct international adoption processes (while 67 children were adopted into these families, two were adopted through private domestic adoptions, four children were adopted through U.S. foster care, and several children were adopted simultaneously in sibling groups, bringing the total number of international adoption processes to 58). Of those 58 adoption processes, parents described unexpected, major bureaucratic delays in 54 cases. The four exceptional cases, in which adoptions preceded more-or-less “as planned,” all occurred before 2008, with two cases in Guatemala, one in Russia, and one in China. Many parents were caught in limbo due to political or diplomatic upheaval; 13 cases (22 percent) were interrupted for up to two years, pending legal changes in the sending nation, the United States, or both. These cases of political change involved adoptions from Nepal, Russia, Haiti, Guatemala, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Parents reported that they uncovered evidence of outright fraud and/or corruption in 14 cases (24 percent), including 12 out of the 17 cases of adoptions from Ethiopia (71 percent of cases from Ethiopia). In an additional two cases, parents encountered unexpected details about their children’s health. Perhaps more significantly, five families, caught in a protracted adoption process, elected to expedite that process by matching with a child with a documented special need rather than stick to their initial plan of adopting a non-special-needs child.
While many of the problems that adoptive parents encountered were simply bureaucratic in nature, others were the result of politically and culturally charged policy changes or due to deep corruption in the people and institutions directly responsible for their children’s adoptions. This not only resulted in personal suffering, but this brought adoptive parents face-to-face with many of the structural issues in international adoption – inequality, lack of regulation, human rights abuses, financial greed – that academics, activists, and journalists have been speaking and writing about for some time. While there may be (or may have been) a general perception in U.S. society of international adoption as a benign, if not beneficial, institution, the adoptive parents I interviewed did not, in general, emerge from their adoption processes with that perception intact. Generally speaking, they went into international adoption thinking it was better than their alternatives, but it turned out to be fraught, at every turn, with unexpected bureaucratic hurdles, long delays, disappointment, trauma, and outright fraud and corruption. The chapters that follow tell the stories of those encounters and explore how these adoptive mothers, in particular, continued to negotiate their preferences, assumptions, and aspirations about their children and about motherhood as the landscape of international adoption shifted around them.

**Where from Here?**

The landscape of international adoption looks distinctly different today than it did fifteen years ago because of fundamental policy changes both in the United States and in practically every sending nation around the globe. What the future of international adoption might look like remains an open question. While international adoption, as a practice, has been constricted, the demand that fuels reproductive markets is not going away. Therefore, the questions – ethical and political, scholarly and wholly pragmatic – that have shaped the debates over international adoption over
the past fifteen years will shape international adoption going forward. And, the extent to which they are interwoven with political, ethical, and policy-oriented debates surrounding other reproductive practices and technologies implicates them in the shaping of reproductive markets in general. I would argue that the example of international adoption is instructive in thinking about other reproductive markets despite the ways in which it’s particularistic; the debates over international adoption are multi-sided and complex and touch upon everything from nationalism to American racism to neuroscience, individual identity formation, and the perennial question of what “makes” a family. As Barbara Katz-Rothman writes, “the institution of adoption is the embodiment of all of our deepest cultural contradictions about motherhood” (1989: 81).

That not all reproductive markets raise identical ethical questions is central to understanding (international) adoption as a reproductive market; there is a profound (if common-sense) difference between the exchange of vials of sperm and the exchange of living, breathing human beings. This is not only relevant in thinking about adoption markets as a theoretical proposition, but crucial in thinking about the very real lived experiences of international adoptees who arrive in the United States with a language, a culture, and, often, a full set of memories. The debates and arguments surrounding international adoption are often deeply emotional, and they can be polarized and reductive. It often seems that they fall into distinctly “pro” and “anti” adoption camps that either wholly deny the evidence of coercion and irregularities in sending nations or, on the other hand, insist that no “true” need for international adoption exists and that no good can come from a child’s placement in a family outside of their natal country. The parameters of these debates have shaped the experiences of those interviewed for this project, and the narratives I heard seemed molded in response to this polarized cultural conversation.
The “pro-adoption” arguments tend to emphasize the “best interests of children.” In what some children’s rights and adoption advocates see as irony, UNICEF funds orphanages all over the world\(^1\) while vehemently arguing against international adoption, which UNICEF sees as a systematic denial of children’s cultural patrimony (see UNICEF 2004). “Pro-adoption” advocates, however, argue that that allowing children to grow up in institutions represents the grossest possible denial of their human rights, and those advocates cite everything from social science to neuroscience in support of a “childrens’ rights” perspective. This perspective espouses the idea that institutional settings ruin children’s social, emotional, and intellectual potential, destroy their chances for healthy relationships and economically productive lives, and further espouses that children have a fundamental human right to live in a permanent family (see Bartholet, in particular). This perspective suggests that it’s too simple to argue that, at the root of the matter, receiving nations’ adoption programs are a kind of post-colonial resource extraction that proceeds at the total expense of the human rights of the citizens of sending nations.

The “anti-adoption” arguments focus not only on children as UNICEF does but also on birthmothers as victims of the systems around them. In this vein, Briggs and Marre suggest, “the only benefit to these women is the avoidance of some other horror. They are doing it because they lack the economic, familial, and/or personal resources to raise a child” (2009: 19). Like adoptive mothers, birthmothers also face a forced choice. And like adoptive mothers, whose forced choices occur in the context of family arrangements in the contemporary United States, birthmothers’ forced choices occur in the context of a profound breakdown of social arrangements in sending nations. Briggs and Marre are clear about who they think international adoption \textit{does} benefit, continuing, “adoption does not particularly benefit the [birth]mother or her other children, or provide a means to improve her situation. On the contrary, the benefits redound to a long chain of
wealthy intermediaries, including governments” (2009: 19). But if adoptive mothers are not coerced into motherhood outright, and if they indeed exercise some agency within a limited set of choices, then so, too, logically, must birthmothers. Writing in 2010 and citing Deborah Spar’s 2006 work on surrogacy, Viviana Zelizer argues for an open, honest, and transparent discussion about the market value of reproductive goods and services – and babies. Wary of the argument that commercialization leads to mismanagement and corruption, Zelizer argues that “instead of worrying about market-based corruption, designers of public policy… should be promoting just, attractive, and life-enhancing economic arrangements” (2010: 277). Zelizer’s argument, among other things, assigns tremendous agency to birthmothers to pursue the arrangements that they deem most appropriate for themselves.

This overall position is, however, met with quick criticism. Herman acknowledges that “adoption commerce has always been a significant dimension of adoption history,” but, she continues, a market-based approach to adoption is “deeply disturbing because of its implication that children are bought and sold as commodities. This practice echoes slavery, negates the pricelessness of modern childhood, and mocks the human values that modern social welfare supposedly represents” (2008: 295). Perhaps an open conversation about the commercial nature of adoption is irreconcilable with a contemporary view of childhood (and children) as, as Zelizer says, “priceless.” Perhaps it should not be; as Marion Fourcade explains in her review of Zelizer’s work, “fears of commodification and pollution through money are deeply misguided, Zelizer argues. Empirically, life is both more complex and less clearcut than that…. Money, Zelizer reminds us time and again, does not dry up social ties. Rather, it organizes them and reveals their nature” (2012: 1059). Writing about eggs, sperm, and embryos, Cahn points out by analogy, “As is clear from the operation of the processes for both adoption and organ transplant, banning sales
does not eliminate the exchange of money or even the development of a market” (2009: 155). Cahn goes on to locate the commodification of reproductive services in the broader context of reproductive labor and argues that our cultural anxiety surrounding commodification centers around fears of the “flattening out of social relationships” – i.e., an erasure of gender difference as a cultural currency. Ultimately, these arguments pose a radical question: If adoption is a reproductive market in which we are – fundamentally – buying and selling children, should we? If it’s already happening, should we regulate it or forbid it? In either case, how? This project is neither “pro” nor “anti” adoption. Rather, I am interested in exploring whether we might find, within the debates surrounding adoption, a path forward towards a more ethical, “life-enhancing,” and life-affirming means of growing our families.

In chapter two, I offer a historical overview of international adoption as a phenomenon that emerged both from the domestic adoption reforms of the Progressive era as well as from the post-World War II and Cold War zeitgeist. I present the chronological development of a “boom and bust” cycle of international adoption programs in a variety of sending nations, and I discuss the simultaneous emergence of critical perspectives in academic and journalistic writing. I also review the ongoing political debates before the U.S. Congress, in the Department of State, and among international NGOs as a means of contextualizing the narratives of the mothers whom I interviewed.

Chapter three situates international adoption within the literature on reproductive markets and explores how adoptive parents understand themselves as participants in marketplace transactions. I argue that the parents I interviewed approached the adoption process as consumers and that they developed an increasing awareness of the commercial nature of adoption. I question
the existing literature on reproductive markets, insofar as it emphasizes the ways in which consumers of reproductive services and products deny the commercial (and highly stratified) nature of the “baby business” (see, in particular, Ginsburg and Rapp 1995, Schepper-Hughes 2002, Spar 2006, Swanson 2014).

In chapter four, I explore in detail adoptive parents’ decision-making processes with specific respect to the age, race, health, and disability status of their (future) children. My findings suggest that parents’ decision-making involves a delicate balance of preferences and concessions that reflects their aspirations and fears for their children’s future lives, and I relate this to the literature on racial formation, as well as on parental anxiety and intensive mothering. I argue that ongoing racial formation in the United States leads to fine-grained racial hierarchies and that children’s perceived health and “fitness” contributes, at times in unexpected ways, to their racialization in their parents’ minds.

In chapter five, I present the stories of mothers who encountered – and often vigilantly sought to uncover – evidence of fraud and corruption in their children’s adoptions. I also discuss the range of responses to fraud and corruption in my sample; while some parents sought to rationalize it, others experienced it as a deep betrayal of their children and of themselves. I argue that, in the context of contemporary ideologies surrounding motherhood, adoptive mothers’ encounters with fraud, corruption, and broader anti-adoption sentiments create new – and deeply gendered – forms of emotion work and ideological work. In addition to managing the bulk of the day-to-day family work associated with adopting and caring for their children, the adoptive mothers in my sample faced the distinctly gendered work of reconciling their actions to prevailing ideologies about family, motherhood, and a triumphal narrative of international adoption.
In its heyday, international adoption represented a cheerful, optimistic modernism – a multi-racial society that transcended colonial boundaries and hierarchies, and embraced “brave new families.” But ultimately this project begs the question of whether – or, to what extent – the shrinking of international adoption, in a post-modern, neoliberal context, signals some kind of cultural reversal on those values. Our thinking about international adoption encompasses an internally contradictory tangle of interests and a jumble of polarized debates – about the nature of kinship, about women’s agency and choice, about children’s individual interests versus the agendas of the adults around them, and about the role of the United States in the world, at least when it comes to “saving” versus “stealing” children. The cohort of mothers whose stories I tell in the coming chapters captures a moment of change in the institutional structure of international adoption and may, therefore, shed light on the workings of some of these cultural contradictions.
CHAPTER 2: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF INTERNATIONAL ADOPTION

This chapter offers a grounded historical and political context for thinking about international adoption in the twenty-first century. The last thirty years of international adoption have been characterized by a series of “booms” and “busts” – of rapidly expanding programs, followed by temporary freezes and indefinite shut-downs in one sending nation after another. This cycle began after the Korean War and took its contemporary form starting with Romania after the fall of the former Soviet Union. While the 1990s and early 2000s were a time of multiple disruptions to established international adoption programs, international adoption in the United States grew overall. The last ten years, however, have been characterized by a series of indefinite closures to international adoption programs in both major and more minor sending nations, and, despite some smaller, temporary “booms,” there has been a dramatic decline in the number of international adoptions overall. This “boom-bust” cycle exists because there is a steady demand for international adoption, while children’s availability for international adoption occurs under necessarily tenuous circumstances. This is true whether a “supply” of adoptable children is, as some critics argue, “artificially” manufactured in response to demand or not. Moreover, in countries where international adoption remains open, the profile of adoptable children has shifted substantially; bureaucratic processes are far longer and more involved than they were fifteen years ago, there is far more emphasis placed on adopting children with special needs, and children are, by and large, older. Today, there is no international adoption program in existence that offers parents the opportunity to adopt infants. In this chapter, I review the historical changes that have shaped international adoption in this first part of the twenty-first century in order to lay out the
bureaucratic, political, and ethical context in which the mothers whom I interviewed for this project found themselves.

Since the end of the Cold War era, international adoption programs have been characterized by their volatility, due both to a lack of regulation and to unevenness in the application of increasing regulation. At the same time, there has been increased media attention and public scrutiny to international adoption programs around the world. As the numbers of international adoptions climbed in the first decade of the twenty-first century, a wave of investigative journalism began to scrutinize the conditions under which some 10,000 to 12,000 children per year were being brought to the United States. As I outline below, journalistic coverage of international adoption both reached and reported on the State Department and has been deeply entangled with changes in adoption policy and the broader cultural discourse. While there has been some academic attention to the “supply” side of international adoption over the past two decades (notably, Briggs 2012, Briggs and Marre 2009, Dorrow 2006, Dubinsky 2010, Leinaweaver 2008), there has been a tremendous amount of journalistic coverage of the situation on-the-ground. This journalistic evidence points to a distinct “boom-bust” pattern among sending nations. Beyond providing a basic historical context, my hope, in this chapter, is to contextualize the narratives of the adoptive mothers that I interviewed, as well as to illuminate the contours of our broader cultural conversation on international adoption. The history I present here explains the assumptions held by the mothers I interviewed as they began their processes of international adoption. This history also explains how international adoption has set up an ethical double-bind for adoptive parents. Mothers’ experiences of the double-bind that international adoption presents lie at the heart of the theoretical problems surrounding international adoption as a reproductive market.
Early History

International adoption in the United States originated in the context of post-World War II America. Its foundations, however, are rooted in a longer history of adoption as a social practice. The informal – but widespread – adoption practices dating back to colonial America allowed for both the care of unparented children and the accommodation of childless couples. Children were often raised by adults other than their biological parents, usually by family members but sometimes by strangers. Both the “putting out” and the “taking in” of children was possible because “the household, and not so much the conjugal unit, constituted the colonial family” (Marsh and Ronner 1996: 17). These arrangements depended on fluid, permeable boundaries, both between “family” and “community” (Marsh and Ronner 1996: 19), as well as between “consanguine and nonconsanguine families” (Carp 2009: 3). But as the norms and practices of colonial America gave way in the nineteenth century, the same social, economic, and political forces that led to more nuclear family arrangements consequently hardened the boundaries between kin and non-kin. In the nineteenth century, as the conception of childhood itself began to shift with urbanization and the growing industrial economy, adoption became more organized. Viviana Zelizer (1985) famously characterizes the changing nature of adoption as a shift from the “instrumental” placement of children in foster families and apprenticeships to the “emotional” adoption of children as one’s “own.” Indeed, the term “adoption” itself was not used to describe the forging of family ties until the second decade of the nineteenth century.

At the turn of the twentieth century, adoption also became far more bureaucratized alongside new forms of social policy, new forms of governmental oversight, and the emergence of the social work profession during the Progressive era (Carp 2009, Marsh and Ronner 1996, May 1997). The first formal adoption code in the United States was a Massachusetts law passed in
1851, far more concerned with inheritance than the emotional aspects of kinship, per se. Indeed, the formalization of adoptions remained uneven until well into the twentieth century; despite the passage of adoption laws across the country, it was uncommon for Americans to use them until “the Social Security system provided material incentives to legalize family ties in the 1930s” (Herman 2008: 21, also see Marsh and Ronner 1996). But the Massachusetts law, which was to become the model for adoption laws across the United States, nonetheless “reflected Americans’ new conceptions of childhood and parenthood by emphasizing the welfare of the child” (Carp: 2009: 6).

Zelizer’s designation of modern adoptions as “emotional” signals this shift not only in the economy writ large but also in the precise economic significance of children on a micro-level. In a pre-modern economy, where foster children provided useful labor to their foster parents, there was a preference for boys who were old enough to perform farm labor, as well as a readier supply of boys whose birth parents didn’t have work for them to do. While girls old enough to perform domestic labor were also valued as foster children, Zelizer suggests that there was a scarcer supply of girls because biological parents were reluctant to give up their own daughters’ domestic labor. “Useful” foster children were paid a wage for their labor. Yet mothers often had to pay a fee to orphanages or baby homes to accept “useless” infants and young children.² It was within the emergence of an industrial economy, the simultaneous rally of Progressive reformers against child labor, the rise of developmental psychology, and the overall cultural shift towards a “sentimental valuation” of children, that U.S. adoptions became emotionally, rather than instrumentally, driven. Zelizer grounds this argument in a dramatic shift in adoptive parents’ preferences from older children to infants and toddlers – in particular to girls with curly blond hair and blue eyes (1985: 193-194, see also Guthrie and Grossman 1999).
The demand for infant adoptions in the first decades of the twentieth century far outpaced the availability of adoptable children; Zelizer cites a 1937 headline in *The New York Times* that declares, “The Baby Market Is Booming” (1985: 192). The article, however, elaborates that the adopted child “needs protection as never before… [because] too many hands are snatching it” (Zelizer 1985: 193). Indeed, the history of adoption has long been intertwined with fears of baby snatching, baby selling, “bad” mothers, and “good” mothers being wronged. As Zelizer evinces, stories about adoption have long been a staple of the press, which magnifies and distorts our cultural anxiety surrounding kinship and motherhood more generally. At the same time, money has been a part of adoption since the very beginning. So in a modern (and post-modern) context, market dynamics and marketplace analogies are interwoven with the concern for child welfare that has characterized the formalization and bureaucratization of American adoptions throughout the twentieth century.

**International Adoption as a National Project**

As the United States emerged from the Second World War and stepped onto the global stage as an emissary of democracy, Americans grew to see their role in the world, from rebuilding Europe to “fighting communism,” as generous and benevolent. The emergence of this worldview coincided with the ongoing assimilation of the children and grandchildren of European immigrants thanks, in no small measure, to the postwar economic boom. It was in this economic, cultural, and diplomatic context that both the United States as a nation and Americans as individuals came to see the breaking down of (white) ethnic barriers and a role for themselves in the international adoption of children. As Herman explains in her 2008 history of adoption in the United States, it was the children fathered by American servicemen in Europe, Japan, and Korea who initially
generated the most interest and pity. Reports of the mistreatment of mixed-race children – particularly the children of African American service members – filled the pages of the American popular press (Herman 2008: 216). At the time, military families stationed in Europe were able to adopt local children through a military screening process, avoiding both U.S. and European national authorities, but the trend quickly spread to non-military families. Initially through an emergency directive by President Truman in 1945, international adoptions of “eligible children from war-torn countries” (Herman 2008: 218) proceeded with relatively little regulation and oversight until 1962. As Herman writes, “For Americans, saving the ‘children of calamity’ infused adoption with the particular patriotism of the Cold War era…. As with earlier phases in adoption history, displays of American benevolence conveniently dovetailed with pursuit of citizens’ desires” (2008: 217). Indeed, in the context of postwar America, “citizens’ desires” for children as a part of nuclear family life and the era’s particular cult of domesticity coincided with contemporary views on America’s particular role in the modern, modernizing world (see also May 2008).

As the first wave of Korean children joined American parents in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and as the first organized efforts to promote transracial domestic adoption materialized in the mid-to-late 1960s, international adoption, along with transracial domestic adoption, took on important symbolic value within the ideologies surrounding American kinship. Herman argues that the humanitarian motivations behind the first postwar international adoptions reanimated a “rhetoric of rescue and religious fervor” (2008: 217) that had characterized the placement of orphans throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and she characterizes the U.S. understanding of its participation in international adoption as a “triumphal narrative.” According to this narrative, the United States and its citizens understand international adoption as a statement
not only of altruism, and not only of America’s political-economic and moral superiority, but also of cultural openness, inclusivity, and diversity, both within individual families and within U.S. foreign policy. Herman argues that both international and domestic transracial adoption have, in this sense, come to reflect “a longed-for symbol of national progress. Families made across borders of difference ratify a triumphal narrative in which bright lines separate the eras of Jim Crow racism and old-fashioned empire from our own age’s stated commitment to multiculturalism and postcolonialism” (2008: 288). A triumphal narrative not only naturalizes international adoption as a way of forming kinship ties but also allows international adoption to proceed as a widespread and relatively uncontested practice precisely because it reinforces broader ideologies of American citizenship.

This triumphal ideology was clearly at work in one of the most notable child-relocation operations of the twentieth century: Operation Pedro Pan, in which, throughout the early 1960s, over 10,000 child refugees from Cuba – called “political orphans” in the media at the time (Dubinsky 2010: 32) – were placed in foster care in the United States. The Cuban Revolution, having ushered in a new phase of Cold War rhetoric, set the stage for the media reports that described “saving” these children from “Castro’s brain washing” (Dubinsky 2010: 32). Publications by the U.S. Department of State, the Catholic Church, and other organizations described both the importance and the ease of these children’s adjustment to American cultural and political values (Dubinsky 2010: 35). Dubinsky concludes that, ironically, “Americanization included a conversion to anti-aristocratic, egalitarian values – presumably some of the very forces they were fleeing in Cuba. Yet somehow this confirmed the superiority of the life the children would find in the United States” (2010: 40). As Herman likewise notes, the adoption of children “sight unseen” presumes “that childhood in America [is] unquestionably superior to childhood in
developing nations” (2010: 222). Ultimately, Dubinsky argues that this sense of inherent superiority fuels the “centrality of children to state building projects…. What could be more suited to the benevolent supremacy of Cold War America than the story of thousands of its citizens providing refuge for young victims of communism?” (2010: 55). While Operation Peter Pan was framed as a fostering program and not, strictly speaking, as an international adoption program, it provides an instructive example of the “triumphal narrative” that underlies U.S. involvement in international adoption. Further, the rhetoric surrounding this program demonstrates how international adoption programs both emerge and shut down within the particular political and diplomatic relationships between the United States and other nations.

As the scope of international adoption expanded in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, so too did our understanding of how international adoption relationships between nations mirror those nations’ broader economic and diplomatic relationships. Several important studies have framed the current picture of international adoptions from the sending countries that they deal with. Notably, Dorrow’s 2006 study of Chinese adoptions and Leinaweaver’s 2008 study of adoptions from Peru offer particular insight into the ways that international adoption can serve as an important kind of diplomacy, complementing the formal diplomatic and economic relationships that those nations already have (or, perhaps, desire). Dorow thoroughly investigates both sides of the adoption of babies from China by parents in the United States and illuminates how the economic and legal structures surrounding international adoption have not only facilitated, but (borrowing Herman’s language) have also rationalized and attempted to naturalize Chinese-American adoptions. Based on interviews with Chinese orphanage administrators, social workers, and adoption facilitators, Dorow suggests that Chinese adoption law discourages domestic adoption through crackdowns on informal adoption, staggering regulation, and prohibitive costs,
while it facilitates international adoption through the development of a discourse of “clienthood.” This, she argues, serves a larger purpose: “Adoption exchange, if done according to transnationally circulating standards of both caring and contractual service, suggests the more equal, modern relationship between China and the Western world desired by many Chinese and expressed in state nationalism…. Clienthood as a discourse is perpetually reproductive of modernity for China, [and] of the political economy of adoption” (2006: 124). Here, Dorow provides a clear example of how international adoption and kinship can stand in for nation under neoliberal globalization – the transactions and the exchanges involved in international adoption reveal qualities of the political and economic relationship between the countries involved.

In her ethnography on child circulation – both local and international – in Andean Peru, Leinaweaver describes centuries-old, indigenous systems of child circulation and their contemporary expressions in a context of rural-to-urban migration, high unemployment, and the precariousness engendered by neoliberal economic policies. She casts Peru’s participation in international adoption as only one part of a larger system of child circulation and explains that, in the 1990’s, in the wake of decades of violence, “poverty intensified as neoliberal policies took hold, and revisions in family and adoption law – based proudly in international treaties, legislating Peru as a modern and internationally aware nation – reshaped poor and indigenous Peruvian families” (2008: 158). Referring to the procedural requirements of international adoption treaties, Leinaweaver continues, “It’s worth asking why the neoliberal state would want to take on the burden of additional children to care for. Why do the courts go to such lengths to… [produce] more wards of the state? The answer, I suggest, lies partly in a co-optation of the ‘best interest of the child’ standpoint so widely accepted in the international sphere” (2008: 158-159). This, Leinaweaver argues, is how Peru “perform[s] itself” as a modern nation on the global stage (2008:
159). But if Peru, as Leinaweaver argues, performs as a modern nation with modern, Euro-American, “enlightened” social work practices, then the United States, logically, no longer plays the role of an exclusively enlightened savior-nation. Indeed, the near-universal acceptance of the “best interest of the child” standpoint, along with contemporary standards of practice in social work, both illustrates the dynamism of the diplomatic relationships that underscore international adoption programs as well as disrupts the triumphal narrative in which the U.S. is so invested.

**Romania’s Orphans after the Cold War**

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Americans were outraged by media coverage of the deplorable living conditions in Romanian orphanages, first exposed on ABC’s 20/20 special “Shame of a Nation.” As Tara Bahrampour writes in the *Washington Post* almost twenty-five years later, “News organizations across the world presented Romania’s orphanages as a symbol of a decayed empire” – and, consequently, as a symbol of American triumphalism at the close of the Cold War. As the Soviet Union fell and the United States adjusted its self-image to meet a new global political reality, international adoption from Romania indeed functioned as a site of that reinvention. In the news coverage of Romanian orphanages, Americans perceived a real crisis and a real affront to their values. Birth control had been banned in Romania as women were exhorted to produce new workers for the nation. But when abandoned children, many disabled, ended up in orphanages, Americans’ Cold War fervor was reinvigorated, and many flocked to “save” Romanian orphans. Adam Pertman, *Boston Globe* journalist and adoption advocate, called the rush to adopt from Romania “a wildfire.” Writing about the frenzy to adopt children from Romanian orphanages, Ortiz and Briggs suggest that the debates surrounding international adoption, in general, constitute an encounter with “powerful contradictions that lay bare cultural
logics [and] identify the diverse stakeholders in social conflicts” (2003: 39). In this sense, the rush to adopt from Romania in the early 1990s serves as the first in a series of adoption “booms” that signal shifts in a triumphal narrative of international adoption as Americans moved on from the Cold War era.

The chaos of Romania’s regime change created a perfect storm for a booming international adoption program; many children found themselves unparented at the same time that there was almost no regulation or oversight of international adoptions. Writing in *Foreign Affairs* in 2003, Kapstein explains: “Changes in economic and social policies determined the sources of supply. With the end of the Cold War, market-driven economics were ushered into Central and Eastern Europe, causing the collapse of communist-era welfare systems and a surge in the number of abandoned children.” He continues, “Romania, for example, had allowed only 30 intercountry adoptions in 1989; in the year after the fall of Nicolae Ceausescu, it let more than 10,000 children leave the country.” Indeed, over 2500 Romanian children came to the United States in 1991, by far the highest number for any year since (see Hamilton 2014, Sullivan 2012 for additional journalistic coverage). But that soon changed, and in 2001 Romania shut down international adoptions, seemingly for good.

Elizabeth Bartholet, a Harvard law professor and strong proponent of international adoption, writing in 2005, characterized the Romanian shut-down as wholly disconnected from concerns over child welfare or the conditions in orphanages, suggesting that it was initially triggered by what she characterizes as a very limited baby-buying scandal. She elaborates,

“Opponents of international adoption took advantage of this scandal to call for a moratorium on international adoption [in Romania], pending ‘reform’ of the adoption system. While efforts to enforce rules against baby buying are appropriate, these so-called reform moves in Romania resulted in denying adoptive homes on an on-going basis to thousands of children abandoned in institutions for reasons
which had nothing to do with any illicit payments to their birth parents (Bartholet 1999). More recently... the country has shut down international adoption entirely as a result of pressure imposed by the European Union in connection with Romania’s efforts to join the Union.” (2005: 111).

Bartholet certainly echoes other scholars who insist that international adoption programs – in their booms and their busts – have less to do with actual concern for child welfare than with the cooptation of the discourses surrounding child welfare in order to achieve political or diplomatic ends. Bartholet, however, in her clear voice as an advocate for more international adoptions, illustrates, first, that debates over international adoption policy are highly polarized into “pro” and “anti” adoption camps, and, second, that both sides of this debate are politically motivated.

Indeed, international political and diplomatic bodies have long sought to regulate international adoption. The 1993 Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation of Intercountry Adoption called for the application of international standards in order to prevent fraud, corruption, and abuse within international adoption. As Bartholet (2005) points out, the Hague Convention takes the important step of legitimizing international adoption under international law, but she nonetheless raises concerns that its implementation will (and, in fact, it did) create additional bureaucratic and financial hurdles for U.S. adoptive parents, as well as for sending nations. The Hague convention emphasizes children’s rights to live in families, rather than institutions, seeking “to ensure that intercountry adoptions are made in the best interests of the child and with respect for his or her fundamental rights, and to prevent the abduction, the sale of, or traffic in children.” In its primary objectives, the Hague convention calls for the establishment of a centralized authority to handle international adoptions in both sending and receiving nations, and for nations’ central authorities to cooperate fully and transparently with one another. As signatory countries have, over time, ratified and fully implemented the convention,
Bartholet’s prediction that international adoptions would slow has come to pass. The U.S., an initial signatory, did not officially ratify the Hague convention until 2007. Below, I describe the most prominent cases of adoption slow-downs or shut-downs in ratifying nations, with an eye toward the ways that these cases have produced increasingly polarized debates surrounding international adoption.

Guatemala as a Representative Case

Following the end of the decades-long armed internal conflict in Guatemala in 1996, Guatemala surfaced as a logical and convenient sending nation for international adoptions, particularly to the United States, and was a major provider of children for international adoptions through 2008, when comprehensive adoption reform was approved and ultimately enacted by the Guatemalan legislature. Throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s, adoptions in Guatemala were largely unregulated and relied on independent networks of foster mothers, doctors, and lawyers who enjoyed an almost total lack of governmental oversight. Guatemala ratified the Hague convention in 2002, temporarily freezing adoptions, until the Constitutional Court of Guatemala reversed the country’s course on the Hague convention’s implementation. While there was some ongoing tension between Guatemalan authorities and the U.S. Department of State over the implementation (or non-implementation) of the Hague Convention between 2003 and 2007 (See Clemetson 2007b), Guatemalan adoptions to the U.S. continued at a brisk pace during those years, ultimately peaking at over 4500 adoptions in 2007. Between 1997 and 2004, 79 percent of all adoptions in Guatemala were to the United States. After 2002, Europe and Canada pulled out of international adoptions with Guatemala because of Guatemala’s failure to ratify the Hague convention (Dubinsky 2010), and so the proportion of U.S. adoptive parents rose to 93 percent in
2004 and reached at least 99 percent by 2007 (Selman 2009). Dubinsky, a historian, in a case study of international adoption in Guatemala, interviews a North American expatriate hotel owner in Guatemala, who tells her, “if they shut down the adoption system, it will be like closing an auto plant” (2010: 108). By the early 2000s, U.S. parents were paying up to $40,000 for a transaction that, according to calculations by a coalition of NGOs, actually cost about $4000 (Dubinsky 2010: 108). Adoption was big business by the money and by the sheer number of babies; a 2006 Associated Press article claimed, “today every 100th baby born in Guatemala grows up as an adopted American” (Llorca 2006).

As adoptions from Guatemala were booming in the early 2000s, some of the first journalistic investigations of Guatemalan adoptions began to emerge. Writing in *Foreign Affairs* in 2003, Kapstein cites a 2000 U.N. report that links Guatemalan adoptions to “a variety of criminal offences, including the buying and selling of children, the falsifying of documents, the kidnapping of children, and the [improper] housing of babies awaiting private adoption.” Selman, writing in *Foreign Policy*, calls international adoption in general “a growing for-profit trade” (2007: 32) and singles Guatemala out as a particularly egregious example of “baby buying.” E.J. Graff, head of the Schuster Institute for Investigative Journalism at Brandeis University and a specialist in international adoption, describes Guatemala as having “the world’s most notorious record of corruption in foreign adoption” (2008: 63). And in February 2007, more mainstream media began to sound alarm bells, with *The New York Times* reporting that the U.S. Department of State “cautioned” parents interested in adopting from Guatemala that the situation was “volatile and unpredictable.” But the *Times* article issues a distinct warning to U.S. adoptive parents to be careful, rather than offering an indictment of the structural issues in Guatemala (and around the world) – war, poverty, corruption, legal impunity – that led to volatility in the adoption system.
Likewise, stories about U.S. adoptive families facing this uncertainty, as well as grappling with its implications, began to emerge. Writing in *The New York Times Magazine* in October 2007, Maggie Jones, a contributing writer and mother of a daughter adopted from Guatemala, explains that she initially sought an open adoption because she was sensitive to the kinds of questions and emotions that could emerge around identity for adopted children. She writes that “before we went to Guatemala to adopt our daughter Lucia, we told our agency we hoped to meet her Guatemalan mother. But it was never clear that she was given the option of meeting us.” Jones goes on to describe her and several other adoptive mothers’ stories of searching for their children’s birthmothers in Guatemala, though, mostly, the concern she expresses is for the identity formation and peace of mind of the adopted children she profiles. In a similar vein, journalist Elizabeth Larson shares her story of searching for her daughter’s Guatemalan birthmother in the December 2007 issue of *Mother Jones* magazine. Unlike Jones in the *Times Magazine*, however, Larson dives directly into the ethical issues surrounding the systemic movement of children from poor women to relatively wealthy ones. And while Jones, at the end of her piece, settles into the uncertainty that accompanied not being able to locate her daughter’s birthmother, Larson frames her article with the ethical uncertainty that she encountered in the project of international adoption as a whole. Larson, furthermore, calls for greater journalistic attention to the issues of corruption, fraud, and abuse within international adoption.

In response to tremendous international pressure from the European Union, the United Nations, and a number of NGOs, Guatemala passed a comprehensive adoption reform law in December 2007. This law reaffirmed Guatemala’s commitment to the Hague convention, created a centralized, national adoption authority, and effectively halted international adoptions. The law went into full effect on July 13, 2010, and negotiations between Guatemala and the United States
about both pending and future adoptions have been ongoing since then. Many cases were, slowly, resolved, but years later, many cases remain unresolved, and new cases of fraud have emerged. In 2009, the Associated Press reported that the Guatemalan government officially acknowledged that children whose parents were murdered during the decades-long armed internal conflict that ended in 1996 had been adopted, many by U.S. families (Llorca 2009a).

Additionally, in the several years that followed the passage of Guatemala’s adoption reform law, several cases of outright kidnapping were documented and resolved. In 2008, a Guatemalan woman, Ana Escobar, was kidnapped at gunpoint and her infant daughter was kidnapped. Thanks to DNA testing, which was always required but which received additional scrutiny after December 2007, the two were reunited (Grainger 2009, Llorca 2009b). The Associated Press reports that a California couple, who suspected that their daughter’s adoption was fraudulent, spent months in Guatemala, ultimately prompting a criminal investigation into the adoption brokers responsible for their adopted daughter’s paperwork. Their daughter, too, was reunited with her birth parents, from whom she had been stolen (Llorca 2008). In August 2011, a Guatemalan judge ordered the return of a six-year-old girl, adopted by a family in the U.S., to her birth mother in Guatemala, who had argued for years that her daughter was stolen. Nine Guatemalans, including a judge, were indicted in the girl’s kidnapping, but the order was unenforceable in the U.S., and the U.S. adoptive parents have remained silent on the matter (Kirpalani and Ng 2011, Romo 2011). The situation of Guatemalan children and the controversy surrounding Guatemalan adoptions continues to appear in the media today. Mary Anastasia O’Grady, writing in The Wall Street Journal, has profiled the children “left behind” in orphanages and foster care placements since the shut-down of international adoption (O’Grady 2014), and the end of Guatemalan adoptions has provoked the
question of what has “happened” to the 4000 children a year who have not been adopted from Guatemala since the adoption shut-down.

**Scandals in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Nepal**

While scholars (notably Dubinksy 2010, Briggs 2012) describe Guatemala as the quintessential case for understanding the dynamics in sending nations, Graff (writing in 2014) identifies Cambodia as the case that initially caught the attention of the U.S. Department of State, setting them on the course that led to investigations in Vietnam and Nepal, as well as Ethiopia, Haiti, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and a handful of other nations. Graff argues that a distinct pattern emerged in these countries, in which babies were “‘produced’ by unscrupulous middlemen who would persuade desperately poor, uneducated, often illiterate villagers whose culture had no concept of permanently severing biological ties to send their children away – saying that wealthy Westerners would educate their children and send them home at age 18, or would send a monthly stipend, or some other culturally comprehensible fostering plan” (Graff 2014). When the U.S. Department of State froze adoptions in Nepal in 2010, they did so based on similar reports. Graff goes on to suggest that there are important lessons to be gleaned from the “anatomy” of this case: “the State Department was confident it had discovered systemic nationwide corruption in Vietnam – a network of adoption agency representatives, village officials, orphanage directors, nurses, hospital administrators, police officers, and government officials who were profiting by paying for, defrauding, coercing, or even simply stealing Vietnamese children from their families to sell them to unsuspecting Americans” (Graff 2010b).

The history of U.S. adoptions in Vietnam has its roots in the end of the Vietnam War, when, as U.S. troops began to withdraw, President Ford ordered the evacuation of over 2500 orphaned
and abandoned Vietnamese children. They were flown to the U.S. and adopted over several months in a mission termed Operation Babylift, which drew media attention from its humanitarian impulse as well as from the crash of the first Babylift flight (Martin 2015, Moritz 2015). Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, the number of international adoptions from Vietnam climbed along with the overall increase in international adoptions over that time period. In 2007, Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie famously adopted their son, Pax, from Vietnam. But in 2008, the U.S. began investigating international adoptions in Vietnam due to widespread reports of corruption, fraud, and outright trafficking in babies. In what some journalists describe as a diplomatic “tit for tat” (Boudreau 2014), Vietnam ultimately shut down international adoptions within a year of these allegations surfacing. As The New York Times reported at the time of the shut-down, “an investigation by the American embassy found many cases in which mostly poor birth parents had been paid or deceived into placing their child in an orphanage. In many cases, an embassy report said, ‘orphanage officials told them that the child will visit home frequently, will return home… or will send remittance payments from the United States.’ The report included the story of a birth mother who was unable to pay for her Caesarean section… [and the doctor] placed the healthy baby up for adoption” (Navarro 2008). These reported improprieties echo similar allegations heard in sending nations around the world.

In her piece, “Anatomy of an Adoption Crisis,” E.J. Graff describes how Vietnamese authorities were particularly unhappy that Americans were conducting criminal investigations on their soil, interpreting U.S. actions as an insult to their national autonomy, as well as to their ability to adequately care for their nation’s children. Graff also acknowledges that U.S. adoptive parents were catapulted into emotional turmoil over fraud investigations into adoptions that they had considered finalized, and that, in many cases, were even considered final under Vietnamese
law. Based on her review of State Department documents, Graff maintains that the State Department and USCIS\textsuperscript{3} seemed to have the best interests of Vietnamese children at heart. And, at that point, the U.S. was not quick to shut down adoptions; as Graff (2010b) reports, adoptions did not stop until Vietnam shut them down. Indeed, the U.S. had shut down adoptions in Cambodia due to similar reports in 2001 (Corbett 2002, Rotabi 2012), and U.S. adoptive families had been reported as “stuck” in Cambodia at that time (Mydans 2001).

**Russia and China as Exceptions**

In December 2012, President Putin signed a bill permanently banning Americans from adopting Russian children, claiming retaliation against a U.S. law that sanctioned Russian officials for accused human rights violations (Flintoff 2012, Lipman 2012, Voigt and Brown 2013). Masha Lipman, writing in *The New Yorker*, quotes one of the Russian lawmakers who initiated the ban, who was asked by a Russian reporter if she thought Russian orphans would be better off in Russian orphanages than in U.S. families. The lawmaker responded, “This is not the point. You’re asking a wrong question…. Normally economically developed countries don’t give up their children, not a single one of them. I am a Russian patriot” (Lipan 2012). Of course, at that time, Russia was still “giving up” their children to Sweden, France, and Germany, the bill simply having halted adoptions to the United States. When Putin held a press conference upon signing the adoption ban, a reporter asked him to comment on the notion that the ban was “excessive.” Putin, in a direct reference to the United States’ “humiliation” of Russia, responded, “Do you enjoy being humiliated? Are you a sadomasochist?” (Lipman 2012). The U.S. Department of State, as reported in *The New York Times*, “strongly criticized” the ban; as one State Department spokesman said, “We have repeatedly made clear, both in private and in public, our deep concerns about the
bill passed by the Russian Parliament” (Herszenhorn and Eckholm 2012). Nobody in the U.S. State Department questioned the legitimacy of the abandonment of Russian children, nor were reports of a “gray market” at all operative in Russia’s decision to end adoptions with the United States. The Russian adoption ban provides a clear case of baldly diplomatic – and nationalistic – motivations, including the suggestion that the best interests of children are far less important than nationalistic concerns.

Russia had also temporarily suspended international adoptions in 2007, when they, along with multiple other countries (including China and the United States) began to shift their practices towards Hague convention compliance. After 2007, the numbers of international adoptions from Russia and China – at that time, the two leading sending nations to the United States – declined as adoptive families began to face longer processes and additional paperwork. These slow-downs, which ultimately became the norm for the international adoption program in China, were wholly bureaucratic in nature and driven by the organized implementation of new policies, rather than by the kinds of scandals that rocked Guatemala, Vietnam, Cambodia, and other nations. At the time of these slow-downs, journalist and adoption advocate Adam Pertman was quoted in The New York Times, explaining, “What is happening in Russia is part of a fundamental restructuring of international adoption across several countries” (Clemetson 2007a). In May 2007, China instituted new and far more stringent regulations that would govern the eligibility of foreign adoptive parents. The new rules initially prohibited single people and those over the age of 50 from adopting. Then, in 2011, China once again allowed single women to adopt but limited them to adopting children with special needs. Single women were also required, as per the 2011 regulations, to sign an affidavit that they were not homosexual. The 2007 regulations bar adoptive parents with a body mass index over 40 (about 230 lbs. for a 5’4” woman or 275 lbs. for a 5’10”
man). They also bar adoptions to parents who have taken antidepressants or other psychiatric drugs. There are additional regulations related to the length of a couple’s marriage, the marital history of the partners, and adoptive parents’ income and assets. (Katz 2006, Voigt and Brown 2013). As reported by CNN, a Chinese government spokeswoman explained that “the new rules were necessary to protect ‘the best interests of children’ as foreign demand for children outstripped the supply of orphans…. The rules ensure adopters ‘are able to offer the Chinese children adopted the best possible environment to grow in.’” (Voigt and Brown 2013). While there have been reports of baby-buying scandals in China that surfaced in the mainstream U.S. media (notably Custer 2013, writing in The Atlantic), these reports have not gained the same traction, nor did they have the same impact as they have in other cases or sending nations. Unlike in the case of Russia, attention to the “best interests of children” discourse is apparent in the Chinese case. More notably, though, Chinese adoption regulations seem to be driven by a similar, if softer, nationalism, with restrictions on U.S. parents tied to their “fitness” as parents and as citizens.

**Ethiopia**

As adoptions halted in Guatemala, many observers predicted that Ethiopia would be the next place that U.S. parents would turn. And, in fact, by 2010, Ethiopia was the second-largest sending nation for international adoption, outpaced only by China. In 2010, the Associated Press reported that, while the numbers of international adoptions were on the decline around the world, Ethiopia was “bucking [the] global trend” (Crary 2010a). A 2010 Washington Post headline declared that “Ethiopia provides hope” for U.S. adoptive parents (Crary 2010b) who had been shut out by other sending nations’ tightening regulations. In early 2012, The Wall Street Journal reported that “Ethiopia has become one of the busiest adoption destinations in the world, thanks
in part to loose controls that make it one of the fastest places to adopt a child” (Jordan 2012). The same article, however, quotes Karen Rotabi, an adoption scholar and professor of social work, as saying that Ethiopia is “a classic example of the next boom country where there are warning signs [of corruption and fraud]” (Jordan 2012). Writer, researcher, and birthmother advocate Mirah Riben, writing for *The Huffington Post* in January 2015, called Ethiopia “the new go-to adoption hot spot nation” for American parents during its “boom” period, and she goes on to argue that Ethiopia fits the clear pattern of a sending nation in which disorganization makes for the same confluence of fraud, corruption, rights abuses, and scandal that rocked Vietnam, Cambodia, and, in particular, Guatemala. Indeed, even before the surge in Ethiopian adoptions truly took hold between 2008 and 2010, an Ethiopian adoption official was quoted in *The New York Times*, saying, “I don’t think we’ll be able to handle it. We don’t have the capacity to handle all these new agencies, and we have to monitor the quality, not just the quantity” (Gross and Connors 2007).

A crop of critical, investigative journalism quickly emerged in response to the growth of Ethiopian adoptions. E.J. Graff, in a boldly titled piece in *The American Prospect* – “Don’t Adopt from Ethiopia” – opens with the allegation that the 2012 *Wall Street Journal* investigation cited above tells “a deceptively simple story” that fails to acknowledge the ethical dilemmas – as well as the “gray market” – inherent in international adoption. The *Wall Street Journal* piece to which Graff is responding tells the story of a girl who enjoys a life of relative affluence in the U.S. but whose living father in Ethiopia failed to understand the permanent and legalistic nature of U.S. adoptions. Graff’s conclusion: “It's far more rewarding to love an individual child than to give to anonymous foreigners. I know; I'm parenting an adopted child. But no one wants to be complicit, even unknowingly, in defrauding a father out of his daughter” (Graff 2012b). Later writing in the *Pacific Standard*, Graff links this kind of micro-level fraud to broader (and more lucrative)
patterns, echoing the worries expressed by Ethiopian government officials years earlier. Graff explains:

“Many poor nations’ international adoption programs started, as in the Ethiopia that [Time magazine, in a 2002 piece on AIDS orphans] portrayed, with a few genuinely humanitarian adoptions, saving children from desperate circumstances. But once word spread among hopeful Western parents that healthy little ones were coming quickly out of a particular country, far more people would sign up than a small, poor country could effectively manage. National governments would become unable to continue carefully supervising every adoption. Demand would begin to outstrip supply, leading to that obvious two-part capitalist solution: increased prices and increased production” (2014).

Likewise, Katherine Joyce, writing in The Atlantic in 2011, tells the story of well-intentioned Ethiopian government officials, but a total lack of regulation and accountability at the local level, which, Joyce documents, led to multiple cases of silencing and frightening shake-downs of adoptive parents, journalists, and other activists who sought to uncover patterns of mismanagement, fraudulent documentation, and financial corruption.

At the same time, Ethiopian adoptees’ own stories began to emerge in the media. Unlike previous cases in Southeast Asia and in Guatemala, in which most adoptees were infants or young toddlers, many more of the children that came to the U.S. from Ethiopia were older, with greater native language development and more established memories at the time of their adoptions. Two particularly notable stories to hit the mainstream media revealed children who reported being bought and sold, of being treated (and feeling) like commodities. A 2013 CNN investigation profiled a young woman named Tarikuwa Lemma. “When I was 13, I was sold,” she said. The news piece explained that she and two sisters were adopted by a U.S. couple who were told that the girls’ birthparents had died of AIDS. But, as Lemma explains, “the truth was that our mother had died as a result of complications during childbirth, and our father was alive and well” (Voigt 2013). CBS News also reported in 2010 on a separate set of three sisters who alleged that their
father had been paid by a U.S.-based adoption agency to place them for adoption in the U.S. (Keteyian 2010). The voices of older adopted children presented, it would seem, an unanticipated contribution to the conversation about the fallout, both ethical and practical, of massive international adoption programs.

**Haiti, Uganda, the Congo, and U.S. Parents’ Last Stand against a Global Trend**

In 2013, Katherine Joyce published a piece in *Mother Jones* entitled “Orphan Fever: The Evangelical Movement’s Adoption Obsession.” In it, she describes “an ‘orphan theology’ movement that has taken hold among mainstream evangelical churches, whose flocks are urged to adopt as an extension of pro-life beliefs, a way to address global poverty, and a means of spreading the Gospel in their homes” (Joyce 2013). She reports on fly-by-night operators, corrupt middlemen, and Christian ministries with little international legal experience, who facilitated waves of adoptions fueled by professional networks of pastors, by word of mouth, by social media, and by online Christian women’s magazines. Joyce describes these magazines as a wolf in sheep’s clothing – as an amalgamation of seemingly disparate cultural signifiers – peddling natural remedies, organic “modest clothing,” and neoconservative “family values” alongside Liberian children. Many of the families that adopted these children, Joyce reports, had large families to begin with. Often adopting four or more additional Liberian “orphans,” they frequently home-schooled and, more disturbingly, practiced severe forms of corporal punishment promoted by the same fundamentalist Christian networks that encouraged adoption. While Evangelical Christian involvement in international adoption had never been a secret – many well-established adoption agencies have always had an explicitly Evangelical mission – Joyce’s piece was one of the first to directly link the “Christian Adoption Movement” to broader trends reported within the Evangelical
community: neoconservative politics, home schooling, missionary work, and extreme corporal punishment.

Soon after Joyce’s exposé, Reuters published a report that detailed the practice of “rehoming” among some international adoptive families. Reporter Megan Twohey opens with the story of a girl named Quita, “rescued… from an orphanage in Liberia, brought to America and then signed over to a couple [that the original adoptive parents] barely knew. Days later, they had no idea what had become of her” (Twohey 2013). Twohey quotes parents who “rehomed” their internationally adopted children, often transferring custody with nothing more than a simple power of attorney, who claimed that they “couldn’t handle,” their adopted children, that they felt “in over [their] heads,” and that they were rehoming adopted children to “protect” or “save” other children in the home. Indeed, Twohey frames the rehoming phenomenon as a result of the unchecked growth of international adoptions from certain countries and among certain U.S. populations. As Joyce explains,

“In 2010, a year when international adoptions overall fell by 13 percent, Bethany Christian Services – one of the nation's largest agencies, with adoption-related revenues of around $25 million – announced that its… international placements were up 66 percent for the first six months. Adoption inquiries had nearly doubled. Bethany's numbers have since declined in tandem with the fortunes of the industry, but the countries still experiencing adoption booms – among them African nations such as Ethiopia, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo – have been the focus of intense missionary activity” (Joyce 2013a).

And Christian missionary activity linked to adoption not only took place in Africa. In the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, Christian missionaries who entered Haiti under the pretense of offering humanitarian aid were accused – and ultimately convicted – of smuggling Haitian children over the border into the Dominican Republic with the intention of transporting them to the United States (Delva 2010, King 2012, Thompson 2010, Voigt 2013). As King writes in the Harvard
Human Rights Journal, the disregard of local, national, and international laws and protocols by these missionaries is a clear sign of disregard not only for social work and social welfare protocols but also the “integrity of poor families” (King 2012). Further, Rotabi, writing in The Journal of Global Social Work Practice, calls for strengthening such protocols – in law as well as in the cultural conversation – in order to prevent similar crimes from taking place in the future (Rotabi 2010a, see also Rotabi 2015).

In early 2013, after adoptions in Ethiopia had begun to decline, CNN reported a “boom” of adoptions in Uganda (Schwartzchild 2013). In an interview published in Salon in 2013, Joyce identifies Uganda as the next “go-to” spot for Evangelical Christians interested in quick and easy adoptions (Barcella 2013, see also Joyce 2013c). Many Evangelical Christian groups had already set up missionary operations in Uganda, and they easily crossed over to orphanages and adoption. Even early news coverage of the adoption booms in Uganda – and in the Democratic Republic of Congo – raised “red flags,” comparing them to cases in previous sending nations that had been widely covered in the same publications. Nonetheless, when the Congo shut down adoptions in 2013 – following the same “boom-bust” trend – Fox News ran a piece detailing the disappointment, shock, and simultaneous determination of U.S. adoptive parents “stuck” in the Congo, awaiting the “release” of their children (Chiaramonte 2014). The New York Daily News ran a similar piece, complete with photos of the adoptive parents wearing empty African-print baby slings (Kuruvilla 2014). As of November 2015, a few children “stuck” in the 2013 controversy were granted the necessary exit permits by the Congolese government and were able to join their adoptive families in the U.S., but approximately 1000 cases remain unresolved (see Graff 2015, Ligtvoet 2014, Pham 2015, USCIS 2015).
Ongoing Media Coverage and a New Front in the Culture Wars

The sense of Christian mission felt by a subset of international adoptive parents is constantly echoed in the news. In one case, a Missouri family adopted a sibling group of five older children from Peru. As the adoptive mother told Fox News, “We got told ‘no’ a lot of times, and by then we were already crazy about these kids, so it was a rough part of the story... And you had to keep trusting that we were fighting for something that you knew was yours to fight for... doing what God asks even when it seems crazy is worth it” (Tenney 2013). But the Christian adoption movement has implications that lie beyond specific debates about international adoption. Writing for *The Huffington Post*, Joyce suggests:

“Domestically, there has been a squeeze as well. While in the days before abortion was legalized or single parenthood accepted, many women with unexpected pregnancies relinquished for adoption, today that number has dropped to around 1 percent in some demographics. But the demand for adoptable infants didn't fall with it, and conservative religious groups like the Family Research Council and crisis pregnancy centers have sought to turn those numbers around by encouraging more women to relinquish. One suggestion the FRC came up with after commissioning a study sounds familiar: changing the language around adoption to present adoption as heroic, selfless, loving and mature – and conversely, portraying young or unmarried mothers who choose to parent their children as immature and selfish. It's hard to look at this, or the message of one Christian crisis pregnancy ministry – that all children born to unwed mothers should be considered de facto ‘orphans’ available for adoption (they say they're following the biblical definition of an orphan as a *fatherless* child) – without thinking that something is wrong here” (2013b).

After the 2013 publication of her book *The Child Catchers: Rescue, Trafficking, and the New Gospel of Adoption*, Joyce published a flurry of articles and was interviewed on NPR’s Fresh Air, widely discussing what she sees as both cluelessness as well as outright abuse and manipulation within the Christian adoption movement. Joyce importantly links international adoption to other aspects of adoption as well as family law and policy more broadly, both in the *Huffington Post* piece above and in a more recent article on adoptions of children born to immigrants from the U.S.
Marshall Islands in Northwest Arkansas. Writing in *The New Republic* in April 2015, she describes the exploitation of immigrants whose conception of adoption is of informal networks of sharing childrearing, of a cultural system in which children have multiple parents. Joyce alleges that Arkansas state law, which has some of the least built-in protections for birthmothers in the United States, allows unscrupulous adoption agencies to exploit marginalized women. Joyce argues, ultimately, that so-called “pro-adoption” laws in Arkansas are an important part of an organized Christian conservative agenda that seeks to diminish civil rights more broadly; for adult adoptees seeking information about their birth families, for women in terms of reproductive choice, for gays and lesbians.

**What Does this History Mean?**

The evolution of the media coverage of international adoption is as much a part of this story as the legal and diplomatic shifts that have directly affected the accessibility of international adoption to American families, because the media appears to have played an important role in shaping the terms of our broader cultural debate. That debate has been as animated as it has been polarizing. While Evangelical Christians (primarily, many would argue) continue to fuel demand for a practice that the U.S. Department of State has joined more liberal activists in trying to regulate, those liberal activists continue to speak out against the abuses within international adoption. Many on the “right” would argue that those activists on the “left” are against international adoption altogether. But at the core of a policy debate over international adoption is the issue of regulation. Mirah Riben, a vocal advocate on behalf of birthmothers and for greater regulation, argues that “the adoption industry has fewer ethical guidelines than guide real estate transactions and no incentive to police itself. Adoption is thus a free-for-all marketplace full of
unscrupulous baby brokers. Those who pay top dollar for children are often victims of scams and rip-offs. Some sue. Some have won wrongful adoption suits. No such recourse however is available to the victimized mothers whose children are commodified.” (Riben 2015). Riben’s argument is in line with those who would protect the rights of birthmothers first and foremost and is highly attuned not only to the global inequality that underlies international adoption but also to the mismanagement, corruption, and outright fraud that recent investigative journalism has uncovered. The journalism reviewed here is a necessary ingredient in any so-called “anti-adoption” activism.

At the same time that many call for greater regulation – and the suspension of international adoption programs until such regulation is in place – Elizabeth Bartholet, one of the strongest and most vocal advocates (among academic researchers) for continuing to keep international adoption open, was quoted in a 2013 CNN article as saying, “In every human endeavor, there is a chance for abuse. But if a plane goes down, they don’t ground the whole airline industry. The only institution I can think of that when there’s a problem, they shut it down, is international adoption” (Voigt 2013). Bartholet has also forcefully argued for allowing children to come to the U.S. at younger ages, because of the developmental delays that are involved in spending early years living in an institution (Bartholet 2010a, 2010b, 2011, 2015a, 2015b). Indeed, one of Bartholet’s primary contributions to the debate over international adoption is simply that children’s rights “matter” and that delays in international adoption processes leave children living in institutions or temporary foster-care arrangements. This position, however, skirts the issues of family reunification and local-versus-international adoption for unparented children in other nations. Graff, the journalist who started the trend of critical investigations into international adoption, tackles those issues head-on, summing up: “Here's the rule of thumb: If you can get a healthy infant or toddler within
a year, don't adopt from that country” (Graff 2012b). Graff’s implication is that if a sending nation (or international adoption agency) purports to have a “healthy” infant or toddler available for adoption, the ethical standards of that adoption are not up to par. Graff continues, exhorting U.S. parents:

“Adopt, instead, from American foster care, or from countries that send abroad very few children, and when they do, the children who are available are older, or disabled, or come in sibling groups, or otherwise have had trouble finding new local homes. Or if you're adopting for humanitarian reasons, donate that money to an organization that helps children stay with their families, or brings clean water and mosquito nets and medicines to their villages” (Graff 2012b).

But it’s no wonder that would be a hard pill for U.S. adoptive parents to swallow. For Christians determined to “save” orphans, it creates an ethical wrinkle in what they see as an otherwise straightforward scriptural obligation. For parents motivated by humanitarian considerations, it creates an inconvenient truth, and for mothers who delayed childbearing in order to advance other life goals, it puts them in an unfortunate double-bind – to be told, often not for the first time, that they can’t have a baby. That they must have something that’s second best. That they can’t have it all.

The mothers whom I interviewed for this project were trapped in that particular double-bind, in many cases, because of the structural infertility that results from delayed marriage and childbearing in the new economy. However, it seems that they also came into international adoption with an older set of assumptions, based in the historical and cultural context of the twentieth century. They expected their international adoption processes to proceed with relative bureaucratic ease, and they had no expectation of the kinds of ethical questions that the latest wave of investigative journalism and diplomatic volatility would present to them. But they were unexpectedly met with a practice that was in flux – pragmatically and politically.
Both the emergence of international adoption in the mid-twentieth century and the decline of international adoption in the early twenty-first century establish the parameters within which the mothers I interviewed are operating. This is clearly true in a pragmatic sense, as many lives were caught in limbo as a direct result of the bureaucratic delays, political impasses, and policy changes that most of the families I interviewed experienced. In the chapters that follow, I tell the stories of families caught up in the very circumstances I’ve described here – the slowing-down of adoptions from China, the adoption shut-downs in Guatemala, Nepal, and the Congo; the instability of the adoption program in Russia; and the frantic “boom” period of adoptions from Ethiopia. On an immediately practical level, this review of the media coverage surrounding international adoption contextualizes their lived experiences. But this recent history also advances the theoretical aims of this project, beyond providing a practical context. This history explains the assumptions that mothers brought in to their processes of international adoption, demonstrating the ways in which changes to international adoption set up an ethical bind. That ethical bind – its contours and its broader implications – is key to untangling the theoretical problem of reproductive marketplaces. The contours of that ethical bind also may suggest a way forward for the reproductive marketplaces that continue to define family life in the twenty-first century. Finally, the historical and contemporary political contexts that I present here are part of an ideological framework in which motherhood, race, and citizenship are interconnected drivers of inclusion and belonging.
CHAPTER 3: “WE’RE ON THE MARKET AGAIN”

One hot June day, while in the proposal stage of this project, I loaded my two own preschool-aged children into their stroller and, in a cloud of sunscreen fumes, headed for the very best of the Cambridge, Massachusetts spray parks. Usually, a good chunk of the adult conversation overheard in that park is in a language other than English, spoken by other graduate students taking their kids out, international professionals of all ages, and nannies and au pairs meeting up for play dates. But that day, which I soon realized was the middle of Harvard University’s reunion weekend, English dominated. Most of the parents at the park were sporting straw hats and reunion lanyards. On the bench next to me, a well-dressed, wiry woman, who appeared to be in her mid-forties, looked up from her phone to greet an old classmate. They exchanged pleasantries, discussed the reunion events, their accommodations, and plans to visit Boston. Then they turned to children. The woman seated next to me had been vaguely supervising two equally wiry, fair-haired preteens. The classmate and her husband had, upon entering the park, released a very excited four- or five-year-old girl into the sprinkler. I stopped listening to their remarks on soccer, piano, ballet, and the quality of their local public schools until a snippet of their conversation caught my attention: “We’re on the market again.” Excited for juicy gossip about real estate prices in a fancy suburb somewhere, I was all ears. But the couple with the four-year-old were not talking about the housing market; they were talking about international adoption. And then, the woman proceeded to tell her old classmate a story that I would hear again and again once I began to conduct the interviews informing this project, about the unexpected roadblocks that cropped up in adopting their daughter from China, and about the uncertainty and long wait-time they faced in adopting a
second child. They said they were “looking” for alternatives, because it didn’t seem like adopting a “healthy baby” from China was a realistic possibility.

This chapter explores the ways in which the parents I interviewed use economic language and marketplace frameworks to understand their own experiences of international adoption, as well as international adoption as a social practice and institution. I argue that international adoption as a social practice fits into the literature on reproductive markets quite well, in terms of the conditions that create it and in terms of the dynamics that have driven it on a practical level. The parents I interviewed certainly spoke like consumers. However, the narratives of recent international adoptive parents suggest that the disruptions they experienced altered their relationships with international adoption as an institution and that, as a reproductive marketplace, international adoption presents a unique set of practical and ethical considerations. Ultimately, I suggest that my findings offer an opening, going forward, to think about a more nuanced application of marketplace analogies and economic frameworks to international adoption.

**International Adoption as a Reproductive Market**

Feminist scholarship clearly locates international adoption within the purview of reproductive markets. Adoption in the United States has functioned as a fundamentally economic enterprise in one way or another since the Colonial period, when children were routinely “placed out” as apprentices or other types of household workers (Carp 2009, Herman 2010, Marsh and Rommer 1996, Zeleizer 1985). But as economic conditions shifted, children’s economic and sentimental value changed as well, and childhood came to be seen as a distinct stage of life best spent in protected education and play. The industrial economy that led to this shifting view, however, also led to a profound inequality in middle-class, working-class, and poor children’s
experiences of childhood (Mintz 2006). It was in this context, Zelizer (1985) argues, that U.S. adoptions became emotionally, rather than instrumentally, driven. Affluent adoptive parents’ preference shifted away from “useful” foster children to infants, or to young girls with curly blond hair and blue eyes, mirroring a shift in American ideas about family, domesticity, and the “pricelessness” of childhood as a discrete stage of life. During the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries, domestic adoption in the United States became a uniquely commercial enterprise. Social institutions, governmental and non-governmental, cropped up in growing cities to care for the orphans and abandoned children of urbanization and industrial revolution, and as traditional social networks deteriorated, money began to change hands in exchange for children. Ironically, the exchange of money took place alongside increasing bureaucratization and involvement of professional social workers (Carp 2009, Herman 2010, Rothman 1989, 2005).

Adoption closely resembles other reproductive marketplaces: egg and sperm “donation,” gestational surrogacy, and fertility medicine more generally. Reproductive marketplaces – and adoption in particular – occupy a complicated and internally contradictory social space. We are invested, culturally, in an idea of “family” and “the market” as separate spheres, but in the case of reproductive technology or adoption, family is created through the market. This can engender tremendous discomfort, as adults of good conscience grapple with the complexities – practical, emotional, and ethical – of having their children thanks to technology, commerce, and global inequality (see Gamson 2015). Further, this contradiction is itself profoundly gendered; as Sharon Hays argues, motherhood, specifically, is “understood as more distant and more protected from market relationships than any other” aspect of family life (1996: 174). Of course, this could not be further from the truth in a context of stratified reproduction, in which some women’s mothering is enabled by other women’s disenfranchisement from mothering.
The literature on contemporary reproductive markets for genetic material (eggs and sperm), gestational surrogacy, egg freezing, in-vitro fertilization, and other fertility treatments and technologies makes it clear that reproductive markets rely upon the same kinds of stratification that have long characterized reproduction. (notably, Almeling 2011, Cahn 2009, Goodwin 2010, Markens 2007, Spar 2006, Twine 2011). Moreover, in a commercial context, surrogacy, egg donation, and, indeed, the role of birthmothers in international adoption can be seen as a form of biolabor: underpaid, donated, or simply invisible work that underpins the reproductive marketplace and that perpetuates the inequality inherent in that marketplace (see Cooper and Waldby 2014). Reproductive markets are dependent upon the gendered “altruism” and “care” woven in to these kinds of reproductive work; with specific respect to egg and sperm “donation,” many have argued that men see sperm donation as a job, while women see egg donation and surrogacy as an altruistic endeavor in addition to a source of financial compensation (Almeling 2011, Becker 2000, Bertolli 2013, Nash 2014). Reproductive markets are also dependent upon the invisibility of this work. With specific respect to adoption, Spar and Harrington, voicing what they understand to be a widely held view, write, “most babies are clearly ‘produced’ outside the market – in the bedroom, for free, a product of love and not money…. Those who venture into the baby business, therefore, have good reason not to want to acknowledge the commercial side of their action” (2009: 43).

Adoption, specifically, and reproductive markets, in general, also mimic markets for reproductive labor, such as domestic workers, nannies, and other types of childcare providers. The flows of genetic material, reproductive services (like surrogacy), and babies (in the case of adoption) from poorer women to richer women and from the global south to the global north follow the same routes as domestic workers, nannies, nurses, and other care workers from Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean to the homes of affluent (and predominantly white) Americans (see,
Reproductive labor is not only a necessary consequence of reproduction, but also a necessary precursor: considerable labor goes into egg donation, not to mention the pregnancy and childbirth that define surrogacy and adoption alike. This literature clearly frames reproductive labor as a site of inequality and injustice but just as clearly reinforces the double-bind in which middle-class professional women, as employers of nannies and other domestic workers, often find themselves. Just as the outsourcing of cooking, cleaning, and childcare is a structural requirement of many women’s professional lives, so, too, can these women be “forced” into other kinds of reproductive markets due to what Briggs and Marre call “labor-force induced infertility” (2009: 17). Furthermore, Hondagneu-Sotelo (2007) in particular points out the ways in which mothering is shared between mothers and nannies across national borders, where chains of caregivers enable multiple women’s economic activity. Hondagneu-Sotelo argues that in the case of many transnational mothers, the ironies of taking care of other women’s children in order to support one’s own does not corrupt motherhood so much as it enables and redefines it. Indeed, Zelizer’s work suggests that markets and money do not necessarily corrupt our social relationships but rather clarify their mechanics, and this has inspired tremendous debate over the desirability – or even the ethical possibility – of consciously and openly applying a commercial structure to adoption transactions.

Several scholars have addressed this possibility in the specific context of contemporary international adoption programs. Dorrow’s investigation of the marketplace dynamics in U.S.-China adoptions reveals a space for the analysis presented in this chapter. Initially laying out that “the interplay of markets with law and politics is crucial” (2010: 71), she goes on to cite her interviews with former Chinese adoption administrators, who outline the “standardization of
paperwork and procedures,” as well as the selection of adoption matches in “rational, systemic ways” (2010: 73); early international adoption policies in China, Dorow emphasizes, were designed to minimize the appearance of a marketplace. But Dorow is equally clear that market dynamics are inescapable, arguing that Chinese adoption policies facilitate international adoption through the development of a discourse of “clienthood,” which serves the interests, both practical and emotional, of U.S. adoptive parents as consumers. Dorrow also argues that this also serves the broader interest of U.S.-China economic relations because “clienthood as a discourse is perpetually reproductive of modernity for China, [and] of the political economy of adoption” (124). Other scholars are more fundamentally critical of the political and economic conditions that create sending nations in international adoption to begin with (in particular, see Briggs 2012, Dubinsky 2010, Leinaweaver 2008). These critiques are driven by the inadequacy of a “triumphal narrative.” Herman’s own critique (echoed by Briggs 2012) is that U.S. triumphalism depends upon a flattened understanding of the histories and social institutions that created sending nations and their supply of adoptable children. Using Latin America as one example, Briggs explains how, a previous generation of adoptive parents, “went to Latin America because they were leftists and wanted to raise the children… that the war had left parentless” (2012: 193). Yet, Briggs continues, “those on the left” had no control over how children in Guatemala and El Salvador were declared orphans. Well-intentioned parents, Briggs argues, were thus drawn into a market in which they contributed to the exploitation and commodification of the very people they had, at least in part, set out to help.

This observation about adoptive parents’ good intentions rings true for many parents I interviewed. In general, they entered into international adoption with a fundamental commitment to Herman’s concept of a triumphal narrative. They were, however, almost universally emphatic
that their primary motivation for adopting was to “grow” their family and that any cultural or social good that resulted was secondary. Thus, the parents I interviewed walked a fine line between consumerism and altruism throughout their adoption processes. Interestingly, the parents I interviewed almost universally came to a broader, more nuanced, and more critical understanding of the tension between commerce and altruism in their own stories and in international adoption as an institution. I suggest that parents’ micro-level experiences should not be divorced from the macro-level context of their adoption processes. The parents I interviewed appeared to be actively negotiating their relationship with these macro-level phenomena, and my findings suggest that their understandings of international adoption as a complex reproductive market are quite nuanced. As I illustrate, many of the parents I spoke with were forced, in one way or another, to confront, as Spar and Harrington put it, the “commercial side of their action” (2009: 43). Further, their awareness disrupts a straightforward picture of adoption commerce in which adoptive parents function as clients, shielded from the messy truth of both commerce and stratification by layers of bureaucracy. I propose here that these parents’ narratives offer an important contribution to ongoing debates about the commercial nature of international adoption – and reproductive markets more broadly – because they complicate the polarized and reductive arguments that tend to emerge around the ethics of reproductive marketplaces.

Market Research

The mothers I interviewed spoke like consumers who, as one mother put it, had done “a ton of research.” And, like in other types of consumer decision-making, it was overwhelmingly women who spearheaded the research, drove the process forward, kept tabs on progress, and sat down to talk to me about it. In fact, of the twenty-five heterosexual couples I interviewed for this
project, I spoke with only five fathers – four together with their wives and one stay-at-home father without his wife present. The remaining eighteen interviews I conducted were all with women – seventeen single mothers and one married lesbian mother. Many mothers squeezed interviews in to their weekday schedules; no small feat, given that twenty-one of the twenty-five married heterosexual women with whom I spoke were working at least part-time. Even during the evenings and on weekends, fathers were eerily absent. The families I interviewed were busy and logistically complicated, and their initial approach to selecting an international adoption program reflected that. More often than not, their choices were highly constrained by the myriad regulations regarding age, marital status, prior criminal record, personal finances, and adoptive parents’ health history – mental and physical – that sending nations have put in place to govern adoptive parents’ eligibility. Moreover, the constriction of international adoption programs that has taken place across the globe since the early 2000s began before the families I interviewed initiated their adoption processes, and so it also drastically limited their options. The mothers with whom I spoke were left to navigate a limited array of choices, all of which had their own potential pitfalls. Yet the mothers I interviewed were universally determined to find an “appropriate” program despite their constraints.

One mother, describing her first steps in selecting a country from which to adopt, illustrates the ways that her personal limitations were inconsistent with the programmatic limitations of many sending countries. She explained, “We did a lot of research looking at South American countries, but in those countries, you have to go and live there for a couple months. And with my husband’s job, he couldn’t take two months off. And I could not live by myself for two months in a foreign country. I took six years of Spanish, but [laughing] that only takes you so far.” While some might consider living in Latin America for two months to be an adventure (or six years of Spanish
instruction to be a solid foundation), this mother clearly did not. She continued, “and in a lot of those countries they want both parents there to bond with child, to make sure that it’s a good match. But it just wasn’t something we were really wanting to consider.” This mother brings up a fundamental tension in the requirements that sending nations impose. On the one hand, a sending nation obviously should act responsibly in terms of child welfare, and U.S. parents should not feel entitled to adopt children without sufficient oversight. But, at the same time, this mother illustrates how U.S. parents are structurally set up as consumers in international adoption arrangements. Through a combination of factors out of her control (her husband’s job), and factors only partly outside of her control (her own willingness to spend time outside of the U.S.), this mother assumes the role of a consumer and actively solidifies that position through her attitudes, choices, and actions. The choice of sending nation was hers, and she clearly chose against programs that required adoptive parents to remain together “in-country” for long periods of time.

Another adoptive mother, who began her process of international adoption in 2010, after most countries’ programs had already reorganized or closed, illustrates how an adoptive parent can sound like a consumer when faced with a number of market-based constraints. Explaining her and her husband’s choice to adopt from the Democratic Republic of Congo, she laid out the facts: “They didn’t have age restrictions, and my husband was about to turn fifty. Adoptions were moving quickly at that time, and they had babies available. We had a year and a half old daughter, and we did not want to jump birth order.” Indeed, this mother had come into her adoption process with a number of “deal-breakers” – some, like her husband’s age, which were out of her control, and some, like her adoptive child’s age, which were only partially out of her control. While, in general, social workers will only place children who will be the youngest in their families, this mother also expressed a clear and distinct preference for an infant. Regarding the other choices of
sending nations available to her, she related, “we would have loved to adopt from Haiti, but I think you have to be married ten years to adopt from Haiti. That’s one of their many restrictions, and that doesn’t fit us.” This mother could not change the length of time that she had been married, but she could also have waited. Thus, while this mother describes a constrained choice, she describes a choice nonetheless.

Erin, another married heterosexual mother, tells a similar story. She and her husband are both public school teachers in their early thirties, living in an expansive suburban town. Erin suffered from a childhood illness that compromised her fertility, and so she and her husband began looking into adoption soon after they married, ultimately adopting a son from Ethiopia. Regarding their initial research and decision-making surrounding sending nations, Erin explained, “[we] both teach, so some countries were ruled out because they require you to be in-country for such a long length of time, or they require multiple trips, and that just wasn’t something that we thought would be feasible.” Indeed, the inflexibility of Erin’s workplace proved to be a major factor in her decision-making. So was her age. “At the time,” she explained, “I was not thirty, so that ruled out several other countries who require you to be thirty to adopt, to even just submit your application, even though their wait list is three or four years.” One of the youngest mothers in my sample, Erin expressed sadness that adoption appeared, at least to her, to be designed for older parents, who came to adoption through their own choices to delay childbearing. Erin felt that she, on the other hand, did not have a choice. But, despite the sense of personal tragedy that she felt at the loss of her fertility, Erin nonetheless described making a series of choices. This is particularly apparent with respect to her child’s age. Continuing, Erin explained, “we knew we wanted an infant so we sort of narrowed it down to Ethiopia. Our social worker initially had talked about Guatemala. That
was right around the time that there were questions of it shutting down, and ultimately we went Ethiopia instead.” Erin and her husband’s choice of an infant was clear.

Amidst all of these mothers’ preferences, limitations, and appetites for risk, they proceeded into international adoption as consumers who made distinct sets of choices regarding their future children, as well as the processes in which they were willing to participate. But the mothers I interviewed also had distinct feelings of altruism and ethical responsibility with which to contend. These feelings often interacted with their impulses and their structural position as consumers in interesting ways. Andrea’s story of adopting from China after several years of failed fertility treatments illustrates the range and complexity of consumer-like decisions when emotions and ethics enter the picture. Andrea approached her decision-making surrounding adoption, at least in retrospect, with notable self-awareness. She reflected that “the whole decision-making process was a combination of ‘good reasons’ and not-so-good reasons. At the time, China had a very predictable timeframe, which was very appealing after trying for so long to get pregnant.” She described the circumstances surrounding her decision to adopt as a difficult time in her life, punctuated by a major career transition, in addition to the “mourning” associated with “giving up” on carrying a pregnancy to term. In the midst of her feelings of sadness and loss, Andrea sought out an international adoption program that met her and her husband’s needs – pragmatic and emotional, but also ethical. Speaking about her thoughts and feelings at the time, Andrea explained, “China had a reputation at the time for being a relatively ‘clean’ program. There was a central authority, there weren’t all kinds of corrupt lawyers or brokers. There was an obvious and clear reason that so many kids were available for adoption – the One Child Policy. We weren’t worried about trafficking or money under the table; that was the reputation.” Andrea and her husband “shopped” for a program that they felt would not exploit mothers and children in the
sending nation at the same time that it would protect her – an emotionally vulnerable adoptive mother – from the unpredictable emotional roller coaster that she had just experienced in seeking treatment for infertility. Andrea explained,

“I am completely in support of policies and laws that, you know, increase the rights of birthmothers and give them the time they need to make the decisions they need and allow them to change their minds. I think that’s hugely important. But I also knew for myself, having gone through years of uncertainty and the huge roller coaster of infertility treatment… that we could be matched with a woman who would like us to parent their child when she was, maybe four months pregnant, and then go through this process with her for five months, and then have her change her mind. Which I completely support her right to do, but it was really scary. That would be completely emotionally devastating for us.”

Andrea was clear, however, that she was particularly emotionally vulnerable at the time that she made the decision to adopt, quipping, “I don’t think I was the most rational I’ve ever been.” She further explained that, as she learned more about China, about international adoption as a system, and about adoption more generally, she felt “a little embarrassed that we didn’t look more seriously at the foster care system. I had a lot of the same prejudices that other people have, you know, too concerned about the impact of trauma. But now I know that international adoptees have the exact same trauma.” Andrea is a primary example of a mother whose views on adoption evolved, the norm in my sample. Nonetheless, her ethics and sense of altruism – as they stood at the time, and despite the fact that they changed – played a major role, alongside her own emotional needs, in her overall decision-making.

**When Altruism Meets the Market**

The majority of the parents I interviewed began their processes of international adoption with an abiding belief in the triumphal narrative that Herman (2010) describes. Several mothers called international adoption “a chance to do something good.” Several called it a “win-win,” and
one Evangelical Christian mother called it a “win-win-win,” explaining that as adoptive parents, they “won” by growing their family, their adopted children “won” by being spared life in an institution, and the world would “win,” through one “small act of healing” at a time. Indeed, many of the parents whom I interviewed expressed altruistic motivations as a factor in their decision to adopt internationally, as well as their choice of sending nation. All of the parents I interviewed who adopted from China – including those who ultimately adopted boys – expressed horror at reports of female infanticide related to China’s One Child Policy, and explained that the policy had impacted their decision to adopt from China. Several families expressed interest in adopting from Haiti in the wake of the earthquake in 2010, although only one family in my sample ultimately adopted there. Several mothers described wanting a child who “needed” them, and others described turning away from domestic adoption because the children available for adoption internationally were “needier.” One devoutly Catholic mother bemoaned what she perceived as a shift away from the social justice orientation of the Catholic church she remembered from her childhood, and was clear that she elected to adopt two school-age from Russia in part as a way to “give back.” Clearly, there is a natural overlap between altruistic and religious motivations for adoption, and, indeed, the few very religious Christians in my sample (both Evangelical Protestant and Catholic) expressed some of the strongest altruistic motivations. But altruism remained a secondary motivation for all of them, save one exception.

Lisa, a white married mother of three older biological children, as well as two school-aged children adopted from Ethiopia, spoke to me from the plush couches of her immaculate, high-ceilinged living room in an affluent outer-suburban community. A devout Christian, she explained that she had become interested in international adoption after attending a presentation at her church and seeing video footage of impoverished children in Ethiopia. Describing the beginnings of her
desire to adopt, she said, “I didn’t feel like I needed more children, or even wanted more... but hearing [about] these children in need, that’s what really did it.” She told me that she was worried that she was being “overly emotional” about the decision, like “any woman, who gets emotional and wants a puppy.” She explained, however, that when her husband decided that he, too, wanted to adopt, and himself took the first steps to contact adoption agencies, she knew that adoption was truly the right thing for her family. If her husband took the initiative, she reasoned, then adopting would not be an irrational, emotional decision. Of course, Lisa’s deference to her husband’s initiative is consistent with the Christian doctrine that she espoused throughout our interview. Nonetheless, in her gendered language, Lisa clearly distinguishes between what she sees as an “emotional” motivation for adopting versus a “genuinely” altruistic one.

Lisa was truly unique in my sample in her insistence that she was not trying to fulfill a “mothering desire,” but rather to “help out a family in need.” She elaborated, “I don’t see it as, those are our kids. They are, but they are also someone else’s. I see it more as merging a blended family. We care for them, we love them fully, we treat them as our very own, but they know they have two sets of parents, one in America and one in Ethiopia.” Lisa explained that she felt she had a lot in common with her Ethiopian children’s biological family, and that she and her husband were united in their Christian faith with the children’s biological father, who “was praying for a family to take his children in, [while] we were praying to help some other family.” Lisa was comforted – and felt that her adopted children were comforted – by the fact that their biological father “reads the Bible every day, and my husband reads the Bible every day.” Lisa’s shared faith with her children’s biological kin not only made her feel confident in her altruism and her actions but also made her feel like part of a global community. As Lisa herself said, “it takes a village.” Lisa even went so far as to say that if anything happened to her and her husband, she hoped another
family, “somewhere in the world,” would do for her children what she had done for someone else’s. Here, though, Lisa’s altruism and sense of a global village betrays her blindness, whether unconscious or willful, to the kinds of systemic inequality that underlies international adoption. Her moral certainty runs up against the ambivalence, nuance, and critical perspective that so many of the mothers I interviewed express. Yet, while Lisa is exceptional in being motivated, as she claims, solely by altruism, she is far from unique in her understanding of international adoption as a fundamentally altruistic enterprise, at least at the outset of the processes that the participants in this study experienced.

Joan and David, a white married couple with a large, blended family, expressed a sense of altruism similar to Lisa’s, but from a profoundly irreligious point of view. After marrying, and bringing their biological children from previous marriages together, they decided to adopt from Ethiopia because of the “tremendous need.” Over coffee at a busy café in her diverse, urban neighborhood, I asked Joan if she and David had considered adopting from any countries besides Ethiopia. She replied that they had initially been drawn to Liberia, but turned towards Ethiopia because of irregularities that they perceived in the Liberia program. Ethiopia, Joan explained, was a more established program and, to her mind, the agencies involved were more reputable. About her and David’s overall motivations, however, she was clear: “something about Africa, there was just something so viscerally appealing to us. And there were so many kids. There still are so many kids.” For Joan, adopting was a marriage of her desire to mother and her progressive politics. She expressed mixed feelings about adoption, as an institution, as well as a profound understanding of the loss that accompanies adoption. She was clear in her opinion that “the best thing for all adopted kids would be if they were able to be raised in their first families. We are a very, very distant second. But,” she continued, “every child needs a family.” Ultimately, Joan said that she thought
adopting was the right thing to do; had one of her daughters remained in Ethiopia, Joan suspected that she may not have survived. “When we brought her home,” Joan explained, “we found out that she was positive for TB. That makes us feel like we did a good thing.” Similarly, Leslie, the sole married lesbian mother in my sample, vocal about her feminist politics, expressed profound sadness at the outcomes faced by abandoned girls in many parts of the world and explained that a major factor in her decision to adopt internationally, rather than to pursue a pregnancy, was to protect a girl from sex trafficking. On this point, Leslie was blunt: “girls who grow up in orphanages do not have good options.” But despite the discomfort Leslie described with the language of “saving” children, she nonetheless believed – and not without good evidence – that, in adopting, she was genuinely saving her daughter from predatory traffickers and a life of domestic and sexual servitude.

But despite the sense of altruism that many parents felt, and in addition to many parents’ discomfort with language about “saving” children, most also experienced a stark disconnect between any potential altruism and the market dynamics that underlay their international adoption processes. If their actions were even partially altruistic, they reasoned, then their actions could not be simultaneously commercial. For the parents I spoke with, altruism and commercialism were as mutually exclusive as commerce and care because “family” stood so firmly outside of the market in their cultural imaginations. And so, it was precisely when parents began to see through their presumptions and claims about international adoption as an altruistic endeavor that they began to more clearly see they ways in which their international adoption processes were part of a commercial enterprise. The mothers I interviewed came to see themselves as consumers precisely because they had initially seen themselves (even if only in part) as altruists. Their triumphal
narratives fell apart when altruism met the market. Ivy’s story exemplifies how this happened for several mothers with whom I spoke.

A married mother of a biological son and a daughter adopted from Nepal, Ivy vividly described her growing awareness of international adoption as a reproductive market through the lens of her initial approach to adopting. A tenured university professor, she spoke about her initial desire to adopt a child from India as based on her personal and academic ties to India, as well as a desire to “do good.” She explained that at the time she and her husband, Paul, were considering adoption, they were very committed to adopting a child who “needed” them, because then, Ivy reasoned, the adoption would be mutually beneficial. About the “millions of children without families” in India, Ivy was certain that “there’s no question they need help.” Elaborating on the context of her and Paul’s initial decision-making, Ivy explained:

“It was in the wake of 9/11, I just felt… it was like our personal lives and politics just came to a head. The world was going to hell, I had tenure but was dissatisfied in my job, I can’t conceive… let’s do something for one person. The books I write, who cares – maybe three people in the world read them – I mean, it was that pie-in-the-sky, I can’t fix the whole world, maybe I can help just one person.”

In retrospect, Ivy questioned her initial assumption about the benevolence of her adoption, ultimately, of a daughter from Nepal. Mocking what she perceived as her own naïveté, she self-deprecatingly quipped, “What, I was going to be Gandhi, Mother Teresa, all wrapped into one?” Ivy’s rosy outlook was stripped down early and often by the very process of going through an adoption that was brokered for money.

Ivy described her first realization that she was participating in an essentially commercial endeavor as both eye-opening and fundamentally uneasy. She spoke softly, with a sense of betrayal: “We were told to show up at [our adoption agency’s U.S. office] with $5000 cash. In new $100 bills. So, I went to the bank, made a withdrawal, popped over there, and to this day I
don’t know what that money was for, where it went, was it for [the agency’s Nepali representative’s] plane ticket, I have no idea.” She went on to explain that her agency had, in her opinion, failed to provide proper services and support in terms of transportation, food, accommodations, shopping for baby supplies, medical care, and even the bureaucratic steps needed to finalize her daughter’s adoption. She felt that she and her husband had been forced to figure things out themselves, and they hired a private driver, recommended to them by other American adoptive parents. Dismayed, Ivy said, “[The private driver we hired in Nepal] did everything.”

Throughout our conversation, Ivy toggled between anger that she had been forced to fend for herself despite a substantial outlay of cash and sadness that she now saw her adoption as a commercial transaction despite her initial altruistic motivations. Ivy’s story suggests a shift in her critical perspective, and indeed Ivy explained how her “politics” shifted as a result of her experiences in Nepal and afterwards. When Ivy and I first sat down at a quiet suburban Starbucks on a Sunday morning, her first words were, “I can’t talk to you until I know what your politics are.” We seemed to agree on the ethical and practical complexity of international adoption, and she admitted her relief that I wasn’t there “to talk about saving babies.” But Ivy was clear that while she did not see her story as a straightforward narrative of “baby saving,” she didn’t see it as a straightforward case of “baby buying,” either. Ivy described taking her newly adopted daughter on outings in Kathmandu while waiting for the adoption to be finalized, and “everybody took one look at us and said, ‘Nepali baby? How much did you pay?’” That was the immediate question, every single time.” Ivy told me that this insinuation made her profoundly sad, and that her sadness emanated from “both the truth and [the] lie” within it. Describing the profound depression that she fell into upon returning to the U.S. with her daughter, Ivy attributed it, in part, to living with that “truth” – that she had indeed exchanged money for a child – and the “lie” that she had
straightforwardly bought another human being. Ivy had been motivated by the desire to mother, and she certainly had strong evidence that her actions – bringing her daughter out of an orphanage, into a family – benefitted her daughter on an individual level. Ivy, ever-critical, came home to inhabit a profound ethical and emotional dissonance between altruism, care, and the market.

Ivy seriously wrestles with the material reality that would have circumscribed her daughter’s life, had she not been adopted:

“If she had stayed there…. She didn’t have a bright future. They still have indentured servitude, so families sell their daughters to go work for a period of time on someone’s farm. She wasn’t going to be going to school, she would not have had a good life. I do take seriously the criticisms of these naïve Americans, they think everything is going to be a Hallmark greeting card, they’re going to go out and fix the world, but…. But.”

“But,” Ivy implies, there is no straightforward solution to the question of international adoption. While many scholars point out that we have a cultural difficulty with the idea that money is determinative in the intimate arena of reproduction, because we separate the “market” from the “personal,” Ivy’s narrative suggests a further difficulty. We also separate the market from the altruistic or the charitable. And while Ivy is clear that she was motivated to adopt because she wanted another child, she is equally clear regarding her altruistic motivations, as well as her abiding belief that adoption provided her child with a “better” life.

On the question of the ethics of international adoption, one mother mused, “so much of the decision to adopt is a balancing game between what you think is in the best interest of the child and what’s in the best interest of you as the adopting parents. It’s a mixture of well-thought-out rational things and completely gut-level reactions, which may or may not be in accord with what’s in your head.” The complexity of competing needs and interests, as well as the cultural contradictions between altruism and the market, muddle the applicability of market analogies to
international adoption – they are helpful, but reductive. International adoption indeed functions as a reproductive marketplace but nonetheless raises a unique set of practical, theoretical, and ethical questions, in no small measure because human lives, rather than disembodied sex cells, are being transacted. Further, no matter what fraud or corruption may transpire, the “best interests of children” remain the explicitly stated mission of the agencies involved. Neither pure altruism nor pure commercialism adequately characterize international adoption because the ways that international adoptions proceed cause these two conceptual opposites to exist together. This renders the commercial nature of international adoption more clear because the exchange of money fractures the triumphal narrative for adoptive parents, who see altruism and commerce as mutually exclusive.

**Discomfort with Domestic Adoption**

While many of the mothers I interviewed struggled with the ethical ambiguity of seeing themselves as consumers in a marketplace, they often simultaneously dealt with a desire to maintain control and agency over their adoption processes in a way that squarely established them as consumers. This was most apparent in the attitudes that mothers expressed with respect to domestic adoption and the way that domestic adoption, both private and public, strives to balance the interests of adoptive families and biological kin. Kate, a married, white mother in her early 40s, was one of several mothers who struggled with political and ethical ideals that complicated her adoption choices from the get-go. Kate was also among several mothers who introduced the word “transactional” into our conversations. But Kate was clear that she found *domestic* adoption to be cold, economic, and transactional, as opposed to her experience of international adoption, which she found to be more about children’s best interests, despite the ethical ambiguity that she
recognized. A highly educated professional, Kate lives in a single-family home in an affluent and, in her words, “overwhelmingly white” suburb with her husband, Greg, and their two children, both adopted from Africa. In our interview, Kate described her affinity for Africa, for African cultures, and for the needs of African children living in poverty. Yet Kate describes how she and her husband had initially pursued domestic adoption, recounting, “we put together these, like, family albums. And it didn’t feel natural, it just felt too vulnerable to have to put ourselves out there and be picked.” Kate was also extremely uncomfortable with her social worker’s emphasis on more material aspects of her and her husband’s lives, in particular when they did not align with her values. Kate explained, “They wanted us to say all these weird things like ‘MBA dad’ and ‘oh, you’re a lawyer but you’d stay home.’ And it didn’t feel like us. Like parts of us, certainly, but not the core of us, not who we really were.” Indeed, for Kate, her discomfort with “marketing” was part of a broader feeling about private domestic adoption:

“I never felt like anybody was representing us or advocating for us in a domestic adoption; it was always about what was in the best interest of the birthmother. I totally understand that they need a lot of support and a lot of advocacy and what they’re doing is a gigantic decision…. We lasted about a month and then we pulled out. I just couldn’t do it, I just felt like nobody had my back. It was very transactional… I think that’s the right word for how I felt when we were doing the domestic [adoption]. With [our new, international adoption social worker], it felt much more collaborative, it felt like they were representing us. I know that that’s not really how it is. I am smart enough to know that it’s really about the child and about the birth parents, but I felt like we had a voice for the first time.”

For Kate, “transactional” meant cold, clinical, and without attention to the nuances and the humanity of the people involved, and to her needs, in particular. Her experience of international adoption felt “more collaborative” and less “transactional” than domestic adoption. Kate felt more free to acknowledge her feelings and desires as a part of the process, as well as free of what she perceived as her social worker’s fetishization of her husband’s MBA. Throughout our interview,
Kate was highly attuned to issues of inequality, discussing her pro-bono legal work, her involvement in international aid organizations, and, quite unlike the majority of those interviewed for this project, the importance she placed on adopting children of color in a domestic context. Kate nonetheless felt objectified by her relative privilege and wealth, and she nonetheless wanted her voice heard as a participant in what amounted, for her, to more than a simple economic exchange; she was, after all, growing her family.

Many of the mothers I interviewed had pursued private domestic adoption prior to international adoption, and two had previously pursued adoption through state-run foster care systems. For them, unease with the adoption marketplace first emerged as a deep discomfort with the standard processes of domestic adoption, both public and private. In the context of private domestic adoption, the mothers I interviewed balked at the notion that they had to be “chosen” by a baby’s birth mother, and they were universally uncomfortable with the manner in which they might be chosen – the letter and photo album that hopeful adoptive parents would put together in order to present themselves and their family to potential birthmothers. One mother said, “I had a real problem with the idea of advertising yourself to potential birthmothers… it really felt like marketing.” Like Kate, this mother insisted that she supported the rights of birthmothers but that it didn’t feel right to “market” herself. Another mother described the letter she was asked to write to potential birthmothers as a “begging letter” and insisted that she should not have to “beg” in order to become a mother. Yet another called it a “bragging letter,” and, like Kate, balked at her social worker’s fixation on her (very comfortable) material circumstances. One adoptive mother described submitting her letter to the agency as “just like an online dating profile,” and others described the prospect of “selling themselves” to a birthmother as distasteful and unfair. Leslie, the lesbian mother who ultimately adopted a daughter from Nepal, summed up, “I just couldn’t
face advertising. I just couldn’t.” Further, uncertainty over getting “picked” at all was a factor for some women. One mother described completing her “Dear Birthmother” letter, and then waiting two years without being selected by any birthmothers. She explained, matter-of-factly, “I was getting very close to the age of 40. And in my head, I had the idea, I don’t want to be well past 40, getting children. And because with domestic adoption, you have no control, you’re really at the when-and-if of the birthmother, I decided that’s when it was time to look at international adoption.”

Another major factor that deterred families from domestic adoption was openness – both official and potential, given the legal structures surrounding adoption in the U.S. One couple, who adopted a daughter from China, exemplified many families’ decisions to eliminate domestic adoption because they didn’t want an open adoption. They gave the simple explanation that they “wanted [the adoption] to be cut and dry, starting new.” The father, present for our interview, also expressed concern around “uncertainty about the laws and transparency” regarding domestic adoption, in general. He emphatically did not want his child to have connections to her biological kin. Marjorie, a married mother of three children adopted from China, explained that her biggest fear in domestic adoption was the idea that biological kin would try to take away her children. She exclaimed, in this case with reference to public adoption through the foster care system, “Some Great Aunt Matilda out in the middle of nowhere decides, ‘I want this kid. I’m like 65 and I have no job, but I want this kid.’ They can take them at any time. I don’t want any relatives popping out of the woodwork.” But Marjorie’s uneasiness extended to official, predetermined openness in domestic adoption as well. She told me that she feels that open adoption “really messes with the kids,” who are forced to meet with relatives for whom they have their own ambivalence. Ivy, the professor who adopted from Nepal, couches her discomfort with open adoption in the context of
the birthmother’s reliability. She explained, “We did a lot of research about domestic, domestic open, foster care, and, to be really honest, we did not want an open adoption. The ones who forget to call on the birthday, that’s like twice as painful as the one who just disappeared.”

Jane, a married mother of a daughter adopted from China, expressed similar worries about both private and public domestic adoption, but framed them in broader terms. “It just seemed like it would take a long, long time,” she confessed. And echoing the same concerns expressed by practically all the parents I interviewed, she continued, “You have to be chosen by the birth mother…. We were really in a hurry at that point.” Jane also mentioned that she had broader worries concerning domestic adoption in light of the “Baby Veronica” case, which made news headlines over the summer of 2013. In this case, a child, “Veronica,” had been adopted by a Caucasian couple and had been in their custody for two years when her biological father, himself part-Cherokee Indian, decided that he wanted to regain custody of his daughter. He went to court with the claim that his parental rights had never been legally terminated. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of the father, citing the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978, which was instituted to redress systematic removal of native children from their families and communities. Jane was bothered by the outcome of this case, explaining, “The father was a very, very small part Cherokee, never lived as a Cherokee, never accepted that part of himself. I see why the law is there, certainly, for some kids, but maybe it goes too far in the other extreme.” Jane and her husband Tom’s reaction to this case ultimately played a substantial role in their decision to forego domestic adoption; as Jane explained, “We were a little concerned about the possibility of it just going wrong, and then having some kind of possibility that the child would be taken away.” Mary, a single mother in her mid-fifties with a son adopted from China, likewise explained, “I thought about domestic but you hear so many stories about the birth mother coming back or a grandparent
coming back and I think our civil rights are too strong here and it scared me… Why would I go through the heartache here over and over again?”

Indeed, fears of disrupted adoption placements blended together with overall discomfort surrounding openness in the narratives of many of the mothers I interviewed. But for other mothers, the fear of “losing” a child was particularly poignant. One mother described her biggest fear as “going to the hospital, holding the baby, and then the birthmother – who has every right – changing her mind. Or other birth family coming forward.” More than one mother described the possibility of a disrupted placement as “scary.” One recounted, “very close family friends had a bunch of [domestic] adoptions fall through. That seemed really scary to me.” Another shared a similar story in which friends had tried to adopt through the foster care system for six years. When they were finally placed with an infant, they raised her for four years with, reportedly, no contact from the biological mother. But when the girl was four years old, this mother recounted, the social worker reportedly said, “we’re going to give mom one more try.” In the same vein, Erin, a married mother of a son adopted from Ethiopia, explained,

“How domestic adoption is very scary. You’re sort of putting yourself out there. You have to put together your profile and you put yourself out there, but there’s always that risk of one parent who either doesn’t know, or doesn’t sign… and we just felt like the risks domestically were so great that we weren’t willing. We actually started [an adoption through the state foster care system] and we had a child that we were asked to take. At the last minute, mom decided she wanted to parent. So we were ready for this child, and they said ‘No, she’s not coming. Mom wants to parent.’ At that point we had done the [required training] and everything, and we said ‘Okay, we put everything on hold to open our homes to this baby and it just sort of shattered in front of us.’ At that point we said, ‘Okay we’re going forward with international.’”

Here, Erin echoes a desire for more agency in the adoption process that drove so many of the mothers I interviewed to international adoption. They wanted to maintain the position of relative power that comes with being a consumer in a marketplace. And before the waves of disruptions
to international adoption programs began, international adoption could certainly have seemed like a rational, lower-risk choice. As Anna, a married mother of a son adopted from Nepal, explains,

“We knew domestic wasn’t an option we wanted to pursue. We had friends who had had way too many failed placements, and we just didn’t want to have that kind of heartbreak. We knew there were risks with international adoption, but at the time we were looking, in 2010, we didn’t know anybody who had had any failed placements with international adoption. It just seemed the quote-unquote safer way to go.”

But anger and suspicion towards U.S. birthmothers was often barely veiled among some of the mothers I interviewed, including in Anna’s case. Anna elaborated,

“We looked into domestic adoption, but once we heard about the corruption issues they had, and also the number of people in line, and the letter that you have to write in order to get approval from the legal parents… The birthparents [in domestic adoptions] are essentially demanding more and more money before they give birth and then, essentially, changing their minds after thirty days. There’s no way of vetting what’s going in, who’s a serious parent in terms of willing to give up their child and who’s out there trying to make money off of it.”

Like many of the mothers I interviewed, Anna is clear that she desires an adoption process that skews control in her favor. In turning away from domestic adoption, the main thing these adoptive mothers have in common is their desire to maintain agency in their adoption processes. The desire to be a consumer drove them to international adoption.

Yet, for many mothers, their desire for agency and control remains interwoven with their sense of altruism. Linda, a married mother in her mid-fifties with five children, the youngest two adopted from Russia, summed up, “I want a child that’s really an orphan. That nobody’s coming back for.” Here, Linda echoes the same fundamental discomfort that many parents expressed with the legal and social work paradigms that leave U.S. birthmothers with more rights and greater agency than birthmothers abroad. Many saw international adoption as a more attractive opportunity than domestic adoption precisely because, at the outset of their processes, the
commercial nature of international adoption remained hidden to them while they maintained a sense of control. That sense of control felt natural; as Kate said about domestic adoption, it didn’t feel *natural* to “have to be picked.” Of course, what feels “natural” to Kate is a dominant ideology in which adoptive mothers’ desires are given priority over those of the birthmother. The loss of agency and control that many adoptive mothers experienced (or simply feared) allowed them to glimpse the transactional and commercial nature of adoption. In Kate’s case, this was explicit – she herself felt objectified and commodified by the touting of her and her husband’s academic and professional achievements. The more generalized feeling that private domestic adoptions involved adoptive parents “marketing” or “advertising” themselves also contributed to adoptive parents’ view of adoption as a commercial transaction, though perhaps ironically, in that they often saw birthmothers as the financial beneficiary. Through their discomfort, they come face to face with what Spar and Harrington call “the commercial side of their action” (2009:43), retreating to a position – international adoption – where they hoped they could protect their interests. They felt more comfortable in a “buyers’ market.”

“You Have a Decision Here”

For some of those I interviewed, consciousness of the commercial side of international adoption came about through a direct experience of consumer choice. Pat and Rich are a primary example, a married couple in their mid-fifties with two daughters, Laura and Jessica, whom they adopted from Guatemala. One of the very few traditionally middle-class families with whom I spoke, they live in a cozy single-family home in a small, ethnically diverse, working-class city. Rich is a retired blue-collar worker and Pat, a decade younger than Rich, is self-employed. Married “later in life,” their journey towards international adoption is quite typical of my sample; they
initially pursued having a biological child, but shifted their focus to adoption relatively quickly, bypassing all but the slightest medical interventions into their fertility. Their process of adopting their two daughters was dramatic and fraught, and yet also not atypical of the stories I heard from many parents. Pat and Rich described themselves as “politically progressive” and as having a cultural affinity for Latin America. Earlier in her life, Pat had lived in Mexico working with indigenous Guatemalan refugee women fleeing Guatemala’s decades-long armed conflict. As a result, she had travelled throughout Guatemala on multiple occasions and felt a particularly strong emotional connection to the region, in addition to having a high level of cultural competency and Spanish language fluency. Nonetheless, Pat was clear that her motivations for adopting were distinctly related to parenting.

Pat describes how, when she and Rich began to search for an adoption agency, one thing quickly led to another:

“We hadn’t been parents before, we wanted to try for a younger child, rather than an older child who might have had more challenges than we could handle. So, we were looking at Mexico, and I was corresponding with all these adoption agencies working in Mexico, and then this agency working in Guatemala just emailed me and said, hey, we have this child, are you interested? I think we had filled out an initial interest form, but not the home study, not any of that yet. That should have been our first red flag.”

Pat and Rich nonetheless proceeded with that initial referral, for a baby named Elsa. They completed their paperwork and began receiving periodic updates. They had poor communication with their agency, however, and became particularly suspicious when the pictures they were receiving of Elsa appeared, all of a sudden, to be of a different child. So, Pat and Rich, curious and eager to meet Elsa, but not overly suspicious, bought themselves a couple of plane tickets. As Pat explains,
“We just decided, ‘You know what? We should just go see what’s going on in Guatemala.’ I speak fluent Spanish, and I just thought, ‘You know what, this is weird.’ We had been getting pictures, and then we were getting other pictures that didn’t look like the same child. And the [adoption agency representative] was like, ‘oh, kids change as they get older,’ and we were like, ‘oh, this is really weird.’ So we went to Guatemala.”

By this point, Elsa’s birth mother had given birth to another baby girl, Laura, and Pat and Rich completed the paperwork to adopt her as well.

Upon arrival in Guatemala, Pat and Rich were met with utterly unexpected circumstances and quickly realized that they had been victims of fraud. As Pat recounts,

“So we went, and my parents went with us. And we found out – Elsa, we found out, just by looking at her, she had cerebral palsy. Her legs were crossed and rigid, she cried all the time, she couldn’t stand. While we were there, we called the lawyer, because [Elsa] wasn’t the child [we’d been receiving pictures of]. It was a different child.”

In the meantime, Pat, Rich, and Pat’s parents brought Elsa and her sister Laura back to their hotel and spent the next few days caring for them, although, as Pat recalled, they barely paid any attention to Laura because Elsa required their constant care and attention. At fifteen months, Elsa was unable to sit, crawl, walk, or make any pre-speech vocalizations. “Her legs were so tightly locked together,” Pat explained, “that you could barely change her.” Continuing her story, Pat recounted,

“My parents were very good. Rich and I, we were just so stunned by this…. So, every day, we were just trying to deal with the reality of what this would mean for us. Laura was just a baby, just a three-month-old baby. My father suggested, why don’t you call a doctor who you know will come to the hotel. And [the doctor] told us, why don’t you have an MRI and all that stuff. So, we did all of it. The lawyer was pretty upset that we were doing it…. She thought this would jeopardize the adoption. And it did. At the very end of our stay, Rich and I made the decision, and we talked to the lawyer, this is not – and this is a very sad thing to talk about, but we made the decision not to adopt Elsa, because we just felt that we couldn’t handle it.
“I thank goodness that my parents were there. They were a stabilizing force for us. My mother said, ‘This is not your biological child. This is a child you are choosing to adopt. And, yes, you are choosing to care for. You have the opportunity to make the decision now, and you need to make the decision that’s right for you.’ She said, ‘If it was your biological child, obviously you would take the steps and do what you would need to do, but you have a decision here.’ And it was very, very hard, but we don’t have any regrets.”

Pat and Rich proceeded with their plans to adopt Laura, but they chose to leave Elsa behind. They would later pursue a separate adoption process for their daughter Jessica.

Pat and Rich’s story brings the reality – that adoption is ultimately a choice – into sharp focus. As Pat’s mother advised, “you have a decision here.” Despite what she perceived as a deep familiarity with “how business is done,” Pat had truly not dreamed that she could have been placed in such a position. The fact that she and Rich were faced with this decision clearly resulted from the fraudulent activities of their adoption agency. Yet, faced with the prospect of adopting a severely disabled child, Pat and Rich were ultimately able, due to their position as consumers, to make the decision of whether or not to adopt Elsa. Indeed, Pat and Rich had never shirked their privilege as consumers. Describing her initial turn towards Guatemalan adoption, away from Mexico, Pat said,

“Mexico seemed like a really good prospect at the time, you could go to the border town and get to know the woman who was giving birth to the child, and actually apparently be there for the birth, but you would have to live in Mexico for four or five months, and we were both working at the time. I mean, we would have done it, but Guatemala just seemed so much simpler and less challenging. All the adoptions from Guatemala, they were babies. They were happening much, much faster. It was expensive, but all the reports at the time, they were really good.”

Pat entered into this process with knowledge and experience, but also with the sensibility of a North American consumer making a consumer choice: adopting from Guatemala was more expensive but seemed much more convenient than adopting from Mexico without any additional risk. Pat and Rich went on to face a situation that, while more painful than some, proved to be
common among the parents who participated in this project. Fraud was, in fact, a common experience among those I interviewed for this project. But for Pat and Rich, “the commercial side of their action” was revealed through fraud. Pat and Rich came to understand their positions as consumers more clearly because of the gut-wrenching, ethically fraught decision that they were forced into by the circumstances of a poorly regulated international adoption marketplace.

Pat and Rich’s experience is not a straightforward story of profit-driven corruption. Clearly, given better regulation and oversight, Pat and Rich’s experience, as well as other types of fraud, should be avoidable. But beyond the pain caused by their agency’s fraudulent activities, fraud and corruption, as well as simple mismanagement, clash with North American consumer expectations and, in that clash, reveal the commercial mechanisms of international adoption to U.S. adoptive parents. Like the other parents I describe above, Pat and Rich operate as consumers – specifically, as North American consumers with a set of assumptions and expectations surrounding the privilege of regulation and transparency in the marketplace. But when their unconscious expectations are not met, when their assumptions prove ill-founded, the commercial mechanisms of the process are revealed. For Pat and Rich, this happened on a macro-level as well as on a personal, micro-level. As Pat explains,

“Right after [the situation with Elsa] happens, Guatemala shuts down for three months. Our lawyer, who we had hired, said it’s because of international pressure. But his take was, right now lawyers get all the money for international adoption in Guatemala, and it’s a lot of money. And the Guatemalan government wants a hand in it… they want a cut of the money.

Pat’s experiences led her to abandon her adoption agency, strike out on her own, hire an independent attorney. In the process, she was forced to rethink the entire nature of adoption, and she came to the ultimate conclusion that adoption leaves her, the adoptive parent and paying customer, with the power to make her own decisions.
However, Pat’s experiences also led her to confront the very real issues of corruption and adoption fraud being reported in Guatemala. At the same time that Pat confronted a marketplace, she encountered a corrupt and fraudulent one, which further disrupted her initial assumptions about the institution in which she had elected to participate. Pat explains,

“And then all the stories come up, of mothers supposedly selling their babies, and we’re like, oh my God. But at this point, and even now, I really feel that, we know the birth mother signed three times, we had two, no, three DNA tests done on the birth mother, because we’re like, we’re going to make sure right and square that everything’s right at this point. We’re not going to have any problem in the future, that someone would say that’s not a legal adoption. Because that was part of wanting an international adoption in the first place, we wanted to make sure that this kid is going to be our child, and not have something come up later on that – yikes. And, even then the stories weren’t coming out as fierce as they did later on.”

Just like many others, Pat and Rich had turned to international adoption for a sense of certainty, but that certainty was under threat.

Later on, Guatemala would indeed shut down international adoption in the face of tremendous international pressure citing multiple cases of outright kidnapping as well as gross mismanagement and greed on the part of multiple adoption professionals (for a concise overview, see Graff 2012, Voigt 2013). Parker, another mother who adopted from Guatemala, was clear about her take on the situation; the first thing she did after signing the consent form and beginning our interview was to offer a flat-out indictment of international adoption as a byproduct of dislocation and trauma, on both a macro and a micro level. She declared, “I’d just like to point out the absolute irony that it was the U.S.’s systematic destruction of Guatemala that caused my son to need a home,” connecting her individual circumstances and global inequality in the broadest sense. That inequality produced what Briggs, with specific reference to Guatemala, called “the essential precursor to any kind of massive intercountry adoption program,” which depended upon “war or economic upheaval that so tears the social fabric that those who wish to raise their children
cannot, and those who do not wish to raise their children cannot find help or friends or family who can take them in” (2010: 10). The profound social dislocation of Guatemala’s poor coupled with an absence of civil society – as Dubinsky describes with respect to Guatemala’s adoption program, “a culture of impunity about crime from the mundane to the catastrophic, and a breakdown of community and trust” (2010: 110) at all strata of society, including among the doctors, lawyers, judges, and other administrative professionals who brokered adoptions. For Pat and Rich, this corruption and dysfunction allowed them to see the system as a commercial enterprise, and their circumstances led them to understand themselves as consumers with choices. They caught a glimpse behind the veil, and the ideology of a clean, child-centered adoption system came tumbling down.

Paying the Price for Inequality

The commercial nature of international adoption, however inherent, is not straightforward. While international adoption certainly functions as a reproductive marketplace, it is distinct from markets for genetic materials and reproductive labor in important ways. Exchanges of genetic material for money certainly entail complex ethical problems, as does contracting the labor of a surrogate. But adoption is a transactional exchange of a human being. Adoption cannot responsibly be called human trafficking; however imperfect adoption may be, it is done for licit, rather than illicit, purposes and with the explicit goal of advancing children’s best interests. My findings add to the consensus that international adoptive parents function as consumers and, indeed, embrace the position of power and privilege that comes with being a buyer in a marketplace defined by inequality. But the mothers whom I interviewed, unlike mothers in other studies of reproductive markets, also came to see themselves as consumers. I argue that my sample is unique
because the vast majority of the parents I interviewed began their process of international adoption at precisely the time that international adoption processes became far more unpredictable from an adoptive parent’s perspective. I argue that these changes cracked the ideological façade of international adoption as a purely benevolent enterprise and allowed (or forced) adoptive parents to more easily see the multiple dimensions of their own ethically ambiguous positions in a shifting and complex reproductive marketplace. The mothers I interviewed were able to acknowledge and negotiate “the commercial side of their action” because of their unique timing. Globalization, information technologies, the booming of social media, and increasing investigative journalism (in addition to critical scholarship) on international adoption have rendered the commercial character of international adoption increasingly visible. But while camps of activists coalesce around a binary “pro” and “against” vision of international adoption, parents live out the ambivalence and uncertainty that an expanded awareness has engendered. As Dorow points out, “markets are not so much totalizing as unevenly implicated in the social making of kin” (2010: 81).

Altruism also played a substantial, if secondary, role in how the mothers I interviewed perceived their actions. It was mothers’ sense of altruism that systemic changes to international adoption shook the most, and it was through the fracture of their initial sense of altruism – their individual version of a “triumphal narrative” – that they were able to first glimpse adoption commerce. Pat and Rich provide a dramatic example of the limits of adoptive parents’ altruism and, consequently, a clear illustration of adoptive parents’ fundamental position as consumers. The ethical questions raised by Pat and Rich’s individual decision to leave Elsa behind are less germane to this point than the fact that, like any buyer, they were free to walk away. Indeed, the real ethical questions – as well as the theoretical problems – with treating adoption as a reproductive market center around the fact that the commodities in this marketplace are not
commodities. Zelizer’s solution is simply greater transparency and an open acknowledgement of the already commercial nature of adoption. But the critical response to Zelizer’s position cannot be erased: What would it look like, for an adoption, inevitably born of inequality, violence, and displacement, to be, in Zelizer’s words, a “life-enhancing” economic arrangement? Given the enormity of the gulf between parties, it seems an impossible proposition. Thus, despite some calls from academics and activists to streamline and regulate the adoption marketplace, the more common response to allegations of fraud and corruption – sometimes on the part of the U.S. Department of State, sometimes on the part of the sending nation – has been to simply shut programs down.

In the next chapter I turn to the ways that adoptive parents negotiate their decision-making surrounding their children’s race, age, health, and disability status in more detail. In a market context, stigmatized children, whether by race or any other factor, are less “adoptable,” something that Pat and Rich bring into painful relief. But my findings suggest that parents’ calculus is nuanced, and the hierarchies of desirability that they establish are both unexpected and internally contradictory. Indeed, I argue that parents’ decision-making is a reflection of their deepest anxieties and aspirations for their children in the context of more permeable racial boundaries and a precarious New Economy.
CHAPTER 4: PARENTAL ANXIETY AND INTERWOVEN DECISION-MAKING
SURROUNDING RACE, HEALTH, AND FITNESS

Alyssa and Keith are a white, married couple in their early-30s with a three-year-old daughter, Isabella, whom they adopted as an infant from the Democratic Republic of Congo. They live in a neighborhood full of young families in a mid-sized but rural New England town. I sat down to talk with Alyssa on a snowy February morning at her local Starbucks, right after she dropped Isabella off at her half-day preschool. Wondering if Alyssa had arrived first, I pulled into the parking lot next to a shiny black SUV sporting a red, yellow, and green “Africa Love” bumper sticker. I found Alyssa inside – friendly, bubbly, and eager to participate in the project, as well as very happy to engage in what she called “some mommy talk” about preschools, toys, behavioral challenges, and funny parenting moments with a fellow mother of young children. We left the interview agreeing that if we lived closer to one another, we might have arranged a playdate for our kids. But during the interview, Alyssa also expressed frustration with some of her fellow young parents, whom she felt did not understand or appreciate the differences between their own experiences and hers as a transracial adoptive mother. Alyssa used the example of a “typical three-year-old tantrum” to illustrate her point, explaining, “I had a lady call the cops on me at Target because they thought I was kidnapping [my daughter].” Alyssa felt that her white friends could never understand the discrimination that her daughter faces because their experiences are limited both by their children’s whiteness and by their own unquestioned biological ties to their children. Wanting to be “just like” her young-parent friends, but also needing the recognition that her circumstances were unique, Alyssa echoes a long-understood paradox in adoption; as Modell (1994) first described, adoptive parents want to replicate the arrangements and relationships of non-adoptive families, yet simultaneously be recognized for their distinctiveness.
This paradox – of being (and wanting to be seen as) “just like” but also distinctive – takes on additional meanings with respect to transracial adoptive families and highlights the tension between race-awareness and “colorblindness” that permeates all kinds of debates about race in our society. Herman puts this in historical perspective, explaining that, unlike in the past, when “the paradoxical point was to design kinship so seamlessly that adoptive families did not appear to be designed at all” (2008: 121), adoption no longer strives to “appear natural” above all else. As Herman explains, other concerns have risen above race-based matching, and, although not without controversy, domestic and international transracial adoptions are more visible than ever. But set against the history of racial formation in the United States, white mothers of black children signal – and literally embody – centuries of conflict and contradiction; as if speaking directly to Alyssa in the aisle at Target, Barbara Katz Rothman writes, “We’ve crossed a racial boundary in our motherhood… we have a baby that ‘can’t be’ ours” (2005: 193). In this chapter, I explore what adoptive parents have to say about race, but also about health, age, and ability/disability as an interwoven set of factors that they consider early-on in their adoption processes. While some white adoptive parents clearly prioritize adopting a white child, the vast majority of the adoptive parents with whom I spoke emphasized, above all else, their desire for a “healthy” child. The narratives that I explore in this chapter reveal the complicated meanings that parents attach to their children’s “health.” Locating race within this constellation of parental considerations certainly tells us something both about race and racism among white adoptive parents, but may also illuminate something about the ongoing racialization of circulating ideologies about “health” and “fitness,” as well as the racialized nature of contemporary parenting in today’s anxious, risk-obsessed times.

Alyssa’s narrative exemplifies the overlapping concerns about adopted children’s age, health status, and race that ran through the interviews I conducted. One of the youngest mothers
in my sample, Alyssa told me that after a year of trying to get pregnant, she was diagnosed with Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome, a hormonal imbalance that is the leading cause of female infertility. She tried some pharmacological interventions but stopped short of pursuing IVF because of both the expense and the uncertainty. Turning to international adoption, she wanted to find a program that would be as quick and as “certain” as possible. She also wanted a baby. Alyssa explained, 

“For our first child, we really wanted a child as young as possible. We knew we would be better suited to an infant, rather than a child of four or five. I was a special ed. teacher before my daughter came home, and just seeing those behaviors that come with older adopted children… I didn’t want to bring my work home. I don’t know if that sounds bad, but it’s just one of those things, you have to know your limits. We just knew what we wanted, at least our first child, an infant as young as possible.”

Immediately, Alyssa links age to disability. But Alyssa’s emphasis is on behavior – and, by implication, on typical social, emotional, and neurological development. Indeed, Alyssa explains that she wants to adopt “an infant as young as possible” as a hedge against the kinds of atypical neurodevelopment that she saw in the older adopted children she had worked with professionally.

Continuing, Alyssa described her and Keith’s first steps in pursuing international adoption. Having initiated their adoption process in 2010, and given their relatively young age, as well as their desire for a “quick” process, few international adoption programs struck Alyssa as viable options. Filtered through these constraints, Alyssa’s priorities become more visible. Discussing her and Keith’s choices of sending nations from which to pursue an adoption, Alyssa quickly makes it clear that “health” trumps national origin and, as a corollary, race. She recounts,

“We had to research countries and agencies. We did them simultaneously. Some countries weren’t even an option for us, we weren’t even going to consider. Well, Russia and Eastern European countries. I had worked with so many children who were adopted from orphanages in those countries and had significant [Reactive Attachment Disorder] and other behavioral issues that are so common coming from those hard orphanages. It wasn’t even something I would consider, even infants.
So, really, we’re left with Africa, because there aren’t really adoption programs in England, or whatever.”

This narrative certainly demonstrates the interwoven nature of concerns over age, health, and ability/disability in adoptive parents’ thinking and decision-making about their future children. But perhaps the most striking thing in Alyssa’s narrative is the colorblindness with which she discusses her child’s race. In this text, Alyssa is quite clear that her primary concern is her child’s neurological and social-emotional health and development. At the same time, staking out a position of colorblindness whitewashes the fact that, as in the stories of several other parents presented in this chapter, black children were adopted as last resort, and often only as “unspoiled” infants. Furthermore, Alyssa’s startling inattention to power and privilege – the false equivalence she draws between “Africa” and “England” – illustrates precisely how colorblindness, as Bonilla-Silva famously argues, can function as an “elastic wall that barricades whites from the United States’ racial reality” (2006: 47). Bonilla-Silva argues that colorblind racism is most clearly manifest in whites’ (like Alyssa’s) downplaying of structural inequalities related to race, but he also suggests that it can be seen in the kind of “abstract liberalism” that the majority of parents with whom I spoke expressed in their openness to adopting children of color.

The changing nature of international adoption (the changing “supply” of children, in particular) has forced parents to consider a range of possibilities that previous cohorts of international adoptive parents were not structurally forced to consider: older children, children with documented medical needs, and black African and Afro-Caribbean children who, by and large, were not available for adoption in the U.S. It was only in the early 2000s that U.S. adoption agencies opened new programs in Ethiopia, Liberia, Uganda, Haiti, and the Congo to meet ongoing demand after programs in Russia, China, and Guatemala were interrupted. Indeed, Alyssa
acknowledged that she would have liked to adopt from Guatemala or from China. She was disappointed that Guatemala had shut down and that the wait-time for a “healthy baby girl” from China was “like seven years or something.” Ultimately, Alyssa and Keith’s decision-making process hinged on multiple factors and revealed some of Allyssa’s pragmatic and emotional limitations.

In this chapter, I argue that the ways in which parents weave these factors together in their decision-making reveal their most profound desires – and anxieties – surrounding their children’s future. Further, I argue that structural changes to international adoption, coupled with the new, emerging shape of parental anxiety in the twenty-first century, complicates adoptive parents’ calculus. Thinking about children’s future implies a particular kind of anxiety about their future “fitness” to meet the demands of a precariously shifting economy and society. In an era where work, and, indeed, citizenship, depend upon cognitive “fitness” and flexibility (see Pitts-Taylor 2010), the task falls to mothers – and their imperative to mother intensively – to prepare their children for success in a neuroscientific, hyper-cognitive age (Wall 2010). Our knowledge economy and hyper-cognitive society demand developmental, cognitive, and social-emotional “fitness” at the same time that dramatic advances in medical technology have made birth defects like cleft palate malformation or certain congenital heart defects entirely correctable through surgery. Indeed, the mothers that I interviewed universally tried to avoid adopting children with cognitive, behavioral, and social-emotional disabilities, while many were willing to adopt a child with what they considered to be a “correctable” medical need. These mothers illustrate how our ideas and ideals about health and fitness change in relation to both the demands of our economy and the capabilities of medical care and technology. But health, itself, has long been a racialized construct, from ideas about “cleanliness” in the British empire (see, for example, McClintock
1995) to far-reaching debates about eugenics in the twentieth century (see Carter 2007 on the U.S. context); whiteness has routinely been defined in contrast to supposed deficiencies in the cleanliness, health, and fitness of indigenous, immigrant, or other non-white groups. Racialized notions of fitness are apparent today in the disproportionate labeling of black students, particularly boys, as “special needs” (see Blum 2015 for an overview). In this context, my data suggest that racialized notions of health and fitness rest at the center of adoptive parents’ decision-making, barely spoken about, except, ironically, when white parents insist upon adopting white children. For the vast majority of the parents I spoke with, who adopted children of color, colorblindness is what allowed them to elevate “health” above race as a primary consideration.

Much has been written about the unacknowledged racism of many white adoptive parents, particularly with respect to black children that they either do or do not ultimately adopt (see, in particular, and most recently, Bailey 2010, Seligman 2013). That black children remain particularly “difficult to place” through public and private adoption is both a clear fact and a profound tragedy. Here, however, I ask specifically how white adoptive parents’ decision-making processes reveal the ways that race is intertwined with other ideas about adoptive children’s desirability, with particular attention to health, ability/disability, and the gendered discourses and family arrangements that feed contemporary forms of parental anxiety. This question is buttressed by the inexplicit and complicated nature of colorblind racism, as well as the dynamism and fluidity of some racial categories, but perhaps not others, in the contemporary United States.

**Interracial Adoption as a Site of Racial Formation**

The 1970s and 1980s saw dramatic increases in the number of domestic transracial adoptions in addition to the increasing international adoptions of the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s.
Interracial adoption has a storied history in the United States, having been (sometimes simultaneously) forbidden, encouraged, discouraged, vilified, and extolled as a means of achieving racial justice (Kennedy 2004, Roberts 1997, 2002, Rothman 2000, 2005). The National Association of Black Social Workers has famously argued that the adoption of African American children by white parents robs the black community of its children while robbing African American children of their cultural heritage. Yet, as Rothman points out in her consideration of this argument, the benefits to children of living in permanent families need to be weighed against the very real impact of what some consider cultural “genocide” (2005). For Rothman, this tension is deeply personal. As a white mother of a black child, she was accused of participating in “cultural genocide” as she sat on an academic panel about interracial adoption. There is a further tension in this argument, as well. Transracial adoption in the United States has represented a noble aspiration for greater racial justice. While white adoptive parents and the adoption agencies that represent them are certainly not infallible, arguments against transracial adoption reinforce racial separation and may, indirectly, reify an ideology of the purported biogenetic basis of racial categories. This same tension lies at the heart of debates surrounding “color-blindness” and colorblind racism more generally; at what point do we overcorrect for colorblindness and end up shoring up the racial inequity we had sought to remediate? This tension also runs through more fundamental questions about how racial categories form to begin with. If race (and ethnicity) are rooted in ancestry and kinship, then adoption must be a site of ongoing racial formation.

Omi and Winant frame their argument in Racial Formation in the United States with the general critique that much of the sociological literature on race has a “tendency to reduce race to a mere manifestation of other supposedly more fundamental social and political relationships” (1994: 2) – a disembodied construct. They, alternatively, define race itself as “a concept which
signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies” (1994: 55). This definition means that when a person’s body is racialized, it carries with it a full history of ethnic, class, and national-level conflicts, among others, and that it reflects contemporary social hierarchies. It is precisely in this way that race can transcend other elements of the social structure – and other axes of transracial adoptees’ identities. This is how adoption can make a child upper-middle class but cannot make a black child white. And this is where “race-awareness” has emerged as an important part of the transracial adoptive experience and has brought many adoptive families to embrace their children’s cultural heritage, from Chinese New Year festivals to language classes to “heritage trips.” But in the context of white families who adopt black children, the “social conflicts and interests” that black bodies carry, for life, are particularly weighty, as well as particularly immutable. As Rothman writes, “for a while, your black child will have a white family, the protective cloak of your whiteness cast over the child. But eventually, that child goes off, as children eventually do, and your whiteness won’t do a thing for that kid” (2005: 233).

Cornell and Hartmann (1998) diverge slightly from Omi and Winant. They argue that while the formation and maintenance of both racial categories and individual racial identities relies on an ascribed status based in racialized histories, race also depends upon the ongoing efforts and actions of individuals. In the context of interracial adoption, domestic or international, this begs the question of whether being adopted by white parents can, indeed, “whiten” a child of color to some extent. As the history of racial categories over the twentieth century has shown, “white” is far from an immutable category, greatly expanding in the post-World War II era to include formerly “not-quite-white” groups (see, for example, Ignatieff 1995 and Roediger 2007 on Irish immigrants; Brodkin 1998 on Eastern European Jews). But the Irish, Italian, and Jewish
immigrants who “became white” largely did so by distinguishing themselves from U.S. blacks, upholding a persistent black-and-white binary in U.S. race relations.

In terms of international adoption, children from Asia and Latin America certainly helped advance the notion that a “transracial” family is not necessarily a black-and-white one at the same time that overall trends in late-twentieth century immigration have thrown the door open to a more complex understanding of America’s racial and ethnic makeup. The arrival of new immigrant groups, as well as the small but substantial growth of interracial and interethnic families, has indeed raised new questions about racialization and assimilation in the U.S. (see Alba 2005, Alba and Nee 2009, Kasinitz et. al. 2009, Lee and Bean 2012). Indeed, in 2010, 8 percent of all marriages and 15 percent of new marriages were between partners of different races or ethnicities. Yet the rate of intermarriage continues to vary widely by race. Among those marrying in 2010, only 9 percent of whites and 17 percent of blacks married someone of a different race or ethnicity, while 26 percent of Hispanics and 28 percent of Asians did so (Wang 2012).

Lee and Bean (2012) take this historically high rate of intermarriage between Hispanics and whites and between Asians and whites as evidence of the assimilation – and the “whitening” – of these non-black immigrant groups. Furthermore, with respect to Asian Americans, Lee and Bean hold up their “model minority” and “honorarily white” status as evidence of a dramatically shifting ethnoracial hierarchy in the United States, given the derisive language used to describe Asian immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century (2012: 139). But Lee and Bean are clear about what has “whitened” Asians, writing, “what changed was not Asian immigrants’ skin color or other physical characteristics but the way they are now perceived by native-born whites after having achieved both economic and social mobility” (2012: 139). Money and “respectability” are what “whiten.” It is in this vein that the notion of a model minority is fundamentally attached to
an anti-model – poor African Americans. The example of early 20th century Jewish immigrants – the first model minority – illustrates this dialectic. As Brodkin argues, “model minorities and deficit cultures are like two hands clapping; the Jewish ethnicity that intellectuals claimed for themselves as model minorities… characterized by values of hard work, delayed gratification, education, and strong, two-parent families… [depended on] the invention of a deficient African American culture that illustrated [the model minority’s] exemplariness” (1998: 150-151).

Likewise, Steven Steinberg writes, “the same logic that underlies the myth of ethnic success has produced an opposite myth about groups that never escape from poverty. Such groups are said to be encumbered with a set of disabling or dysfunctional cultural values that impede social and economic mobility” (1981: 106). Indeed, a model minority discourse reinforces our cultural association of black Americans with cultural deficiency and inescapable poverty.

Studies of both contemporary immigration and the children of racially or ethnically mixed couples question the ongoing meanings of categories like “white,” “minority,” and “mainstream.” Lee and Bean argue, echoing the long-held view of white ethnicity (i.e., Irish, Italian) as purely symbolic, that children of interethnic couples, both white-Asian and white-Hispanic, view themselves as increasingly white. Lee and Bean suggest that this is due, in large part, to being monolingual English-speakers, who experience their Asian or Hispanic ethnicity as increasingly symbolic – relegated to foods and occasional holidays, just like their peers of Italian and Irish heritage. Thus, as Alba and Nee argue, contemporary patterns of racial formation must rely on “new ways of theorizing assimilation as a social process stemming from immigration” (2003: 9). Likewise, Kasinitz and his coauthors write, “today’s immigrants and their children challenge us to examine the nature of our racial definitions, the ways in which race operates in American society, and how nonwhite immigrants and their descendants will be incorporated into the society as
members of racial categories” (2008: 302). But Kasinitz and his coauthors remind us that the conceptual treatment of blackness is central because, as in prior models of assimilation, we continue to “risk essentializing central-city black culture in the image of the underclass” (2003: 8). Indeed, for black immigrants from around the world, Waters writes that “becoming American also entails becoming Black” (1999: 93). And for children of mixed black-white parentage, Lee and Bean argue that the one-drop rule continues to operate in a way that has never applied to children of mixed white-Asian or white-Hispanic parentage.

Arguing that “adoption follows the same logic as immigration,” Rothman writes that “other groups, including adoptees, even if not ‘white,’ can be assimilated, can move into white America. People of African descent are not permitted that luxury” (2005: 106). This goes beyond the specifics of a model and anti-model dialectic, and touches on the very ways that U.S. society draws boundaries between black and white. As Michèle Lamont has argued, these boundaries rely on our ongoing work of refining and reasserting what distinguishes us from others. The mothers that I interviewed describe this kind of boundary-work as a central part of their decision-making surrounding the sending nation from which they ultimately choose to adopt. While all of the parents I interviewed described efforts to introduce their internationally adopted children to their “cultural heritage,” the meanings attached to this vary greatly by the adopted child’s race and ethnicity. For white (Russian), Asian, and Hispanic international adoptees living in white families, ethnicity can be purely symbolic, as it is for the children of (partly) Asian and Hispanic ethnicity that Lee and Bean (2012) describe.

For black adopted children, however, it’s not as simple. The parents I interviewed who adopted African children also went to great lengths to expose them to the food, language, religion, and other traditions of their natal countries. But I would argue that these parents did so in part
because they were forced to wrestle with the question of whether their child is “Ethiopian-American,” “Congolese-American,” or just African American – that is, black. Seligman, comparing the parents of Chinese adopted children to the parents of African American domestic adoptees, notes that “although adoptive parents use ‘heritage’ with respect to transnational transracial adoptions, they tend to use ‘race’ in the context of domestic transracial adoptions” (2013: 11). I take up this observation with respect to the white parents of black, African adoptees whom I interviewed. Their narratives suggest a particularly fine-grained exercise of boundary-work. They emphasize their black children’s national “heritage” while simultaneously (though not always) distancing themselves and their children from U.S. blacks. In the context of a shifting ethnoracial hierarchy in the twenty-first century United States, Yancey (2003), among other scholars, suggests that the new racial divide in our society is between blacks and non-blacks, rather than between whites and non-whites. In line with Lee and Bean (2012), as well as others who look at model minority discourses, Yancey argues that assimilation is, in some ways, inevitable for nonblack racial minorities, but that the African American experience is “unique” (2003: 153). The narratives of white mothers of African children that I present in this chapter certainly highlight white adoptive mothers’ (perhaps futile) efforts to exempt their black children from that “unique” experience.

The parents that I interviewed for this project need to be understood as both actors in the ongoing drama of racial formation in this country as well as a part of white racism in our society. This is most apparent in their efforts to distinguish themselves and their children from non-immigrant African Americans. I argue that these parents manage this boundary work through a distinct discourse of colorblindness, which allows them to frame their children as international adoptees rather than as black Americans, as well as to justify a hierarchy of “health” over race.
Their discursive position of colorblindness enables their decision-making surrounding health status, age, and disability status while simultaneously highlighting the racialization of our ideas surrounding health, fitness, and ability/disability, which is apparent in their expression of stereotypes about model minorities and “damaged” (black) U.S. foster kids.

**Parental Anxiety in a Risk Society**

When the mothers I interviewed spoke about health and “fitness,” they did so in the context of a particular set of discourses surrounding motherhood and of our current cultural relationship with risk more generally. The late twentieth century and the outset of the twenty-first century have heralded an age of “intensive mothering” (Hays 1996, most notably) in which women, in particular, are exhorted and expected to devote tremendous amounts of time, energy, and money to the project of raising their children. Hays argues that this is a distinctly gendered phenomenon and that intensive *mothering* results from the intractability of the gendered arrangements of work and family life. From Hochschild’s 1989 description of a “stalled revolution” to Gerson’s 2010 description of an “unfinished” one, the middle and upper-middle class, heterosexual mothers that populate such studies have remained both psychologically and economically saddled with the great majority of care-work, despite substantial (though uneven) shifts in the gendered ideologies that women and men bring into marriage. The stubbornness of these gendered work and family arrangements is apparent in the Pew Research Center’s finding that the share of “stay-at-home” mothers has increased across the socioeconomic spectrum since 2000 (Cohn et al. 2014). Moreover, that a norm of intensive mothering has completely saturated our culture is perhaps best illustrated by the finding that employed mothers at the outset of the twenty-first century spent more time actively engaged with their children than nonemployed mothers did in the 1960s and 1970s.
(Bianchi et al., 2007). Expectations for mothers’ (and, arguably, all parents’) involvement in their children’s lives has never been higher because, as some argue, the stakes are so high: economic precariousness, the shrinking of the middle class, and the overall splintering of full-time work, from subcontracted janitors to subcontracted lawyers. Parents – but of course, mothers, most particularly – therefore set out to mitigate any conceivable risk that might disadvantage their children later in life, from pregnancy and breastfeeding, to preschool, college, and beyond (see, notably, Cooper 2014, Nelson 2010, Spar 2013, Wolf 2010). And all of this is happening against a backdrop of our evolving relationship with risk in a society “increasingly preoccupied with the future (and also with safety)” (Giddens 1999: 3). Risk society – our response to the precariousness of our contemporary circumstances (see Beck 1992, Beck 2008, Glassner 2010) – has created a space for intensive mothering to flourish.

Intensive mothering under these circumstances has created not only new kinds of labor but also new kinds of anxiety about children’s preparedness and success. Childrearing strategies have long been understood as class-based (see Lareau 2003), but these cleavages have taken on new forms as the knowledge economy has flourished and inequality has increased (Lareau 2003, Nelson 2010, Vincent and Ball 2007). Nelson, in particular, describes the ways that today’s affluent parents remain tethered to their teenage and college-age children through constant communication and profound involvement in the day-to-day details of their children’s lives. Nelson argues that this is a manifestation of a real (and not entirely irrational) increase in parental anxiety surrounding children’s success in higher education and professional careers. That anxiety includes a heightened focus on typical social-emotional, behavioral, and neurological development (Blum 2015), and is directly linked to the kinds of attributes, advantages, and skills that parents (mothers) suspect will best prepare their children for an uncertain future.
The (generally) affluent mothers in my sample certainly reported subscribing to the class-based stratagems that Lareau (2003) describes. But they also described their decision-making surrounding adoption in a way that resembled what Wolf (2010) calls “total mothering.” Writing in the context of ideologies surrounding breastfeeding, Wolf argues that contemporary mothering ideologies demand a total mitigation of all potential risk – an impossible proposition, of course, but one that drives mothers to extreme measures. I argue that, unable to personally control their children’s prenatal exposure to drugs and alcohol, adoptive mothers avoid adopting Russian children to mitigate the risk of cognitive and social-emotional disabilities. Likewise, absent for their children’s earliest experiences of the world, adoptive mothers seek out adoption programs with “warm” and “loving” orphanage workers in order to maximize their future children’s capacities for attachment and future social-emotional health. In the context of a hyper-cognitive – and hyper-competitive – economy and society, adoptive parents view international adoptees as potentially risky propositions. The adoptive mothers that I interviewed sought to mitigate these risk by simply excluding categories of children as potentially adoptable. As I go on to describe, these categories were highly racialized, but sometimes in quite nuanced ways. The trade-offs adoptive parents made regarding their future child’s race, age, health, and disability status, I argue, reveal how those factors stand in for parents’ aspirations and fears for their children. Bailey (2010) argues rather bluntly that middle and upper-middle class, professional adoptive parents desire, if not entirely expect, a “blue-ribbon baby” who will attend a prestigious university and achieve a high professional status. In many of the stories I heard, however, parents’ anxieties far outweighed their aspirations, and parents’ fears – primarily of atypical neurodevelopment – led them to make a series of, ultimately, intricately racialized decisions.
In this chapter, I look most closely at three groups of parents – those who adopted from China, those who adopted (white) children from Russia, and those who adopted (black) children from Africa. First and foremost, the parents whom I interviewed almost universally expressed a distinct hierarchy of health over whiteness. This is apparent in their positive decision-making (i.e., *to* adopt a non-white child from China), but is most prominent in their negative decision-making – *not* to adopt a (white) child from Eastern Europe. This begs the question of how “healthy” Chinese children might be racialized not only through the prevailing notion of a model minority but also through parents’ presumptions of health and fitness. Secondly, I explore how parents reveal their priorities through the concessions that they discuss making, particularly in terms of those who elect to adopt an older child or a child with a documented developmental or health concern. My findings suggest that the adoptive parents I interviewed held typical cognitive and social-emotional development as their highest priority. Finally, I turn to those parents who adopted black children from Africa and the Caribbean. They express similar preferences to other adoptive parents in their rejection of white, Eastern European children in the name of health and fitness, but they raise unique questions of their own. How do *they* attempt to racialize (or de-racialize) their black children through discourses of health and fitness? How do they view their children’s race and ethnicity? Ultimately, I suggest that the answers to these questions are as complex, internally contradictory, and uneven as the reshaping of the American racial order.

“A Healthy Baby”

Danielle is a married white mother in her late forties with a teenage daughter by birth and an elementary school-age daughter adopted from China. Danielle struggled with secondary
infertility for several years before she and her husband made the decision to adopt. She told me that her own parents were rather traditional, explaining,

“When we first told my parents we were adopting from China, they said, ‘Why? Don’t you want to have a baby that looks like you?’ And I was like, um, no. So I think they had a harder time with it. I said, ‘We are not concerned about that; we want a healthy child.’ We could adopt from Russia or Ukraine, but those are not healthy children, generally. We would rather go with a more known quantity, and just have a child we can love, who will just be healthy.”

Many would applaud the fact that race is – at least in a limited sense – no longer a trump card in parents’ images of their future children. In Danielle’s case, she seems to see colorblindness as a generational achievement – she could “handle it” even if her parents couldn’t. But Danielle’s “abstract liberalism” (as Bonilla-Silva might put it) is consistent with shifting ideas about race, and particularly about “honorarily white” Asian Americans in American society more broadly. More than colorblindness, though, Danielle reveals her true priority – “a healthy baby” – which other parents echo again and again. While Danielle is less direct about what she means by “health” than some other parents, her objection to adopting from Russia and the Ukraine makes her meaning more clear, especially in the context of other parents’ parallel objections to Eastern European adoptees, on the grounds of fetal alcohol exposure and disordered attachment.

Most parents I interviewed turned to international adoption out of trepidation toward domestic adoption. But they also turned to international adoption in the belief that they might hedge against potentially unhealthy American children and risky American birth mothers. Writing about the wave of international adoptions from Romania in the early 1990s, Ortiz and Briggs (2003) explore precisely how we’ve come to perceive U.S. birthmothers as inherently riskier than poor birthmothers abroad. The Romanian children being adopted by U.S. parents at that time were, on average, the same age as kids in U.S. foster care, and Romanian adoptees presented with the
same constellation of behavioral and physical health challenges as the U.S. foster kids. Why, then, Ortiz and Briggs, ask, would parents spend tens of thousands of dollars to adopt a Romanian child? It had to be race, they argue; Romanian children were so much more “adoptable” than African American children in foster care, because Romanian children would, upon arrival in the U.S., be white. Yet, Ortiz and Briggs point out that at the time of the Romanian adoption boom, nearly 40 percent of children in the U.S. foster care system were white. This leads Ortiz and Briggs to conclude that we find children abroad to be more “adoptable” than children in the U.S. Dorrow calls this “the transracial imaginary of white America, which includes the vilification of poor mothers of color, [and in which] nonwhite orphans abroad are deemed more rescuable and desirable than domestic nonwhite children” (2010: 71). Ortiz and Briggs take their argument a step further with specific respect to U.S. foster kids, arguing that Americans adopt abroad specifically because of “the racialization and biologization of poverty” (2003: 40) and the subsequent “creation of moral panics over the scarcity of white children for adoption or the medical fragility of crack babies” (2003: 41). In this chapter, I take up Ortiz and Briggs’ argument about the “racialization and biologization of poverty” in international adoption, asking precisely how adoptive parents’ desires for a “healthy” baby affect their thinking and decision-making surrounding race.

Almost thirty years after panic over an “epidemic” of “crack babies” ensued – and the myth was ultimately debunked (see Okie 2009) – I interviewed one married, white mother of a child adopted from Nepal, who fell back on its old, panicked language to explain why she opted against domestic adoption. As she explained, “we did a lot of research about domestic, domestic open, foster care, and to be really honest, the domestic scene was scary – you had to take five siblings and three of them were crack babies. Not the direction we wanted to go.” As Ortiz and Briggs
(among many others) establish, “crack babies” are black in our cultural imagination, and this white mother hit two of the most classic negative tropes about poor black mothers right on the head: drug use and uncontrolled fertility. This adoptive mother’s description leaves little doubt that the faces she imagined in her domestic adoption “horror story” were black. While this mother was particularly explicit in her language, other mothers used somewhat more coded language. Arden, a married white mother who adopted a daughter from the Democratic Republic of Congo, explained,

“As part of my research I looked into private and foster care adoption. Private didn’t make sense for us, because we didn’t have fertility issues and the supply cannot meet the demand in domestic adoption. The need for those kids, it’s not the same. So there was no reason to do private infant adoption for us; we could just have our own biological kid. As far as domestic foster care, it wasn’t a good match for us because of the age of the kids. And the needs of those kids are extremely severe. So, because of the age and the special needs, we decided not to.”

Both of these mothers, with varying degrees of subtlety, echo Ortiz and Briggs. But Arden, in particular, emphasizes what she herself calls “the need of the children.” “But, of course,” she says, it was “the needs of the children” that caused her and her husband to adopt from the Congo. Echoing Dorrow, Arden explains that she felt a domestic infant did not “need” her. And by emphasizing her own fertility, Arden reinforces the fact that she is adopting a child who does. Arden also makes clear that she went to the Congo because “they had babies available,” and so, for Arden, a black baby in Africa is far more “rescuable” and far more desirable than a “damaged” black child in the United States. Arden’s position is clearly supported by colorblindness, on the one hand, and a racialized discourse of health and “fitness” on the other.

Presented with the choices inherent in international adoption, parents’ colorblind language enabled them to explain their hierarchy of preferences in terms of age, health, and race: parents
wanted babies as young as possible, in large part, it would seem, as a hedge against atypical social-
emotional and neurological development. But perhaps more importantly, parents consistently
expressed a distinct hierarchy of health over whiteness, with the exception of the parents of the
five children (eight percent of the children in the sample) who were adopted from Russia. Jane, a
50-year-old married mother of a daughter adopted from China, turned to adoption after “a year or
so” of trying to conceive, but without pursuing any kind of medical intervention. She was
uninterested, she explained, mostly because, as she said, she was “getting a little older.” When I
asked her why she and her husband had chosen to adopt from China, specifically, she explained,

“We just ruled out other places. China seemed to be very organized, they had the
experience of doing this for a decade or more at that point, and it seemed very
efficient, and we would be taken care of in country as well… and then, just knowing
that, statistically, the children from China seem to do very well, they have less
attachment issues, and things like that – that I’ve heard – from other countries.
Russia we kind of considered a little bit, but it didn’t really feel right to us. I mean,
I’ve heard a few things about Russia, it’s not really fair, but it just seemed like… it
was partly emotional and partly intellectual, but it just seemed like China was a
better fit and would go more smoothly.”

Jane articulates her trepidation about Russia as a positive decision to adopt from China, where the
process is streamlined and the children “seem to do very well.” Jane hardly masks her priorities;
whiteness is unimportant in the face of the attachment issues “and things like that” for which
Russian adoptees are infamous. Yet Jane’s quick dismissal of whiteness is enabled by the model
minority status enjoyed by many groups of Asian immigrants, including, ultimately, the adopted
Chinese daughters of white, middle-class and professional parents who, as Jane put it, “seem to do
very well.”

In a similar vein, Beth, a mother with an older biological daughter and a younger daughter
adopted from Russia, told me that she felt comfortable with international adoption, in general,
because of the contrast between adoptees from Asia and U.S. foster kids in our collective imagination. She explained,

“I never really thought about domestic adoption. I only really thought about international. I mean, I wonder to what extent it has to do with the wave of Chinese and Korean adoption and how successful those kids are in the outside world. Cute as buttons, bright and shiny, they seem to be outstanding members of their community. And how foster care has a very different image to middle class Americans of being like forgotten kids, messed up kids, messed up families, baggage. And I wonder first to what extent that was in my psyche deep enough that I couldn’t even consider it as a valid option.”

While Beth did ultimately adopt from Russia, and not from China or Korea, she highlights both the dichotomy between model minority status and “deficiency” that seems to enable many of the parents I interviewed to adopt Asian children, as well as the particular ways that “health” – and a “biologization of poverty” – can cut across sometimes fluid, sometimes permeable racial categories. Indeed, she illustrates the idea that U.S. society can assign model minorities differing degrees of whiteness.

The discourse of a model minority – and its dialectic opposite – certainly illustrate the ideas that many white adoptive parents have about the “health” of black American children. But the model minority discourse does not address why, precisely, many white adoptive parents in the U.S. hesitate to adopt white children from Eastern Europe. Anna, a married white mother of a son adopted from Nepal, describes her turn away from Eastern Europe as guided by her adoption agency, as well as a discourse of colorblindness. Speaking specifically to what she means by “health,” she explains,

“We started with Eastern Europe because it was what we knew… but then our adoption agency asked us to prioritize what was most important to us in terms of health, age, ethnic background, and we didn’t care about age and ethnic background at all, but we did care about health, and that’s when they said, well, then, Eastern Europe is not for you. So, we went back to the drawing board a little bit, and that’s when we realized that Nepal is a Hindu and Buddhist country, and that leads to very
little abuse and neglect. That was the main way we saw it then… compared to Eastern Europe there’s probably very little abuse and neglect, and very little exposure to alcohol and drugs.”

Anna is not concerned about bacterial infection or malnutrition – very real, deadly problems in Nepal. Rather, she uses “health” as code for a lack of fetal exposure to drugs and alcohol, and as a lowered risk for disordered attachment, social-emotional challenges, and atypical cognitive development, at least in her estimation.

Anna’s barely-coded language runs through the narratives of many other mothers with whom I spoke and dovetails with ideas about exoticism and “naturalness” among transracial adopted children. Catherine, a single white mother of a son adopted from Kazakhstan, also framed her choice of Kazakhstan over Russia in terms of Kazakhstan’s ethno-religious character: “Kazakhstan is an Islamic country,” she explained, “so there’s less incidence of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome.” Another single white mother, Betty, with a son adopted from Mongolia, told me that she originally wanted to pursue adoption from Russia because, as a Ph.D. in Russian literature, she speaks fluent Russian, has a deep cultural and historical understanding of the region, and had lived in Russia for extended periods of time. But her concerns over the “health” of the children living in Russian orphanages trumped her intellectual interest and cultural affinity. Betty also framed the health – defined as less prenatal drug and alcohol exposure – of Mongolian children in terms of Mongolia’s Buddhist character despite the fact that Mongolia’s rate of alcohol abuse is actually three times the overall rate in Europe (Lim 2009). Indeed, these mothers exoticize their children and their children’s native countries. And a not-so-subtle racism runs through these statements, which exoticize Asian children, casting them as “healthy” because they’re unspoiled by drugs and alcohol, and are, therefore, closer to their “natural” state. Echoing a trope as old as Orientalism, one mother said, “we were very open to ethnic cultures.” These mothers clearly illustrate how a
hierarchy of “health” over whiteness operates, as well as how “health” itself is racialized along the new lines of fitness and desirability that we’ve drawn to meet (as best we can) the demands of the new economy.

At the same time, it is absolutely the case that for a few mothers in my sample – some for particularistic reasons, others out of more generalized feelings – adopting a white child was very important. Yet it’s simultaneously clear that this struck them as a risky preference. Those who adopted white, Russian children also experienced tremendous anxiety surrounding their children’s social-emotional, behavioral, and neurological development. These parents were exceptional in my sample in the sense that health did not trump race, but health was still a fundamental concern. Indeed, all five of these mothers explained that they had chosen to adopt from Russia only because of race and in spite of serious trepidations related to attachment issues and fetal alcohol and drug exposure. One mother who adopted from Russia said, “I wanted someone who wasn’t institutional looking.” Linda, another married white mother, with two children by birth, had adopted a school-aged brother and sister from Russia when her two older children were teenagers. She told me that she simply did not feel she could navigate the complexities of an interracial family, explaining,

“We went with Russia because the kids would blend into our family naturally. And there was nothing wrong with getting a child from Ethiopia or China, I think. It’s just that then my older kids would have to talk adoption all the time. Because that child… you know how it is. They don’t look like them, so everybody has to say, ‘Oh, they’re adopted.’ So, I figured we wouldn’t have to, you know, have to talk about our kids being adopted to everybody all the time.”

Similarly, Abby, a self-described “older” single white mother, specifically sought out a Russian adoption because she wanted a child who would “look like” her. Abby was not particularly nervous about Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, however, because unlike almost all other participants in this project, she set out to adopt an elementary-aged child from the start. As a result, she explained,
the presence of severe Fetal Alcohol Syndrome would have been apparent. She was apprehensive about attachment, however, and described this as the only factor that made her doubt her commitment to motherhood and adoption.

Karen, a single white mother of a daughter adopted from Russia as a young toddler, was also very explicit about her reluctance to form an interracial family, as she felt her daughter Leora would already face disadvantages as the daughter of a single mother in a traditional, religious Jewish community. Karen also shared, with pride, if not a little bemusement, that acquaintances often comment on how alike she and Leora look (Karen showed me several pictures on her phone to elicit my opinion on the matter, as well as to show off Leora’s recent social studies project). But Karen made no secret of her fears of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, and, on multiple occasions during our interview, described the scrutiny she gave to Leora’s philtrum (the vertical groove between the nose and upper lip). Karen – and her parents – poured over Leora’s photographs when Karen received the match, trying to determine if it was “flat” – a possible sign of fetal alcohol exposure. Karen also described immediately focusing on Leora’s philtrum when the two met at Leora’s orphanage. Ultimately, Karen bonded with Leora before fully formulating her thoughts on Leora’s risk of facing developmental challenges. Karen explained that she decided to proceed with the adoption because of her bonding with Leora. Karen also explained, though, that after making the decision to proceed, but before finalizing the adoption, she felt “tremendous relief” to see that Leora “was all there.”

**Making Trade-Offs**

Parents’ discomfort with – and even fear of – domestic adoption loomed large in their decision to pursue adoption internationally. As one mother summed up her feelings on
international adoption, “It just seemed like it would go more smoothly.” But as almost all of the parents I interviewed discovered along their path towards adoption, international adoption rarely proceeded smoothly or quickly, particularly in the context of the shifting reproductive marketplace that I describe in the preceding chapters. As a result, many of the parents I interviewed reported making trade-offs surrounding the age, race, and health of their adopted children. This, I suggest, reveals the ways that parents’ decision-making sheds a light on the interplay of race and “fitness” that characterizes these parents’ narratives. Marjorie, a married white mother of two children adopted from China, was very explicit in her rejection of “damaged” foster children, alcohol-exposed Russian children, and children with atypical neurological and social-emotional development in general. But her language surrounding the trade-offs and compromises that she did make is telling. Initially explaining how she and her husband had ruled out adopting through domestic foster care, Marjorie was succinct: “we went to one state training and the kids were significantly damaged.” Telling me about her preferences with respect to international adoption, though, Marjorie elaborated,

“We specified zero to three, because of language, emotional, and other developmental things. The kids in foster care, the average age was seven or eight. We looked at a lot of different countries, but Guatemala was closed, Kazakhstan was closed, Vietnam was closed. So we looked at China, and they have a Special Focus program, which is kids who have minor correctable medical needs. So, on the advice of some of our physician friends, we went with cleft palate kids. The wait [for them] was 12-18 months, whereas a healthy child from China would have taken four years or more.”

Here, Marjorie is clear that her children’s age at adoption was paramount among her concerns. She is also clear that she was willing to make certain concessions in terms of her children’s “health.” But Marjorie goes on to specify, in no uncertain terms, what she means. As she explained, “Russia was completely out, because of [Fetal Alcohol Syndrome]. I had worked in a
drug rehab, I knew some of those behaviors. Our kids just needed surgery, and then they were fine. We could not have handled it, like, medical versus emotional issues.”

Most recent adoptive parents have faced the decision to adopt an “older child” – a child over the age of one or two – or a child with a documented disability or health concern because “healthy infants” have become increasingly unavailable for international adoption as regulation and oversight, both in the U.S. and within sending nations, has increased. This is the case even for parents adopting from China, a country that did not “shut down” or experience any major diplomatic shakeup. But as Marjorie’s story pinpoints, the vast majority of the parents I interviewed remained closed to the prospect of adopting a child whom they perceived to be at risk for neurological, psychiatric, behavioral, or social-emotional challenges.

Alyssa and Keith, discussed in the opening of this chapter, were able to bring their daughter home from the Congo at eight months old, but that program – one of the last to make “healthy infants” available – shut down soon after. Overwhelmingly, parents who were unable to adopt “healthy infants” revealed that when they chose “special needs” or “special focus” adoptions, they wanted to adopt a child with a diagnosis that, as more than one mother put it, was “correctable,” or, at least, “medically understood.” These mothers clearly excluded children whom they deemed to be at risk for atypical social-emotional development. And, as Alyssa’s calculus clearly illustrates at the outset of this chapter, the best hedge against atypical neuro-development that parents could identify was a child’s age. Indeed, this concern came to the forefront for many parents as adoption processes grew longer, particularly in once-predictable China. Another mother who adopted a daughter from China, explained,

“Nobody was getting referrals as quickly as they thought they would… it was very disheartening and very hard to wait. When we finally got the referral, she was older than we had said we wanted, but as soon as I saw the picture, I knew this was right.
I had dreams about her eyes, that I was looking in her eyes, she has these huge eyes, it’s so sweet.”

As this mother illustrates, age is paramount, but this mother looked into her daughter’s eyes and knew it “was right,” like Karen, who looked into her daughter Leora’s eyes and knew she was “all there.” But, of course, in the case of a mother adopting from China, a daughter with “huge eyes” hits on a classic trope in the racialization of Asian women who seek out “whitening” double-eyelid surgeries (Kaw 1993). It is possible to read this mother as linking “huge eyes” – a feature of white women – to her Chinese daughter’s interwoven health, fitness, and racial assimilation in U.S. society.

Mary, a single mother in her early fifties, provides a striking example of the trade-offs that parents make when a sending nation’s regulations change mid-process and the process slows down. Mary describes having focused on her business career earlier in life and, despite always wanting children, having “never met the right guy.” When she turned forty-five, she decided to adopt from China, acting on the advice of a colleague who had adopted two daughters from China after experiencing several failed domestic placements. Mary elaborates on her decision and explains what happened next:

“It was a fairly quick process from China at that time, and most importantly, they took single women. I made my application in September 2006 and I was logged in April 13, 2007. So, at that time – up until that time – it was thirteen to fourteen months, it was a fairly manageable wait. I went to China because they accepted single women. So there was a flood of applicants, and that, coupled with all the other changes in China, economic and whatever else… So, the wait became a big wait, and so you wait.”

Four years passed. Mary made a career change, got a graduate degree, moved back to her hometown, and climbed Mount Kilimanjaro because, she said, “I thought, ‘what should I do now that will be more difficult with a child later on?’ and I had always wanted to do that.”
Meanwhile, Mary saw no end to her waiting, and she began to search for a way to expedite her process. She explained,

“...I was looking at the waiting children pictures [online] and I thought, ‘I’m just gonna ask about this one little girl,’ and I asked to see her file. I went over to [Children’s Hospital] and I thought, I’m way out of my league, you know, I’m a single mother, this isn’t going to be fair to either one of us, it was far more complicated than I wanted to deal with. I said [no], but then the director of the waiting children program called me again and said, ‘Listen, we have this child, we didn’t know if you would want it, it’s special focus,’ which means that it’s not a real extenuating circumstance but because the child had a heart murmur and because they had identified it, they had to put the child into a different category. So, I said, ‘sure, I’ll look at the file.’ I didn’t want to see the picture but it was the cutest little picture and I was looking at the file and thinking this is so insignificant. I was looking at the EKG and I sent it to my mother by email and I said, ‘why would I say no?’ And she said, ‘you wouldn’t.’ So I said, ‘Sure, I’ll accept.’”

Mary’s trade-off may seem minor, but she highlights the process that many parents I spoke with experienced: roadblocks were met with alternatives, and parents adjusted their thinking to accommodate what they considered to be “minor, correctable medical needs.” Mary’s privilege – and the privilege of these adoptive parents, in general – speaks volumes because, on the one hand, they have the resources to address a variety of “correctable” medical needs, while, on the other, they would not relinquish their intergenerational privilege by adopting irreversibly “damaged” children with disordered attachment or damaged brains.

Parker and John provide another example of parents who are willing to adopt a child with a medical need that they consider “managable.” A white, heterosexual married couple in their early 30s with two sons, eight-year-old Gabriel, adopted from Guatemala, and six-year-old John Jr., adopted from China, they live in modest apartment in an affluent inner-suburb. John is employed full-time, and Parker combines adjunct college teaching with a postdoctoral research fellowship. Indeed, despite the family portraits on the walls, the futon on which we conducted our interview was much more “grad student” than “upper-middle class professional.” Parker and John
decided to grow their family through adoption before getting married in their early 20s, and initially considered adopting through the state-run foster care system. They decided against that route primarily because Parker’s career could lead them to move out of state at any time, which would have disqualified them from any adoption in process. While they were exceptional in their interest in adoption from the foster care system, they were less of an exception in other ways. Parker was very clear that, for their first child, they wanted “a baby, as young as possible,” and they chose to adopt Gabriel from Guatemala – when adoptions in Guatemala were still open – primarily for that reason. By the time they were ready to adopt a second child, however, adoptions in Guatemala had stopped. They were “old enough” to adopt from China by that time, though the wait-time for a “healthy infant” had grown to several years. So Parker and John considered the range of disabilities they were willing to knowingly take on, and they ruled out severe physical limitations, as well as mild, moderate, and severe developmental delays, including autism. As Parker related, “I didn’t think we could handle major behavioral problems, or problems like autism.” Instead, Parker and John selected a number of relatively minor, surgically “correctable” issues – cleft palate, missing digit, minor congenital heart defect. And, in relatively short order, they were matched with John Jr., who, after corrective surgery, is “doing great” with “no restrictions on his activities.”

While there are certainly families in the U.S. who consciously and specifically adopt severely disabled children, they represent a tiny minority of adoptive parents. One mother I interviewed told me about an acquaintance who adopted a daughter with both severe disabilities and a chronic, life-threatening illness. This devoutly Christian couple was strictly motivated by the desire that the girl would “know a family, and know Jesus” before she died. But the mother who told me this story did so out of curiosity and a desire to distinguish herself and her own
motivations from those of her acquaintance. Again and again, parents told me that they were primarily motivated by the desire to parent, not by the desire to “save,” neither spiritually nor in any other sense. This was as true for the few “very religious” Christian parents with whom I spoke as it was for those with a more secular outlook. This desire was so true for Pat and Rich, whose adoption processes in Guatemala I discussed in the previous chapter, that they backed out of an adoption of a child with severe disabilities. But while Pat and Rich’s circumstances were extreme, they were not atypical, as Pat and Rich were concerned both with severe physical limitations and impaired cognitive development. Many parents, including Pat and Rich, said they “just couldn’t handle” the prospect of parenting a child with such severe special needs; Parker and John referred to parenting children with challenges as “advanced parenting,” emphasizing that, for their first child, they were still “beginners.”

The child that the parents I interviewed wanted to parent, by and large, was a neurotypical one – remember Danielle, who said she wanted to “just have a child we can love, who will just be healthy.” The parents I spoke with were clear that their top priority was to have a “healthy child,” but I argue that their ideas about “health” are bound up with the particular character of contemporary parenting, parental anxiety, and parents’ perceptions of the demands of the new economy. The vast majority of the parents I spoke with considered “health” to be more important than race, per se, in this respect. This position is enabled by model minority discourses as well as some increasing flexibility in the American entho-racial order, more generally. This holds true for parents who adopted black children, and so the stories of parents who adopted black children have a particular contribution to make in terms of understanding how parents’ views of health and “fitness” are racialized, as well as how international adoption plays a role in ongoing processes of racial formation in the United States.
Adopting Black Children

As I have argued, it is through parents’ expressed colorblindness that their preferences surrounding “health” are revealed. But most parents’ colorblindness had an implicit limit, revealed through the omission of any language surrounding blackness and black children. Indeed, the only parents who mentioned the possibility of adopting black children were parents who actually did (with the single exception of Wendy, whom I describe below). One possible explanation for parents’ lack of awareness of adoption programs in Africa is that they were simply not very large until other major sending nations shut down or significantly slowed their programs. In fact, many U.S. adoption agencies only opened programs in Ethiopia after Guatemala, specifically, shut down. Ethiopia, the African nation with the largest international adoption program by far, only saw adoptions to the U.S. surpass 100 per year in 2001. Adoptions from Ethiopia surpassed 500 in 2006 and peaked at over 2500 in 2010 (USDOS 2012). It was during that period that the majority of the parents I spoke with who adopted from Ethiopia began their processes, motivated in part, like Kate and Joan in the previous chapter, by what they described as an “affinity” for Africa. Since 2010, the number of adoptions from Ethiopia has declined by almost half, and all Ethiopian adoptions today are of children over the age of two. Other African countries represent a trickle of adoptions, in comparison. So, what can we make of the narratives of parents that do adopt black children? How do parents elect to adopt from Africa? And how do their decision-making narratives surrounding race and “fitness” parallel or differ from the narratives of parents who did not?

Writing about domestic adoptions, Kennedy notes that “nothing more succinctly evinces the broadly disfavored status of black children on the adoption market than the fact that they are
conventionally described as juveniles with ‘special needs,’ or pegged as ‘hard to place’ – labels created for and routinely attached to children with physical or mental disabilities” (2003: 449). Indeed, the very language and structure of adoption programs draw an equivalence between blackness and disability. Here, Kennedy points to the echoes a “biologization” of poverty argument, pointing to the ways that U.S. black children are so often pathologized for, seemingly, little beyond their race. Yet, the parents I interviewed who adopted from Africa saw their children very differently – not as African American but as Ethiopian or Congolese. Like parents who adopted from China, they routinely set Eastern Europe up as a negative to the positive of an African culture of baby-care. Focusing not only on a lack of fetal alcohol and drug exposure, they insisted – and expressed tremendous relief – that their children had been held and nurtured, unlike children from Russia. Wholly unlike “cold” Russian orphanages, parents described African caregivers as “loving” and “warm,” emphasizing that they “held,” “looked at,” and “spoke to” the children in their care. For the parents I interviewed, the liabilities of disordered white children were held up as the opposite of “healthy” African children who, parents believed, were primed for healthy attachment and social-emotional development.

Discussing why she ultimately chose to adopt from Africa, one mother revealed a distinct bias against Eastern Europe driven by concerns for her future children’s health:

“We knew we weren’t comfortable with Eastern European countries because of some of the issues with connections and how the kids are doing emotionally – the kids’ emotional connections with the caregivers. But with Africa, we know enough Africans to know that the kids would have been held. They would have been tiny and they would have had stomach issues, but they would have been held and they would have been looked at and they would have been spoken to. And we wanted that for attachment reasons.”

This mother even describes herself as happy to take on real physical health issues like malnutrition in lieu of damaged Russian children. Another mother who adopted from Africa said:
“[Our daughter] was going to be in foster care. We knew that she would get a lot of individualized attention and loving, that’s just in the African culture. Kids are worn until they’re two or three.”

And a third mother, of two siblings adopted from Ethiopia, described her suspicion of Russian caregivers: “the communist system of childrearing and the mentality of that era is so… cold.”

Even a generation after the fall of the former Soviet Union, adoptive parents utilize ideas about a communist – an anti-American – menace to create a boundary between who is “fit” and who is “unfit” to be an adopted American. But when these white adoptive mothers hold the warmth of African caregivers up against the “communist” – the uncaring, undifferentiated, and “cold” – Russian system, they also make a profound, if internally contradictory, statement about race and “fitness” in America. They express what Bonilla-Silva calls “abstract liberalism” by their openness, and even preference, for adopting black children, on the one hand, while exoticising African caregivers, emphasizing their “naturalness” and positive attachment to their charges, on the other hand. At the same time, these are the same mothers who would not adopt “crack babies” – black babies – from U.S. foster care. What makes African children different, in these mothers’ minds, represents a new kind of boundary work in an ever-more fine-grained American ethno-racial order.

In order to explore this question of difference, I consistently asked the parents of African children whom I interviewed about how they balanced exposing their children to the culture of their birth with exposing their children to African American culture. Did they find one or the other more important? More complicated? What strategies did they use? One mother, Deirdre, whose story I tell in greater detail in the next chapter, described her ongoing efforts to teach her two boys about African American history – slavery, Reconstruction, the Civil Rights Movement. But among my sample, she was entirely alone in that effort. While some parents expressed a desire for their
children to be exposed to well-educated, middle class African Americans, specifically, even more described the distance that their children (or, perhaps, they themselves) felt from less advantaged African Americans. Lisa, whose Christian motivations I discussed in the previous chapter, explained:

“I find that [my] kids relate better to other immigrant kids than kids of color specifically, because they have similar experiences, rather than just looking the same. I have some friends with Ethiopian kids, who live in a more diverse neighborhood closer to [the nearest large city]. They just don’t get along with those kids, because they don’t have a lot in common.”

The eighteen mothers in my sample who adopted African children all described conscientious efforts to expose their children to a diverse group of children and adults, as well as to black adult role models. But some parents were more aware than others of their children’s needs to navigate the complexities of an “African American” or “black” identity more broadly. All the parents of African children in my sample described efforts to keep their children connected to Ethiopian or Congolese culture specifically, though, whether through churches, community groups, adoptive family groups, or individual family friends.

Many of the children adopted from Ethiopia whose parents I interviewed came to the U.S. as older children with memories and identities and a well-developed cultural consciousness. Perhaps because of this, parents expressed both a great deal of fluency with both Ethiopian culture and with some of the psychological and social-emotional issues facing older adopted children. For many parents, the depth of their children’s trauma, pain, and anger specifically related to adoption was initially unexpected. And so, despite the distance that these families maintained from African American communities, history, and culture, they described going to great lengths to eat in Ethiopian restaurants, participate in Ethiopian community groups, visit Ethiopia, and attend Ethiopian churches. Marty, a single mother of five children, all biological siblings adopted from
Ethiopia, described her discomfort, as a devoted atheist, with her oldest son’s deep involvement in a local Ethiopian church. Yet she explained that it was crucial to her son’s identity as he, an adolescent who came to live in the United States at age 12, negotiated the complexities of black masculinity as it intersected with Ethiopian immigrant culture. Marty, personally uncomfortable with organized religion in general, and Christianity in particular, nonetheless encouraged her son’s church involvement. She saw it not only as an opportunity for him to speak his native language and maintain community ties, but also as a salve against the very real dangers – both physical and psychological – that face black men in America.

The narratives of what happens when children adopted from Africa enter school in the United States offers an additional insight into the ways that parents’ decision-making and concern surrounding age, race, and “fitness” are woven together. Another mother, Jen, of two daughters adopted from Ethiopia noted that her older daughter, Ruby, who struggles academically, gravitates towards other international adoptees in school, even though her teachers often see her as African American. When teachers see that Jen is white, Jen said, they have then assumed that Ruby was adopted domestically or was in foster care. Jen suggests that while she sees (or initially saw) her Ethiopian adopted daughter as “brown,” others quite clearly see her as black, particularly because of her academic difficulties. Jen’s narrative illustrates that Ruby’s teachers see learning challenges as specifically linked to U.S.-born blacks, rather than international adoptees; Ruby’s teachers, who see Ruby socializing with other international adoptees, had no reason to assume that she was adopted domestically other than racialized stereotypes about children with learning disabilities.

While the parents I interviewed of children adopted from Africa almost universally expressed a deep relief that their children were cared for warmly and lovingly while in their home countries, they were still often keenly aware of the kind of labeling that black children (especially
boys) can be subject to in the U.S. Lisa, whose Christian motivations for adoption I discussed in the previous chapter, trained as an elementary educator before leaving the workforce to raise her kids. Like Marty, the atheist with a church-going son, Lisa revealed deeply perceptive instincts about black masculinity. When it came time to integrate her newly adopted, six-year-old Ethiopian son into his new neighborhood and school, she became immediately race-aware. She describes the process:

“The biggest reservation I had about it was the color difference in our neighborhood. It’s not that people are hateful; it’s more that they’re just fascinated. But the lack of diversity in our town is very poor. They’re not colorblind, they know exactly the deal. I homeschooled [my youngest son] for a while because I knew, in our school system, he would get labeled. I knew he would have a hard time, and then act out, and then adjust, and they would label him as ADD or something. But that’s not him, he was just adjusting. The school administration was offended, they were like, you don’t think we can do it? And I was like, well, I’m not using my son as an experiment for that.”

So Lisa homeschooled her son for his first few months of first grade, in order to “manage” his adjustment because she was intuitively aware of the kinds of labeling that disproportionately affect black boys. Lisa’s insight rings true with Blum’s finding that “mothers raising vulnerable sons of color might also pose risks [in addition to protection], inviting… the harsh, unfair framing of any disruptive behaviors” (2015: 234-235). But like the majority of parents I spoke with who adopted African children, Lisa saw her child as different and the issues he faced as inherently distinct from African American children.

Lisa and Jen both illustrate the ways that African American adopted children are often presumed to have learning disabilities, as well as the discomfort that can arise for white adoptive parents when their African children are seen as African American. Overall, the parents I interviewed who adopted from Africa went to great lengths to identify their kids as African – Ethiopian, Congolese – rather than as black. This is consistent with Seligman’s observation that
international adoptive parents, in general, focus on their child’s “ethnic heritage” rather than their race. I argue that the white, international adoptive parents of children from Africa whom I spoke with attempt to do the same with their black children. Typical neurological development and school performance, as well as good mental and behavioral health, was one way that they did this.

“Have You Ever Seen Pedro Martinez?”

Wendy is a married, white mother in her late forties. She lives with her husband, two sons, and ten-year-old German shepherd in a large single-family home, tucked behind the central business district of an ethnically diverse, middle-income urban neighborhood. As I arrived for our interview, Wendy was settling her older son, James, into a YouTube video on giant deep-sea creatures. Wendy homeschools James and explained that it is a treat for him to watch a video. Wendy’s home is tastefully filled with objects that seem to have been collected over many years of world travel, and the semi-open floor plan betrays cooking projects in progress in the kitchen. As we settled into the living room and James followed us, his head buried in his iPad, Wendy apologized for a pile of astronomy equipment – her husband and the boys were tracking a comet. Nondescript on the exterior, the home is a quirky yet intentional jumble of activity and display of taste. Wendy begins her story, with a Southern twang moderated by many years of living in the Northeast. She and her husband Charles agreed that they wanted to grow their family through adoption before getting married, she told me, and they began to pursue adoption through the state foster care system soon afterwards. They put that process on hold when Wendy, unexpectedly, became pregnant with James. Then, when James turned two, they tried to pick up their adoption plans where they left off.
The bureaucratic challenges that Wendy and her husband faced in their interactions with state agencies are ultimately what led them to international adoption, despite both a strong financial disincentive and their even stronger ideological commitment to public, domestic adoption. Wendy explains that she only “went international” grudgingly, and not because of any perceived advantages. Indeed, she and Charles struggled with international adoption emotionally more than financially; Wendy told me that they felt like they were “buying” a child. In order to avoid a long waiting period, they elected to adopt a child with disabilities. In line with other parents interviewed for this project, they ruled out intellectual disabilities. Ultimately, they brought their son Preston home after a relatively short waiting period due to his challenging (but not at all life threatening) diagnosis of albinism. Yet Preston’s homecoming was cold comfort after a devastating loss in the state-run adoption system. Wendy explain that she and Charles had been matched with a baby girl in foster care but that they were deemed an inappropriate placement at the last minute because of, of all things, their ten-year-old German Shepherd. Wendy was indignant that this had not come up in their home study and became disillusioned about the foster-to-adopt program – both its bureaucracy and its rigidity. She had wanted to “do the right thing,” and her dog, “the sweetest darn dog you’re ever going to meet,” forced her out of the only adoption program that she considered wholly ethical. “To say I was upset,” Wendy told me, “would be an understatement of epic proportion. To say my husband was upset… we were devastated.”

Wendy, in many ways, presents an exception to the majority of those interviewed for this project. Her initial preference was to adopt a child through the state-run foster care system. She felt that foster-to-adopt was the “right way” to adopt, and she felt deeply betrayed by a system that was so rigid and unreasonable that she felt “forced” to adopt internationally. For Wendy, being open to a “harder-to-place” child was the answer to her discomfort with international adoption and
her deep ethical and political commitment to public, domestic adoption. She and her husband briefly considered private domestic adoption after their public adoption process fell apart, but, as she explained,

“I have a lot of issues with private domestic adoption, moral and ethical. I have a lot of issues with adoption, period, moral and ethical. We looked briefly [at private domestic adoption], and we’re talking about women in a very compromised situation, where someone from an agency is swooping in and saying, you can have all of this money. And that, the coercion… just struck me as horrid, just horrid. It was going to be the rare exception that there was some happy-go-lucky high-schooler who really wanted to place her unexpected child in a happy home and go get her Ph.D. and move on, whole, with her life. These were drug-addicted, compromised, needy women… there’s a huge coercion in my opinion.”

In her ethical objection to private domestic adoption, Wendy is somewhat, though not wholly, exceptional in my sample, as the majority of mothers who expressed objections to private domestic adoption did so because, as I discussed in the previous chapter, it weakened their position of power in the adoption transaction.

Wendy is particularly exceptional in my sample because she and her husband had initially, even before having James, planned to have and prepared themselves for a multi-racial family. I asked Wendy if she was “excited” by the process of forming a multi-racial family, and Wendy explained, “We anticipated it. [We were] excited about having a family member, excited about embracing who he or she was. But,” Wendy continued, “‘excited’ is very white.” In this sense, Wendy made it clear that she did not exoticize or idealize the prospect of mothering a black child. Indeed, she mocked mothers who do, voicing their seemingly suspicious motivations, “Like, check me out, my bad self with my black child. Like Angelina Jolie. Like a social accessory, Madonna.” As for her own motivations, Wendy was clear: “[We were] excited about the process, not about the color.”
The opposite of Bonilla-Silva’s designation of “colorblind,” Wendy is clearly quite “color aware.” Nonetheless, she criticizes a woman from her state-run foster-to-adopt training group, whose own awareness was, perhaps, not up to Wendy’s standard. Explaining what she calls “a sad, racist, funny example,” Wendy recounted, “a woman who said she would take someone who was Hispanic, but not black. Okay. Have you ever seen Pedro Martinez? My whole head was like, did you just say that out loud?” Wendy, of course, was responding directly to the false assumption that there are clear-cut lines between “black” and “Hispanic,” calling out the specifically anti-black racism that she has perceived among white adoptive parents. Indeed, among the parents I interviewed, Wendy was unique in her attention to race and ability to talk about blackness. When Wendy and her husband decided to pursue adoption through the foster care system, they went through a transformative process of self-scrutiny, and came out of it ready, willing, and, they believed, well-prepared to adopt an African American child. But Wendy’s experience with the state-run foster care system was a trauma and a betrayal. Initially an exception among adoptive parents, Wendy and her husband ultimately elected to do the same thing as many of the other parents in my sample. In making their own set of trade-offs, they adopted a child from China with a “manageable” genetic condition that “doesn’t really affect his life.”

**Health and Fitness in a Multiracial Society**

In this chapter, I offer an intersectional analysis of how race, national origin, age, and disability status operate together in parents’ decision-making surrounding international adoption. I argue that in our present cultural moment, health – particularly typical social, emotional, and neurological development – trumps race, per se, in parents’ calculus regarding their future children. This is driven both by the decreasing rigidity of (some) racial boundaries in the
contemporary United States, as well as by the intensive mothering and parental anxiety that the precariousness of the New Economy has engendered. But the adoptive parents I interviewed, like U.S. society in general, still have a race problem, and this problem is multi-faceted and complex. A model minority discourse is painful, limiting, and exclusionary for the so-called model group, but, as scholars of model minority discourses will note, model minorities are one way that we delineate their dialectic opposite and draw boundaries between racial groups more broadly. Stereotypes of “healthy,” “successful” Asian Americans cast African Americans as dysfunctional, lazy, and categorically “unfit” in our cultural imagination. Likewise, the findings I present in this chapter suggest that ideas about desirable children fall along a similar binary. “Healthy” children were not exposed to alcohol or drugs in utero and were cared for by warm and caring orphanage workers prior to their adoption. For the mothers I interviewed, this excludes Russian children, but it also excludes children from the U.S. foster care system who, in the public imagination, are black. These purportedly “damaged” children, white and black, are too much of a gamble for all but a few of the mothers I interviewed, who consistently expressed an overriding concern with their children’s social, emotional, and neurological development.

It is curious that in our highly racialized (and racist) society, white parents would choose “healthy” children of color over potentially “damaged” white children. But those who adopted black African children went to great lengths to try and distinguish their children from African Americans, highlighting, in describing their motivations for adopting, their “affinity” for Africa. This supports the idea that our real problem – with international adoption, as well as with race more generally – concerns the full integration, inclusion, and acceptance of black Americans in American society. Yet the “American society” that continues to exclude black Americans, immigrants and non-immigrants, is a moving target. In the context of post-1965 immigration,
Alba argues that thinking about the “assimilation” of non-white immigrants into “white” society is “informative but ultimately inadequate” because there is no monolithic society for immigrants to be “assimilated” into (2009: 15). Alba maintains that “ethno-racial hierarchies, at least in democratic, economically dynamic societies, are less rigid than they are sometimes thought to be” (2009: 21). Thus, following this line of argument, as racial categories shift in the United States at the same time that socioeconomic inequality, driven by educational and occupational success, becomes all the more intractable. Thus, as our society has shifted to a knowledge economy ruled by risk culture and neoliberal practices from board rooms to elementary classrooms, “health” – specifically social-emotional and neurological – might be a better bet in terms of future success than whiteness, plain and simple.

Changes in international adoption on a programmatic level have forced parents to consider a variety of children that they would have previously overlooked: children over the age of one or two, children with documented healthcare needs, and, crucially, black African children. These structural shifts to international adoption have shifted parents’ balancing-act surrounding the characteristics that they elect or do not elect in their future children. My findings suggest that this may have, in turn, shifted the ways that adoptive parents conceive of risk, desirability, and “fitness,” as both the racial landscape and future security continue to shift in the new millennium. As I have argued, though, this requires a degree of colorblindness. Some of the colorblindness that parents revealed to me truly exemplifies Bonilla-Silva’s definition of colorblind racism, because adoptive parents framed their praise of their black children with an assumption that the rest of the world is as colorblind as they. As one mother described her black son, “He’s so magnetic that I think sometimes people don’t see his color.” And another mother described her black daughter: “I guess this is assuming things, but she’s beautiful. And she has a very strong, outgoing
personality. And I think sometimes, people see her, and they don’t necessarily see the color of her skin because of her personality.” These mothers point out how profound and painful a liability blackness is in our social world. Yet, the extent to which parents avoided children with cognitive disabilities also raises important questions about how parents view children, childhood, and, indeed, parenting as we settle in to the twenty-first century’s knowledge-based, hyper-cognitive economy.
“I began to read a little more about how complicated it is, and that it’s not such a cut-and-dry thing. There is no such thing as a real orphan and we don’t really know much about these kids’ circumstances. We don’t have any guarantee that these children are legitimately and authentically available. It’s hard.”

-Danielle, Chinese adoptive mother

“About the ethics of international adoption, I think I didn’t want to know. I wanted to be a mom. I wanted this to happen. I’m not proud of this. I just said, ‘okay, I accept this,’ and we went ahead and did it. Everybody was really celebrating international adoption at that point. There wasn’t a lot of encouragement to probe more deeply.”

-Gail, Ethiopian adoptive mother

“We were told both parents were deceased – mom bled out giving birth to him, dad died of malaria a few months before he was born. We have since learned, the summer we went back and met them, none of it was true.”

-Kate, Ethiopian adoptive mother

In this chapter, I tell the stories of families who encountered and often vigilantly sought to uncover evidence of impropriety, corruption, and fraud in adopting their children. Where fraud existed, adoption agencies and officials often denied it, leaving adoptive families on their own to seek out the truth. The stories that I tell in this chapter are full of struggle, confusion, and pain. They also highlight the profound ethical complexity of international adoption in the context of the social inequality, the market dynamics, and the political battles that scaffold it. The upheavals that international adoption programs have undergone over the past fifteen years have lifted the veil on
any supposed simplicity regarding what constitute children’s “best interests” and shattered the “triumphal narrative” whereby U.S. involvement in international adoption functions as a benevolent project that both “saves” orphans abroad and creates a more open, multiethnic society in the United States. The narratives that I heard from the mothers I interviewed are, on the whole, hardly triumphal, but the mothers I spoke with all worked to bring their children to the United States, even under ethically questionable circumstances. In this chapter, I argue that these mothers’ actions were driven by a deep commitment to two distinct ideological constructs, which exist in parallel: a triumphal narrative of international adoption on the one hand, and intensive mothering on the other.

As I have argued in previous chapters, markets and motherhood came together for the women I interviewed for this project. When they decided to pursue international adoption, they entered into a quagmire of market relationships, political and economic upheavals, and profound social inequalities that created an individual tragedy for each adopted child in my sample. And just as many of the mothers I interviewed were not fully aware of the commercial structure of international adoption at the outset of their processes, many were not aware of the political and ethical complexity of international adoption arrangements, either. But just as most of the mothers I spoke with became more aware of the ways in which their adoptions were brokered for money, most mothers’ sense of a broader triumphal narrative was fractured by mounting evidence that their children were often not “orphans” in the classical sense, nor was the world necessarily a better place because of the U.S. families who adopted “orphans” from abroad. Our growing awareness of the systemic fraud and corruption in international adoption has forced adoptive parents to defend themselves against allegations of misconduct, the depth of which they had no preparation to comprehend. And so, adoptive mothers’ intensive efforts set them up for the ultimate maternal
double-bind; many discovered, through their intensive efforts, that their children, presumed to be “true orphans,” in fact had two living, healthy biological parents. Indeed, many of the mothers I interviewed were forced to confront, head-on, the reality that their mothering depended directly on extremes of global inequality, exploitation, and, as a result, their child’s first mother’s loss.

The upheavals faced by the mothers interviewed for this project drew out a distinctly gendered maternal response: an intensive, totalizing commitment to mothering, in which adoptive mothers did anything and everything they could to resolve uncertainties in their adoption processes and, as many adoptive parents say, “bring their children home.” In the wake of financial corruption, political power plays, deception, and fraud, the mothers I interviewed calibrated their behavior to our contemporary ideologies and expectations of intensive motherhood, stopping at nothing in pursuit of what they determined to be their children’s interests. Back in the U.S., these are mothers who would hire private tutors, educational consultants, psychotherapists, and sports coaches. But in our interviews, these mothers spoke of hiring private drivers, attorneys, investigators, doctors, and even foster mothers to help them finalize their threatened adoption processes. They pursued all paths and exhausted all options in pursuit of their (future) children, and the extraordinary circumstances in which they found themselves drew out their fiercest exercise of maternal obligation. Ultimately, their intensive actions reified old ideas about the “triumph” of international adoption by, literally, triumphing over bureaucratic hold-ups and political disputes. But these mothers’ intensive actions also reproduced regressive gendered family arrangements in which their husbands were absent from both the day-to-day family work of resolving these adoptions and the emotional work inherent in living in a double-bind.

In the context of changing discourse surrounding international adoption in politics and the media, my findings suggest that lifting the veil on a triumphal narrative of international adoption
not only disrupts international adoption on a practical level but also disrupts a broader narrative of intensive mothering as noble, selfless, and “natural.” A growing awareness of the structural inequality, the commercial organization, and the consequent corruption and fraud that underpin many international adoption programs, coupled with their unyielding commitment to “bring their children home,” made the mothers I interviewed into both activists who rescued their children and, simultaneously, into monsters who stole and trafficked them. Faced with the truth, sometimes about international adoption as a system and sometimes about their children’s first families specifically, the mothers I interviewed were called to reckon with their complicity in a practice that the media, foreign governments, the United Nations, and even the United States have deemed ethically suspect and politically incorrect. In the face of these threats to their families’ legitimacy, the mothers I interviewed, despite a range of political opinions, clung to two things: their intensive commitment to mothering and, though to varying degrees, their belief in a triumphal, redemptive narrative of their individual children’s adoptions into their American homes.

“Intensive” Motherhood and “Involved” Fatherhood

When problems emerged in the international adoption processes, it was the mothers I interviewed who assumed the bulk of the work to resolve them, illustrating the utter persistence of gendered inequality in who performs the bulk of family work more generally. This is by no means unique to adoption; gendered inequality defines the ways that heterosexual couples proceed through other kinds of reproductive markets, as well. Writing in the context of heterosexual couples experiencing infertility, Bertolli (2013) demonstrates the gendered inequality of “fertility work,” whereby women assume the primary responsibility for managing medical appointments, procedures, medications, and schedules related to becoming pregnant. Further, writing in the
context of markets for eggs and sperm, Almeling argues that men and women “calibrate their actions in ways that align with cultural norms of maternal femininity and paternal masculinity” (2011: 178). Almeling’s argument concerns the ways that men understand sperm donation to be a purely economic exchange, whereas women who “donate” eggs see their actions as partially altruistic, despite the money that changes hands. But despite the different context, the adoptive mothers whom I interviewed also calibrated their actions, desires, and priorities to reflect the distinctly gendered expectations and arrangements of intensive mothering in the twenty-first century.

The actions undertaken by the mothers and fathers in my study affirm the long-held understanding not only that women remain disproportionately responsible for all kinds of reproductive work, but, more importantly, that when families are stressed, the gendered inequality in family arrangements grows (see Casper and Bianchi 2002, Cooper 2014, Hochschild 1989, Jacobs and Gerson 2004, Ochs and Kremer-Sadlik 2013, Stone 2007). This is particularly true of high-status professionals who work in highly demanding fields and in jobs with expectations of long hours (see Blair-Loy 2003, Coltrane 2004, Gerson 2009, Hays 2004, Hochschild 1997, Stone 2007). Coltrane, writing specifically about high-status professionals, argues that mothers and fathers in high-status professions “are likely to share breadwinning, but the accommodation of [their] careers to family concerns is limited by nostalgic family ideals and gender stereotypes” (2004: 214-215). It is in this vein that Gornick and Meyers call the contemporary model of the American family a “highly gendered partial specialization between men and women” (2005: 25), arguing that it is the partial nature of this specialization that creates a particularly disproportionate caregiving burden for mothers. Mothers, equally or nearly equally responsible for paid work, remain primarily responsible for unpaid family work. In her classic depiction of the “second shift,”
Hochschild (1989) finds that most of the women in her sample were simply working two jobs. More recent depictions of the division of family labor (Gerson 2009, Hochschild 1997, Schneider and Waite 2005) describe two parents sharing three jobs rather than a mother working two, but that sharing, of course, remains profoundly unequal.

Much research has focused on how, precisely, two (heterosexual) parents share those three jobs. Writing almost twenty-five years ago, Gerson (1993) clearly argues that the gender revolution must extend to accommodate fathers and create space for fatherhood in workplaces and men’s professional lives. Fathers have, indeed, become more involved in childrearing over the past quarter-century, yet many men continue to be held back from fuller participation in their children’s upbringings, in part, by inflexibility and unsupportive policies in the workplace (for a review, see Marsiglio et al. 2000). Yet despite the ways in which fathers have become more involved in family work, the most progressive and egalitarian men are still simply called “involved.” Even then, mothers remain the “primary parents” (Wall and Arnold 2007). Williams (2012) argues particularly forcefully that inattention to fathers, both in the scholarly literature and on a policy level, lies at the core of the persistent gender inequality in family arrangements.

Moreover, it has long been clear that not only the amount but also the type of family work that men and women undertake is unequal. Notably, Coltrane (1996) points out that when mothers care for children, they go to the supermarket and the doctor, whereas when fathers care for children, they go to the park and visit the zoo. More recent studies have continued to reinforce the notion that dads get the “fun” jobs while mothers are left with the more tedious and stressful day-to-day work. Kaufman (2013) finds that fathers today fall into three broad categories – “old” dads, “new” dads, and “superdads,” characterizing the majority of fathers as “new” dads who ultimately make only minimal changes in their work schedules. Even then, they mainly accommodate things
like soccer practices and dance recitals. Despite exceptions on both ends of a spectrum, “involved” – but hardly egalitarian – fatherhood is the norm.

Of the twenty-five heterosexual couples that participated in this project, I spoke with only five fathers – four together with their wives, and one stay-at-home dad without his wife present. I also interviewed one single father. The remaining interviews I conducted were all with women – nineteen married heterosexual women without their spouses present, seventeen single mothers, and one married lesbian mother (also without her spouse present). Many mothers squeezed interviews in to their weekday schedules; no small feat, given that fifteen of the seventeen single mothers and twenty-two of the twenty-six married women with whom I spoke were working at least part-time. But beyond participating in this project, it was the mothers in my sample who assumed the monumental task of organizing and resolving problems in their children’s adoptions. As the stories in this chapter illustrate, that was no simple task and was often accomplished thanks to a tremendous and intensive amount of organizational, emotional, and ideological work on mothers’ parts. When Hochschild (1989) uses the term “emotion work” to describe the ways that mothers accept an unequal division of family work – as well as their husbands’ fundamentally differing gender ideologies – she argues that mothers engage in this work in order, in part, to preserve their marriages. When Hays argues that mothers engage in “ideological work” to resolve their deeply-held ambivalence surrounding mothering and professional achievement, she writes that they do so as “a means of maintaining their sanity” (2011: 43). Here, I argue that the mothers I interviewed engaged in a profound kind of emotional and ideological work in order to maintain their families’ legitimacy. In the face of changing public discourse surrounding international adoption, these mothers had to make use of prevailing ideologies – both intensive motherhood and a triumphal narrative of international adoption – that validated their day-to-day lives. Perhaps
their willingness to sit down with me went beyond an affirmation of traditional forms of gender inequality in family work and signaled their investment – as the “primary” parent – in an emotional and ideological resolution to their families’ ordeals.

“She Has a Fabulous Life”

For some mothers in my sample, fraud and corruption remained abstract, and these mothers, as well as two fathers, used the scaffolding of a triumphal narrative of international adoption to justify systemic ethical difficulties after the fact. They acknowledged that there may have been improprieties in their children’s adoptions, but happily moved on, sweeping human rights abuses and extreme global inequality under the rug by relying on the presumption that their children were better off in families in the United States. This was particularly true for the nine families with whom I spoke who adopted from China. Of these nine families, I spoke with three single mothers; four married, heterosexual mothers without their spouses present; and two married, heterosexual couples. Without exception, these parents reflected on the confidence they had in China’s adoption program before they began their own adoption processes. These families all believed that China’s system was efficient, relatively transparent, and corruption-free. One mother said, “China seemed to be very organized, they had the experience of doing this for a decade or more at that point, and it seemed very efficient.” Another mother expressed comfort that most orphanages in China were (in her belief) state-run; “At least,” she reasoned, “the communist system is efficient and organized.” But as the China program slowed down, some mothers began to question China’s reputation. Mary, a single mother of a boy adopted from China, explained that, when her process had come to a practical standstill, she began to research Chinese adoption on the Internet. Conveying her findings to me, she reported, “One of the stories was that they
found a child in one of the southern provinces that they realized had not been abandoned, but, indeed, had been taken off the street. So, supposedly the [central adoption authority in China] took everything and made all the orphanages double-check each child, which brought everything to a halt.” Other parents began to read about the various scandals that rocked international adoption in a variety of sending nations, including China, after they had already brought their children home.

Lynne and Mike are a married couple with an older biological daughter and a younger daughter adopted from China. Discussing their feelings about media coverage that emerged after their daughter had been home for several years, they both expressed profound sadness that something they had considered benevolent and ethically straightforward had turned out to be so complicated and ethically fraught. Mike explained that he had been drawn to adopting from China because it seemed to have a “well-run” program relative to other, more “disorganized” sending nations, naming Guatemala in particular. Active in an email group of parents who adopted children from the same orphanage, Lynne and Mike were, at the time of our interview, regularly exchanging articles and information about various international adoption scandals, including a high-profile trafficking ring that was discovered in the region of their daughter’s birth and implicated their daughter’s orphanage. Lynne and Mike recognized elements of their daughter’s story in the articles they were reading about other children, and came to the realization that they may have adopted a baby who had been trafficked. Tearfully, Lynne related, “I think the government’s trying to crack down. When we went into this, we weren’t aware of that. The first media coverage on this came out within a year of bringing [our daughter] home. It’s heartbreaking. There’s a high likelihood that [our daughter] was one of these trafficked babies… Would I adopt from China again? I don’t know.” Indeed, Lynne found herself in the ultimate maternal double-bind.
After learning about the trafficking scandal linked to their daughter’s orphanage, Lynne and Mike continued to research Chinese adoptions and international adoption more generally. Mike, in particular, immersed himself in the economic and political aspects of international adoption as an institution, looking for patterns and further clues to his daughter’s story in the media coverage he devoured. Ultimately, Mike came to a highly nuanced understanding of what’s at stake in international adoption. He explained,

“The coverage, especially in China, all the child trafficking, women being given cash for their babies, it feels bad to be part that. A very high proportion of the children in China who are up for international adoption have been trafficked. That doesn’t mean they’re kidnapped, but there are payments along the way. It’s very commonplace there. And I think people recognize that there is a great degree of corruption in the system, but that it stems from the One Child Policy, and the other corruption that’s endemic in the system. So, maybe people feel a little bit bad about perpetuating this, but they feel much better about providing a good home for a child who needs one.”

Here, Mike clearly articulates the complexity behind reports of child trafficking, but he just as clearly uses that complexity to rationalize his own actions, as an adoptive father, as the lesser of evils. Again referencing Guatemala, Mike continued, “You have to understand that you’re part of a whole process, whether it’s a war orphan or a trafficked baby, that you’re part of a process.”

Throughout the first half of our interview, in which we discussed the nuts and bolts of their adoption process, their motivations for adopting, and their daughter’s adjustment to the family post-adoption, Mike deferred to his wife and remained practically silent. But when allegations of fraud and corruption came up, Mike dominated the conversation. He was proud of the research he had done and stood behind his solution to the complicated political and intellectual puzzle that he felt he had solved.

Lynne and Mike sought out China’s adoption program for its “clean” reputation but nonetheless found themselves implicated in serious allegations of child trafficking. Where Mike
hewed to a masculine rationality, Lynne proceeded on (wholly secular) faith. His “rationality” and her “irrationality” clearly follow gendered emotion norms, as Hochschild (1983) first described as “feeling rules” that circumscribe women’s and men’s understandings of their own feelings, particularly surrounding gendered forms of work (1983, 2003). Lynne explained,

“You have to go into it with good faith, you have to hope that these countries, these agencies are transparent, [but] you really don’t know. You kinda have to trust that it’s transparent, that it’s not totally corrupt. But for any country that’s allowing so many adoptions out of its borders, looking back, my guess is that there’s some level of corruption going on; where are they getting all of these babies? How are they allowing so many to be placed?”

Lynne and Mike indeed went into their adoption process trusting China’s program and placing good faith in the parties responsible for bringing their adoption to fruition. They brought their daughter home without incident. But when they began to read about corruption in the system, a year later, they were forced to reckon with the moral weight of their actions. Both Lynne and Mike express sadness, ambivalence, uncertainty, and regret. But their bottom line, ultimately, is clear. As Mike explained, “You have to do a fair amount of reading to really understand the nature of the problem. But all I can say is, just look at the result. We’re happy, she’s happy.” Responding to her husband, Lynne added, “She has a fabulous life. We can’t go back and do anything about it, it is what it is, we move forward.”

While Lynne and Mike learned about adoption irregularities after the fact, many other adoptive parents saw “red flags” early in their adoption processes. Alyssa and Keith, introduced in the previous chapter, are a white married couple with a young daughter, Isabella, whom they adopted from the Democratic Republic of Congo. Alyssa and Keith’s top priorities in adopting were a quick referral time and a young infant, which left them with few choices of sending nations at the time they began their adoption process. They elected to adopt from the Congo because, as
Alyssa explained, “We found out about a new program in the Congo, fast referral times. Our [first] referral came three weeks after we had USCIS approval.” But, Alyssa continued,

“We got our first match, and it fell through after a month. I don’t know if our agency rep had all the information, either, because they’re working with a Congolese attorney, and a lot gets lost in the communication. But we were told that when our agency went into the orphanage to move [the referred child] to foster care, they found out that there was a bidding war going on [between agencies over that child]. So, they backed out because they don’t participate in, you know, child trafficking and buying children.”

Rather than be alarmed, though, Alyssa took comfort in the fact that her own agency had pulled out of this type of illicit activity. Ignoring this first clue, Alyssa, like Lynne and Mike, did not begin to seriously consider improprieties in Congolese adoptions until a year after her own daughter came to the United States and the Congo shut down its international adoption program entirely, denying exit visas to a number of children who had already been legally adopted and granted visas to enter the United States (Chiaramonte 2014, Graff 2015, Ligtvoet 2014, Pham 2015, USCIS 2015). Alyssa then acknowledged, “we trusted our agency, maybe a little too much in some ways.”

Jen is mother to two daughters, Ruby and Eva, who are biological sisters adopted from Ethiopia. Jen told me a similar story about how she was initially matched with a set of twin boys, yet the match was quickly dissolved. As she explained, “it was found out that they had living parents. The parents were arrested, the boys were taken out of the adoption process, and that fell through.” Jen was then matched with another set of siblings. Their story, though not caught early on, proved to be quite similar. She recounted,

“Supposedly the mother had died in ’08 and the father could no longer care for them. When they learned English, the story came out that the mother was living, they have grandparents, they did tell us that they also have an older sister. I called the agency and said, ‘you have to red-flag [these sibling groups].’ I said, ‘you need
Much like Alyssa, Jen did not feel the need to suspend her plans to adopt because her agency had uncovered an irregularity in her first match. Rather, Jen saw this incident as evidence that her agency was doing their job. But once her daughters were able to fully communicate with her, Jen saw the entire enterprise as a cover-up.

While many parents bemoaned the sensationalized nature of negative media reports on international adoption, the language of those reports – of “finders,” of “harvesting,” and of “trafficking” – found its way into their narratives. A few of the parents I interviewed pushed back against the use of such language, and I highlight the most vocal opponent of what she called “anti-adoption rhetoric” at the end of this chapter. However, such opposition was a rare exception. The majority of the parents with whom I spoke reported seeing, in one mother’s words, “one red flag after another.” Indeed, the majority of the parents I interviewed developed a highly nuanced perspective on how their child(ren) came into their family. But for most parents, much like Mike and Lynne, the murkiness, the lack of transparency, the ethical ambiguity, and, in many cases, the unknowable-ness of their children’s stories were balanced by the “better” – or, even, “fabulous” – life that they had in the United States.

“My Mamma Gut Told Me”

While fraud and corruption remained abstract for some parents in my sample, this was far from the case for other mothers with whom I spoke. The evidence of corruption and fraud was, for some mothers, inescapable and permanently visible on their children’s bodies. These mothers expressed utter horror at what had happened to their children individually and profound discomfort with international adoption as a system. Two of these mothers in particular, Ivy and Emily,
illustrate the ways that an intensive commitment to motherhood mediated the cognitive and emotional dissonance that they experienced with respect to international adoption – something they found extremely problematic despite the fact that they, themselves, had participated in it. Ivy and Emily both talked about a “gray scale” of ethical considerations in international adoption as a way to rationalize their own imperfect actions, and they both spoke of their “maternal instincts” or “mamma gut” as a way to frame their responses to corrupt or fraudulent activities.

Ivy, the professor whose story of facing the commercial side of international adoption I tell in chapter three, was, like Anna (whose story comes later in this chapter), caught in the shutdown of adoptions in Nepal. Ivy explained to me that she and her husband Paul had been concerned about allegations of corruption and trafficking in international adoption from the get-go, which is how they ended up adopting from Nepal. Ivy explained that they had quickly ruled out adopting from Guatemala. She told me, “I did not want to be part of that system…. I knew about the coyotes, I knew about the selling. I knew there were people here in the United States who had already been prosecuted for trafficking. I was just totally queasy.” But she nonetheless elected to pursue an adoption from South Asia because she felt that the “need” of the children outweighed other ethical considerations. She explained,

“India emerged as, there’s no question they need help. Millions of children not in families, it’s clear they need help, as opposed to other countries where the child trafficking situation may have been more overt. So, we felt that India, on the gray scale, was more ethical than some other places.”

Much like the mothers whose stories I tell in chapter three, who sought a “win-win” situation in adopting their children, Ivy implies that, if she adopted a child who “needed help,” she could outweigh the ethical problem of adopting a child internationally at all. Framing India as “more ethical than some other places” on a “gray scale,” Ivy acknowledges the underlying danger of child
trafficking and the corruption that may be more or less “overt” in different contexts. Ultimately, Ivy’s adoption agency steered her to adopt from Nepal, a decision she describes as “irrational” but about which she took “a leap of faith” and followed the lead of her agency.

Ivy explained to me that despite seeing red flags along the way, she ignored them in pursuit of bringing a child into her family, and her critical perspective on international adoption did not begin to deepen until some time after she had brought her daughter Becca to the United States. Ivy reported that while she was in Nepal,

“There were riots in the streets, there were police with guns. Students were rioting in the university and throwing fire bombs in the university. [Laughing.] So, you know, I really didn’t have time to think about the big picture. I was worried, are we going to get home before curfew tonight? Will a policeman stop us on the road with a semi-automatic rifle? I’m not kidding, I lost twenty pounds in three weeks. Best diet ever. But, I couldn’t eat, the terror that took up residence in my gut.”

Another mother I interviewed, of a daughter adopted from Guatemala, told me that thoughts of corruption and fraud had only crossed her mind several years after she brought her daughter home. I asked her, “Even with all the coverage in the media?” And she said, “Honestly, I was too busy taking her to doctors’ appointments and changing diapers to pay much attention.” Another mother, of a daughter adopted from Russia, similarly explained, “I was too focused on taking care of my daughter to get wrapped up in all that. The media sensationalizes everything, anyway.” Like Gail, the mother who adopted from Ethiopia quoted at the head of this chapter, Ivy “didn’t want to know.”

But as Gail further explained, “everybody was really celebrating international adoption at that point. There wasn’t a lot of encouragement to probe more deeply.” Likewise, Ivy described walking into a meeting at her older son Josh’s school a few weeks after returning from Nepal with Becca. The speaker stopped mid-sentence, and the whole room rose to their feet and broke into
applause. For Ivy, this display was a turning point because she saw the absurdity of a wholly triumphant narrative reflected back to her in the naïveté of her neighbors’ applause. They did not see how Ivy had organized, managed, and then “begged” for more unpaid leave from her job, how she had coordinated care for then seven-year-old Josh, or how, ultimately she was left to care for a very sick baby. Recalling Becca’s first weeks at home with the family, Ivy related,

“She was [in the orphanage] way too long, so she had a cross-eye problem from being in a crib eighteen hours a day. She also had persistent Giardia, persistent parasites in the gut, the worst smelling diarrhea you have ever smelled in your life. It’s also extremely contagious and when we got home we were contacted by the public health department because we had a child with contagious Giardia. You have to be really careful how you dispose of the diapers, the caretakers could also get it. But, I mean, we were really lucky. She did not have Hepatitis, she didn’t… I mean, once we brought her home, I went into panic mode. What if she has epilepsy? What if she has HIV? You know? Because all we had was height, head circumference, and weight. And three pictures of her crying. And we thought, yeah, let’s bring that little girl home. We’ll fix her up, a loving American family.”

It was after coming home, resuming normal work routines, battling major post-adoption depression, and “sorting through all this for years in therapy,” that Ivy, in retrospect, wonders why she ignored the very warning signs of corruption that she had initially set out to avoid and why she had so wholeheartedly bought into a triumphal narrative whereby a “loving American family” was all that mattered.

For Ivy, the trauma that she, herself, experienced upon adopting Becca had, in addition to Becca’s difficulties, fractured the triumphal narrative of international adoption. In retrospect, Ivy mused,

“Who knows? Supposedly [Becca] was found at a public water tap. That’s a common story, which is why the embassy shut these down, because it’s a generic story. Some poor woman, whether she was a sex worker, a circus performer, a servant, a maid, whoever this person was, it’s illegal for a woman in Nepal to relinquish a child. A male relative, however distant, has legal authority over that child, a woman cannot relinquish her child. So, they bribed a policeman. I feel like I was an idiot in a way, to overlook it.”
Ivy accepted the fact that Becca’s story was generic, uncertain, and likely problematic, and Ivy rejected a triumphal narrative on an abstract level. But Ivy continued, throughout our interview, to toggle back and forth between a critical view of international adoption and a sense that she had, on an individual level, done something positive for her daughter. In Nepal, Ivy and Paul had hired a private driver who, according to Ivy, “did everything.” Ivy described their driver as “something of a fixer, which means he’ll never get a visa to America because they think of him as a child trafficker.” Yet he “fixed” Ivy’s adoption problems, allowing her to bring Becca to the United States quickly, without getting “stuck” in the delays that faced other families involved in the Nepal shut-down. Becca was acutely sick at the time and faced chronic malnutrition as well. Ivy explained,

“Her twelve-year molars are erupting, [but] she just celebrated her eleventh birthday. She’s menstruating. She was probably a year older than they told us. I can’t even let myself go to the place of understanding the malnutrition, the lack of care, the lack of stimulation, for her to be that small and to have been a year older [than we were told]. Because when we brought her home, we were told she was small for the age we were told she was.”

Ivy tells a story in which she saved her daughter from poverty and neglect on an individual level, despite the problematic nature of a broader triumphal narrative.

But in addition to the fracture of a triumphal narrative, Ivy’s story also illuminates profoundly unequal gendered family arrangements. It was Ivy, not her husband Paul (also a tenured university professor), who begged her department chair for an extra semester of unpaid leave. Ivy drove Becca to appointments with medical specialists all over town. Ivy dealt with the bureaucratic fallout of the inquest from the public health department. Ivy showed up at her son’s PTA meeting in the middle of all this. And Ivy, not her husband, spent “years in therapy” working through the emotional and ethical implications of her own blinding commitment to mothering.
Paul was not only absent in our interview, but he was absent in Ivy’s narrative. In his absence, it was Ivy’s “mother’s instinct” that legitimized Becca’s adoption. Continuing to explain the neglect that Becca faced in her orphanage, Ivy related to me,

“We were told that she had been born [birth date redacted]. We had height, weight, head circumference, and nothing else. Now, look at those feet [showing me Becca’s referral photo on her tablet]. The first thing I thought was, if she’s only a year old, those feet are too big. My mother’s instinct, I knew those feet were too big.

For Ivy, the politically engaged and highly critical professor, it was ultimately an essentialist take on motherhood that justified her participation in a “gray scale” of ethical (and unethical) actions.

Emily’s story, like Ivy’s, illustrates how a commitment to intensive mothering as a distinct gender ideology can insulate mothers from the full emotional effect of the double-bind in which fraught international adoption processes place them. Emily is a single mother in her late 30s. Emily decided to pursue an adoption from Ethiopia in part because of her political and professional interest in the region, which stemmed from working on public health projects related to both AIDS education and public water systems in several African nations. Emily had travelled widely in central and southern Africa, and Ethiopia was her first choice of sending nation from which to adopt. Emily and her daughter, Mara, live in a modest home in a suburban neighborhood, where Emily had settled down when she chose to adopt. At the time of our interview, Emily had made the decision to take some time off of work in order to fully support Mara’s social-emotional and educational needs and was living off a combination of savings and her own parents’ support. But in addition to telling me about Mara’s struggles in school, Emily also shared a story with me of such deep corruption in the agency she used that the agency, according to Emily, “went belly-up” only weeks prior to our interview. Explaining the situation that Mara had faced in that agency’s orphanage, Emily said,
“[Mara] arrived in care heavy, pudgy even. She was an extremely well cared-for baby before she came into the care of the agency. During the period that she was in care, a number of babies died of protein-energy malnutrition because of an insufficient supply of formula and because the nannies were not appropriately trained to administer the formula. And the reason that she was so tiny [when I gained custody] was the direct result of that.”

In this case, Emily alleges, children died as the direct result of a corrupt agency, whose in-country director for Ethiopia, according to Emily, “was making over $200,000 per year. And she was the person who brushed off the volunteers who were trying to help, and for whatever reason, chose not to bring in sufficient formula to feed the children or train the nannies to administer it.”

Emily continued, “At the time I accepted her referral, I was told she was abandoned. I received a report with the name of the person who supposedly found her and the location in which she was supposedly found. All of that is, at this point, highly questionable and probably not true.”

But Emily sees the consequences of that “untruth” as particularly immediate. Less concerned with abstract ethical debates than with her daughter’s health and development, Emily explains,

“I’ve had my child’s case referred to as ‘benign fraud,’ but there’s no such thing. It’s abundantly clear that my child is older than I was told. She’s six years old on paper, but she’s not six years old. Her birthday is probably six to eight months off. But that meant that she was referred to me as an ‘infant girl’ when she was actually a young toddler. But the demand was for infant girls, so they made her an infant girl. Well, the problem is that when I brought her home, she weighed thirteen pounds, and she was supposed to be thirteen months old. Well, that would be bad enough, but she was actually eighteen to twenty months old. And she weighted thirteen pounds. The pediatrician apologized that she didn’t realize the discrepancy, but it was so hard to fathom that she was so tiny, much less that she was even older than we thought. Thank God, she’s fine. The pediatrician said, though, that if she had known that [my daughter] weighed thirteen pounds at eighteen months, she would have sent us out the door and straight to the hospital, and that would have been bad for our bonding. Thank God, she’s fine, but she might not have been fine.”

For Emily, the prospect of what might have been is too much to bear and her anger and frustration at the danger her daughter faced were palpable throughout our interview.
Emily described her commitment to her daughter as “fierce” and, indeed, had quit the workforce to devote herself to Mara’s academic and social-emotional success. A proponent of Attachment Parenting, Emily described wearing Mara in a baby sling for most waking hours following Mara’s arrival in the United States. Emily initially shared a bed with Mara to promote bonding, and had, from the beginning of their relationship, devoted tremendous amounts of time to one-on-one interaction and play. But none of it was enough to prevent Mara’s difficulties in elementary school, with reading in particular. It was Mara’s diagnosis of learning disabilities that led Emily to quit work, to become more involved in Mara’s school, and to fill Mara’s life with other kinds of enriching activities – dance, gymnastics, music, art – that made Mara feel good about herself. And Emily has been left wondering if Mara’s experiences in the orphanage may have led to her academic difficulties. Emily insists that if Mara’s “issues” are related to adoption, they were not related to abuse or neglect in her birth family, but, rather, in a corrupt orphanage and a system that was more concerned with “expediency” than child welfare.

In addition to uncertainty about Mara’s intellectual development, Emily is also left to navigate the ethical uncertainty of Mara’s adoption in the first place. Like many of the mothers I interviewed, Emily came to see international adoption as a system not as wholly benign or wholly corrupt, but as a “gray” reproductive market. Emily explains,

“I don’t know if it was pure corruption, like she was trafficked or purchased or harvested, or if someone was coerced, or if it really was that the person who truly had the power to make that decision – her birthmother or birth father or a grandparent – hadn’t actually died but made that choice. And then someone erased her history to make it easier for her to be adopted. Or whether it is truly harvesting and trafficking, I don’t know. But I know that the story that she was left at an animal market, it’s bullshit. My suspicion is that it’s not flat-out trafficking, but it’s obvious, now that people are sharing their stories, that there’s no way in hell there were that many abandoned infants from the place where my daughter’s from in an extremely short period of time. For that to be true, there would have to have
been babies falling from the sky. There was probably some heavy recruiting and then erasing the trail back to families.”

Here, Emily points to three distinct aspects of the “gray” side of the international adoption market that have come to light over the past fifteen years. First, like many of the adoptive parents with whom I spoke, Emily adopts the language of “trafficking” and “harvesting” with respect to her adopted daughter, taking on some degree of complicity in a system that she has come to understand as ethically problematic. Second, Emily acknowledges the possibility that Mara’s birthmother (or father, or grandparent) may have made a conscious (if forced) choice to place Mara for adoption. This possibility, of course, is in tension with the possibility of trafficking, and this tension creates more, rather than less, ambiguity for the adoptive mothers I interviewed. Finally, Emily very clearly identifies the fact that patterns of fraud and corruption could never have come to light without people “sharing their stories” — something that, thanks to social media, is much easier and much more efficient than it was only fifteen years ago. Emily herself described active participation in many social media groups that are highly critical of international adoption.

Ultimately, both Ivy and Emily turned to essentialist ideals of mothering as a way to negotiate through their circumstances. Emily concluded,

“Looking back on what the agency did to her for money, and for expediency to get that money, I can’t believe it. I just can’t believe it. The majority of the issues she struggles with are related to how her adoption was processed, not to the reason she was adopted. The research I’ve done and my mamma gut tell me that my daughter has a history. I know my child was not abandoned. But for expediency, someone chose to erase why she got to where she was.”

Ivy’s and Emily’s experiences and self-reflection illustrate the particular double-bind in which adoptive mothers find themselves. They both settle into the unavoidable contradictions presented by their daughters’ stories. One the one hand, as adoptive mothers, Ivy and Emily are suspect: if their daughters’ adoptions were fraudulent, then they are implicated as a selfish, uncaring, anti-
mothers who stole and trafficked their children. On the other hand, their “fierce” exercise of maternal obligation simultaneously “saved” their children, in Ivy’s daughter’s case from the life of sex work or indentured servitude that Ivy envisioned, and in Emily’s case from dangerous malnutrition and likely death.

**Maternal Femininity and Paternal Masculinity in the Face of Fraud**

Like Ivy and Emily, Kate embodied an ideal of intensive mothering as a response to her child’s needs. Kate, whose feelings about domestic adoption were highlighted in a previous chapter, describes how her family uncovered the truth of her son Jonah’s adoption story. Kate told me that Jonah experienced a particularly difficult adjustment in joining the family; alternating between sullenness and anger, Jonah was both hard to manage and hard to reach. One night, when he was in kindergarten, about a year after coming to the United States, he ran away from home. Kate’s husband found him standing in the middle of the highway on-ramp, a few blocks from the house. Jonah reported that he was going to the airport, so he could go back to Ethiopia. This was a wake-up call for Kate and her husband, who immediately entered family therapy with their son. Kate also put a tremendous amount of research into finding an individual psychotherapist for Jonah, ultimately selecting a renowned expert in attachment in internationally adopted children. Kate stopped full-time work and would bring Jonah to appointments, almost three hours away from home, every other week. Kate’s husband, meanwhile, continued working the long hours that the financial sector demands, and Kate took on the bulk of the new family work that grew out of Jonah’s struggles.

Kate told me that the family had been planning to return to visit Ethiopia at some point in the future, but that, in response to Jonah’s behavior, the new therapist said, “Jonah is clearly telling...
you that he needs to go now.” Kate set about planning a trip to Ethiopia, and she contacted her adoption agency to let them know. The agency contacted Jonah’s birth family, and the true story of Jonah’s birth parents came out. Kate explained,

“The Ethiopian social worker on the ground there went multiple times and the whole story came out. She was alive. He was alive. They were young. He left her as soon as he found out that she was pregnant. The parents couldn’t support that. I think there was some shaming there. And so, that’s what happened. The mom was living with her aunt, our son’s great aunt, who was only a couple of years older than his mom. And we met the aunt when we adopted him. So the two of them sort of created this story based on a friend of theirs in the village who said, you know, I know about these orphanages. If you want to get him in there, you need to say that everyone died.”

Beyond assuming responsibility for managing both her son’s psychotherapy and her family’s travel arrangements, Kate’s attitude towards her son’s birth parents reveals an acceptance of normative maternal femininity. Kate seamlessly steps into the ethical double-bind of mothering someone else’s child thanks to global inequality. Rather than anger at having been lied to, Kate expressed a sense of relief at learning the truth about her son, explaining,

“Personally, I know my role in his life, so I never had any feelings that I was competing with someone. I was concerned about him, about how he was going to handle it. He would cry and cry and really mourn the loss of these people. His birthdays have always been hard, he just gets very reflective on his birthday. I just didn’t want him to feel rejected. And honestly, I felt sad that she had to create this story to make a plan for herself and her son. I felt really sad that she had no other choice. When we found out, it was about six weeks before our trip. We had a few more therapy sessions, which was really helpful. I will say, though, our son was just happy and so excited to get to meet her.”

Like Ivy’s husband Paul, Kate’s husband is absent in her narrative. In assuming the day-to-day responsibility for Jonah’s care, as well as the emotional responsibility for his adjustment, Kate clearly reproduces stereotypically gendered family arrangements. Kate embraces normative (intensive) maternal femininity as a response to both her son’s individual trauma as well as to the broader implications of the fraudulent circumstances of his adoption.
Deirdre and Thomas are a white, married couple in their early 50s with two sons, biological brothers, who were adopted from Ethiopia. The family lives in a close-knit neighborhood in a rural New England town. In my sample, Thomas was exceptional – one of only five fathers to participate in an interview, he stood out as highly involved at all stages of he and Deirdre’s decision-making. But most strikingly, where other fathers spoke matter-of-factly about completing paperwork, home studies, and travel arrangements, or intellectually about the politics of international adoption (like Mike, above), Thomas spoke emotionally and relationally about his experiences as a father. A devout Christian, Thomas spoke movingly about his love for his children and his wife as well as about the relationships that he was able to forge with his sons’ birth relatives – fellow Christians – in Ethiopia. Yet, in his deep involvement in family relationships, family work, and family decision-making, Thomas nonetheless represents an idealized paternal masculinity in the way that he, ultimately, processes the news that his children’s adoption paperwork had been fraudulent.

Deirdre and Thomas’ story, in many ways, follows a predictable trajectory: Deirdre and Thomas couldn’t conceive, they pursued fertility treatments, then moved on to domestic adoption, and finally arrived at international adoption after exhausting most other options. Deirdre and Thomas even described Ethiopia as their “final option” among potential countries from which to adopt. However, Deirdre and Thomas describe, quite exceptionally, a steadfast ethical commitment to and profound empathy for the birthmothers and families with whom they became intertwined throughout their long process of adopting. Indeed, Deirdre and Thomas told me how they had pursued private domestic adoption but elected to adopt from Ethiopia after a failed placement, in which the birthmother pulled out at the last minute. Deirdre told me that, at the time, she was disappointed, but ultimately “happy for the mother” who decided to raise her child after
all. When Deirdre and Thomas decided to pursue an adoption from Ethiopia, they were matched quickly with their sons, who were two and a half and almost one at the time. Initially, Deirdre and Thomas were told that the boys’ birth father had passed away while the mother was pregnant with the younger boy and that they had four older biological siblings. Deirdre’s response to the family’s circumstances was reflective:

“I was surprised that they had a birthmother. In my mind, I had it that they would be orphans. I had a bit of an internal struggle, of is this the right thing to do, when the only reason she was making this decision was because of her financial circumstances? But then I thought, [having considered domestic adoption,] why would I put a different set of standards on her than I would on someone domestically?”

Here, Deirdre suggests that living birthmothers in Africa could be making conscious choices, however “forced,” to place their children for international adoption. Given her experience with a failed domestic placement, Deirdre decided to proceed with the match from Ethiopia after deciding not to apply a double standard to Ethiopian birthmothers.

After accepting the match, Deirdre and Thomas set about preparing for their boys’ arrival. When they received clearance to travel to Ethiopia, they quickly put the final touches on the boys’ room, made a last-minute trip to Wal-Mart, and packed their bags. Deirdre describes going immediately from the airport in Addis Ababa to meet the boys and then hesitantly saying goodbye in order to sleep for the first time in several nights before travelling to meet the boys’ birth family the next day. On their second day in Ethiopia, Deirdre and Thomas set out with another adopting couple on a five-hour Jeep ride to visit their children’s natal villages. Deirdre describes the journey, which would ultimately span years and continents, leading to the truth about her boys’ story:

“We got a flat tire. So the driver told us to go [into a café] and have some coffee while he fixed the tire. The other couple were reading to us out of the Lonely Planet
guide about the town we’re in, and they call it the armpit of Ethiopia. Just then we were approached by two men, one of them is the social worker from [our agency] who lives in Ethiopia, and the other, I didn’t get it at first, but he was the birth uncle of our boys. He was their birth father’s brother. So, they sat down with us, and once I realized who it was, I remember thinking, I have to remember everything for my children for when they get older. He was there to help show how to get to our family. So, we pile into the Jeep, we drive another hour, we get on a dirt road, and then they stop and they’re like, okay, it’s your birth family.

“We had a wonderful, amazing, positive visit. I was prepared for sadness, tears, but I was the only one who cried. When we got in there, they brought out each of their brothers and sisters and introduced them, and we hugged them, and we met their birthmother. The hospitality that she had was amazing.

“Driving back [to Addis Ababa with the other adopting couple], the uncle says to [all four of] us, you have to stay in close touch, because your children are from the same tribe. And I have no idea what that means. So, we were nodding, like, yeah, we’ll keep in touch. Well, about six months later, the birth uncle won the immigration lottery to come to America, and he calls us, and it was at that point that he told us that the twins [adopted by the other couple] were the boys’ first cousins. Their birthmother was [our] boys’ birth father’s sister. [Remember,] we’re told at that point that our boys’ birth father died.

“So, the birth uncle [also uncle to the aforementioned twins], he wins the lottery to come to the U.S. But it’s 2008, the recession hits, he’s not able to make a go of it, so he joins the Army. When you join the Army, you get your citizenship, and he got all these good deals. He marries his girlfriend from Ethiopia, brings her over. And this past August, I’d said to him, a couple years ago, I’d like to go back to Ethiopia and visit the birth family, and he said, well, if you do, let me know, I’d like to go with you. So, last year we decided to go back to Ethiopia, and last August we went, and he, true to his word, he went with us. And, before we went, we went through our adoption agency, and they sent a social worker out to say, hey, the adoptive family’s coming. Well, we found out that the birth family had lied, that the birth father had not passed away, but that [the birth parents] knew [an orphanage] would not take the children if both parents were alive. So, they fabricated this story, and the birth father is alive. He’s so alive that they’ve had two children since then.”

Through a combination of global flows, cellular phones, and the luck of the draw in the Green Card lottery, Deirdre and Thomas came face-to-face with the truth of their sons’ adoption story. I asked Deirdre how she reacted when she found out that her sons’ birthmother had lied and that their birth father was alive. Like Kate, she responded with startling empathy, explaining, “For me,
I was just, I guess I had the same reaction the boys did: dead is bad, alive is good. So, great, we have a birth father, too. I’m not walking in her shoes, or his shoes. If I can’t feed or clothe my children, I might lie, too. I didn’t have any judgment for them, I was fine with it.”

Deirdre went on to describe her sons’ reunion with their birth father as “joyful” and, like Kate, “healing.” She told me that, upon meeting the boys’ birth father, he said, “‘I want for the boys, that when you get older and they get older, I want them to take care of you. They owe us nothing, and they owe you everything.’ Because in Ethiopia, when [your] parents get older, you take care of your parents. So that was him saying, ‘we’re not their parents, you are their parents.’”

But Thomas also developed a relationship with the boys’ birth family, and, in particular, with the uncle they had initially met at the roadside café. Thomas felt that he bonded with the boys’ uncle, as well as with the boys’ birth father, over their shared Christian faith, explaining,

“While we were in Addis, their uncle came there. And he left a little before we did. But he came to talk with us, and I could tell something was really on his mind. I walked him out, because I could tell something was really, really bothering him. So, I walked him out into the hallway, and that’s when he told me about the decision they’d made to give the boys up. And he said, ‘they didn’t come about that easily.’ It was aunts and uncles, they all got around and talked about it and discussed. It’s not something they did lightly. And after they did it, they agonized about it, because they weren’t being truthful. And that had been eating on them for years, it had been six years up to that point. So, when they knew we were coming back for a visit, he wanted to just let me know how they felt. He was emotional when he was telling me. He said, ‘they just want you to forgive them for not being truthful.’ I’m getting teary-eyed now, talking about it. But I said, ‘Well, you know, I can’t throw stones at you for this. You just let them know that I don’t hold anything against them for that. I forgive them for that.’ So, anyway, it was pretty emotional.”

Thomas even told me that, because he and the boys’ uncle were both Christians, he felt like they were “speaking the same language” and could communicate on a level that transcended their cultural differences.
Further, for Thomas, it seems that this redemptive narrative is, ultimately, triumphal. For Thomas and Deirdre, as well as for Kate, “knowing” that their children’s birth parents had “chosen” to place their children for international adoption allows them, as adoptive parents, to understand their adoption as, ultimately, beneficial to their children. They echo Alyssa, who was able to proceed in good faith with adopting from the Congo because her agency “caught” an initial case of impropriety. They also echo Lynne and Mike, who insist that despite compelling evidence that their daughter was trafficked, “she has a fabulous life.” About the systems that lead to a supply of adoptable children, Mike speaks to the same “gray scale” of ethical considerations that Ivy and Emily mention. In the context of the notion that China’s One Child policy led to the large-scale abandonment of baby girls, Mike says, “So, maybe people feel a little bit bad about perpetuating this, but they feel much better about providing a good home for a child who needs one.” Kate also addresses this ethical trade-off in her understanding of Jonah’s adoption story. About Jonah’s birthmother, Kate says, “I felt really sad that she had no other choice,” yet she ultimately concludes, “I know my role in his life.” Kate, along with the other mothers presented in this chapter, filters this understanding through a commitment to the prevailing ideologies of maternal femininity, and Thomas, though in many ways exceptional, nonetheless filters his understanding of a (complex) triumphal narrative through his commitment to normative paternal (and patriarchal) masculinity.

Mothers as Activists

Anna and Dan are a white, married couple in their mid-40s with a seven-year-old son, Jacob, whom they adopted from Nepal. They live in a single family home in an affluent suburb and are both employed full-time. Anna and Dan decided to pursue adoption after several years of
unsuccessful fertility treatments. Eighteen months after submitting paperwork to their adoption agency, they were matched with their son, Jacob. They left for Kathmandu shortly afterward, and, upon landing, headed straight to Jacob’s orphanage. The first meeting went well, and the couple began to bond with their son over Goldfish crackers and soap bubbles. Leaving Jacob that first night, they anticipated appearing in Nepali court the next day in order to take temporary custody pending their final adoption decree, a process that they were told would take about five days. But the next morning, Anna explained, “[we were] on our way to the orphanage. The State Department called us and said, ‘we want to talk to you before you sign the decree.’” So, they asked their driver to turn the car around, and, instead of meeting Jacob, they headed to the U.S. embassy. Caught in the middle of the U.S. Department of State’s 2010 shut-down of adoptions in Nepal, Anna felt like she was acting on “impulse” – a maternal impulse to protect her child. She explained her and Dan’s decision-making process:

“So we say, what do we do? So, well, let’s go ahead with what we’re doing here, and we’re just going to have to figure out along the way what’s happening. We can’t cancel this on something that may or may not be accurate. If it is accurate, then we have to find his birth parents and rectify what’s happened. If it isn’t accurate, we can’t risk that he’s growing up in an orphanage for nothing. And so we went to the ministry, we signed the papers.”

Anna and Dan took Jacob back to their hotel and prepared to wait out the situation. Two days later, Anna, Dan, and Jacob came down to their hotel lobby and were met by a representative of their adoption agency who told them, “you can’t leave the hotel, you’ll be swamped by journalists – they shut down the program.”

Anna and Dan were then invited to a meeting at the U.S. embassy, in which they were told, according to Anna, “we don’t know if we can trust [your child’s] documents. You can leave [Nepal] at any time, but you can’t bring your child.” Anna asked, “What would you recommend
that we do?” and reports that she was told, “Well, you can annul the adoption and return him to
the orphanage. If you stay, you could be here for up to two years.” Anna’s response was swift
and decisive: “so, then we’ll be here for two years.” Anna had, indeed, wholeheartedly donned
the mantle of maternal responsibility and adopted the most central, normative assumption we hold
about motherhood: that a mother does not abandon her child. She was instantly determined to
uproot her life and live in Nepal, waiting for her child’s adoption to be finalized. Anna and Dan’s
next step was to contact an immigration attorney in the U.S., who drafted a letter to the U.S.
embassy in Nepal. As Anna explained, “Apparently adoption law is pretty clear; if the child is
most likely an orphan, then the child is considered an orphan. But the response [to the attorney’s
letter] was, ‘We’re the U.S. State Department, we don’t have to follow the law.’” Anna’s take on
the State Department’s position was pragmatic. She explained, “I think [the embassy] assumed
that people would just go home. But that was a weird assumption. They didn’t understand that
people who adopt are just as attached to their children as anyone else.” Indeed, Anna explained
that she had been “waiting for [Jacob] for so long, there was no way I was giving up on him.”

Anna and Dan were told that in order to secure a visa for Jacob to enter the United States,
they would have to hire a private investigator to confirm that Jacob was, indeed, an orphan. So,
Anna and Dan hired a private investigator, and Dan returned to the U.S. to work while Anna and
Jacob moved into a rental apartment in Kathmandu. Thrust into “survival mode,” as Anna put it,
she spent the days caring for Jacob and the nights (“until 4 o’clock every morning”) searching the
Internet, corresponding with lawyers, doing whatever she could to contribute to her case. The
investigator’s 120-page report ultimately confirmed the story that Anna and Dan had been told –
that Jacob had been abandoned on a riverbank, with no way to trace biological kin. Anna’s story
provides a clear illustration of how a disruption to her international adoption process drew out her
total commitment to intensive mothering. Anna abandoned her job, her home, and her spouse in order to wholly devote her intellectual, emotional, and financial resources to bringing Jacob to the United States. Anna went up against the United States government and, in her mind, emerged victorious, with moral certainty that her son’s adoption was not only legitimate but also, ultimately, benevolent. Anna sublimated herself to the task of mothering, she “proved” that her son was a “true” orphan, and she ultimately triumphed.

Anna’s narrative brings together an ideological commitment to intensive mothering and a parallel ideological commitment to a triumphal narrative of international adoption. But Anna also fits Stone’s (2007) description of the “professionalization of motherhood” whereby highly educated, professional women, pressured or forced out of the workforce, channel their professional skills into intensive mothering. While the mothers in Stone’s study are driven out of the workforce by their generally ordinary circumstances of inflexible bosses and commitments to intensive engagement with their children, and Anna is forced into an advocacy role by the extraordinary circumstances of her son’s adoption, both Anna and the mothers in Stone’s study “professionalize” motherhood at an intersection of ideological commitment to intensive mothering and structural gender inequality. Indeed, while Anna’s husband continued to work full-time after Jacob’s adoption, Anna went back to work part-time, devoting herself not only to mothering Jacob but to substantial public activism. Anna frequently travelled to meet with U.S. Senators and congressional representatives as part of a lobbying effort to reopen adoptions with Nepal, and she told me that she was actively pursuing an independent legal case that would allow her and her husband to adopt a second child from Nepal. In this sense, Anna’s story, as well as those of Leslie and Arden, two other “activist” mothers, illustrates the ways that intensive mothering exists alongside a neoliberal turn towards self-sufficiency and the privatization of carework. The closing
and reorganizing of international adoption programs across the globe, as well as the fracture of a wholly triumphal narrative of international adoption, left mothers to struggle on their own. It was within this void of public, institutional, and, often, familial or spousal support that some mothers fashioned themselves into activists for their children. Though writing in the context of Clinton-era welfare reform, Hays points out a fundamental contradiction facing U.S. families, including many of those that participated in this project: “Our nation is simultaneously celebrating the importance of children, holding high an ethic of care and commitment to others, while at the same time demanding that all Americans be completely self-reliant” (2004: 232). In the stories of these activist mothers, self-reliance and professionalized, intensive mothering are deployed to resolve their children’s disrupted adoptions and, in the process, preserve a final shred of the triumphal narrative whereby a mother’s love and U.S. exceptionalism that ultimately justify their actions.

Arden, another activist mother, was the singular voice in my sample who spoke consistently and forcefully against what she called an “anti-adoption” position. Arden and her husband Michael, a widower, are both affluent, highly-educated professionals raising two teenage biological sons from Michael’s first marriage as well as a preschool-aged daughter born about a year after their marriage. Arden and Michael are also the legal parents of Chloe, a two-year-old girl whom they adopted in the Democratic Republic of Congo, but who, despite an adoption decree naming Arden and Michael as parents, was “stuck” in the Congo at the time of our interview. As Arden explains,

“It got rocky when the Congo stopped issuing exit visas [to Congolese citizens] after we had already adopted her. We signed the adoption decree, so we’re legally her parents. In January 2013, the U.S. embassy announced that they would be implementing a mandatory 3- to 6-month investigation of each and every orphan petition in the Congo, which would begin only after we had signed all the paperwork and had legally adopted our children. So, that was the next step, to begin that clock. Then you would get the U.S. visa. We have still not gotten the U.S.
visa, it’s been more like 6-12 months. But, then, after you get the U.S. visa, you have to apply to Congo for the exit visa. Exit visas are not normal, they’re probably illegal under international law, but countries like the Congo restrict the movement of their citizens. [In any case,] they suspended issuing exit visas.”

I asked Arden what she expected – and what she hoped – would happen next. She quickly replied, “The U.S. government needs to pay [the Congolese government] off. So they release the pipeline kids.”

A few months into this ordeal, Arden quit her job and immersed herself full-time in lobbying congress, attending congressional hearings, and participating in rallies and other campaigns that have grown around the shutdowns of international adoption in several countries, including the Congo. She made contacts at the Department of State and at various non-governmental adoption advocacy organizations, and she filed multiple Freedom of Information Act requests in an attempt to publicize what she sees as gross incompetence and mismanagement at the U.S. Department of State. Arden, a licensed attorney, truly channeled all her professional energy and expertise into the project of mothering – in her case, doing everything necessary to get her daughter out of the Congo and into the United States. Indeed, Arden framed her activities in terms of both a commitment to mothering and a steadfast belief that international adoptees would be better off in the United States.

Arden harshly criticized the U.S. Department of State for, in her view, creating a diplomatic climate that is fundamentally hostile to international adoption, insisting,

“[The State Department] has the anti-adoption language going, [questioning] the motives of parents who decide to adopt internationally. The State Department has this attitude that [adoptive parents] are all a little corrupt, a little shady. A lot of the consular officers are just doing their job. They don’t have a mandate to treat orphan petitions as anything but an immigration matter, and children’s best interests don’t come into the equation [so they] end up in a spitting match, and children wind up in limbo…. It’s not the State Department’s intention that tens of thousands of children be left behind and have their lives destroyed in institutions; their intention
is to increase transparency and accountability. But the result is that tens of thousands of children’s lives are being destroyed to root out what may be a couple more cases of fraud. I don’t think the intention justifies what we have as the result here.”

In our interview, Arden clearly advocated for less bureaucracy and oversight in international adoption processes.

In a similar vein, Arden goes on to characterize the disruptions to a variety of international adoption programs as purely politically motivated:

“Just like Russia used the excuse of abuse in families in the U.S. to shut down adoptions when everybody knew that’s not what it was really about, Congo used the excuse of the Reuters ‘rehoming report,’ which did not actually involve any children from the Congo. But it’s bullshit, and everybody knows it’s bullshit. What I do know, what everybody knows, what I know from contacts in [the Congolese] government, is that the DRC has put trade on the table, it’s just a shakedown. Pure and simple, it’s a shakedown. Some people think it has to do with Congo being declared a Tier 3 Human Rights Violator [by the U.S. Department of State] for the third year in a row, which automatically starts funding cuts. So these children are hostages, basically, while the Congo shakes down the [U.S.] government. Congo is the poorest country in the world, and it’s shaking us down.”

Here, Arden handily dismisses well-researched journalism as “bullshit,” suggesting that any discussion of misconduct among adoptive parents – and any systemic problems with international adoption that such a discussion might suggest – is inappropriate and irrelevant. She alleges that the Congo refused to “release” adopted children to the United States as a way to get the United States to restore humanitarian aid and other types of governmental funding. Arden’s suggestion that governments lean on the rhetoric of “the best interests of children” to justify diplomatic, political, and economic positions and activities that have little to do with children’s welfare echoes well-established academic arguments.

While Arden was exceptional in the ferocity with which she clung to a triumphant narrative, she was not alone in the view that international adoptions should be easier, because, in terms of
child welfare, the benefit of living in a family outweighed the damage of living in an institution. Leslie took this position strongly. A married mother of a daughter adopted from Nepal, Leslie was the only participant in the study who was part of a same-sex couple, and one of only two participants who identified as gay or lesbian. Indeed, Leslie understood her position vis-à-vis international adoption as deeply rooted a lifetime of feminist activism. When Leslie’s daughter, Judy, was “stuck” in Nepal at the same time as Anna’s son Jacob, Leslie was unable to leave her job and her older children to stay in Nepal with Judy. From her suburban home office, Leslie dedicated herself to organizing a campaign to “bring home” the handful of “pipeline” children in Nepal, whose adoption processes had begun, but had not been finalized, before the State Department shut down the program.

Leslie draws a hard line when it comes to keeping international adoption programs open, but she is nonetheless circumspect about allegations of fraud, corruption, and trafficking. Quite unlike Arden, Leslie points to the difficulty of identifying the “truth.” She explains,

“I think that [allegations of corruption and fraud in international adoption are] so complicated that no one is telling a whole, balanced, fair, appropriate story. Because it’s impossible to do it. You have the big camps: pro-adoption and anti-adoption with all the little camps underneath it, not always clearly defined to themselves. There’s too many perspectives. It’s too complicated to tell a clear story. You can’t, these countries aren’t the same, all with their own political systems, their own understanding of personhood. It’s too complicated.”

Wholly certain in her position on a policy level, she nonetheless lives with a degree of uncertainty. Leslie explained that despite the complexity inherent in international adoption, she firmly believed that children were universally better off living in loving families than in institutions. She was also unable to uncover any information about her own daughter’s history yet remained steadfast in her belief that adoption saved her daughter from a life of poverty, dislocation, and likely sexual or domestic servitude. I asked Leslie how she lived with the cognitive dissonance of “knowing”
she’d “saved” her daughter, despite not fully knowing her “true” story. She replied, “I’m queer. Cognitive dissonance doesn’t bother me.” Like Ivy, who sees the ethics of international adoption on a “gray scale,” Leslie holds on to a triumphal narrative of international adoption by accepting the complex, contradictory, and dissonant nature of a position that discriminates between the lesser of evils.

Beyond the ways that the mothers with whom I spoke continued to express a triumphal narrative of international adoption, they also describe a tremendous commitment to private action in pursuit of disrupted adoptions. International adoption is of course widely acknowledged to lack standardization, to be largely unregulated, and to transpire extra-governamentally, if not extra-legally. But it is particularly striking that in some of these cases it was the U.S. Department of State that ultimately told U.S. citizens to step outside protocol, outside procedure, and outside the law, or else abandon the children that they had already legally adopted. Ivy hired a driver, Anna hired a private investigator, Arden quit her job to become an unpaid lobbyist in a one-woman shop. The extreme nature of their actions begs the question: motherhood at what cost? Motherhood against all odds? Motherhood against the will of the United States government? A compulsion towards all-encompassing, totalizing, intensive motherhood led to tremendous upheaval in their lives. Even mothers whose children were not “stuck” and who did not take on public activism described intensive efforts to uncover their children’s full histories. In so doing, they found a way to cling to the shreds of a triumphal narrative.

“Lucky” Babies

Standing on a street corner in Antigua, Guatemala, I once overheard a conversation between two sets of U.S. adoptive parents, strangers to one another, both vacationing in Guatemala
with their Guatemalan adopted children. One mother, of two preteens, said to the other, who was pushing a stroller, “she’s one of the lucky ones.” The mother of the younger child replied, “no, we are.” In a reference to the shut-down of Guatemalan adoptions, the first mother suggests that the child in the stroller was “lucky” to get out of Guatemala before the 2010 adoption freeze, while the mother of the younger child sounded a note often heard among adoptive parents – that adoptive parents are the ones who truly benefit from the adoption of their child. Across Africa, Asia, and Latin America, the phrase “lucky baby” reverberated in the ears of the adoptive parents I interviewed. In China, in particular, adoptive parents I interviewed visited zoos, palaces, and the Great Wall, followed by a veritable chorus of local residents calling out, “Lucky baby. Lucky baby.” But the political and ethical complexity surrounding the systemic movement of children via international adoption problematizes the notion of a straightforwardly “lucky” baby. Jackie’s story makes this painfully clear.

A single mother in her early fifties, Jackie holds a prestigious professional degree and is employed full-time in a highly demanding field. She has two adopted daughters. Jackie’s first daughter, Ana, died while in foster care in Guatemala. Though Ana had been legally adopted in Guatemala, she was in foster care waiting to join Jackie in the U.S., her paperwork indefinitely delayed because of the adoption freeze in that country. A few years after Ana’s death, Jackie adopted a second daughter, Zhara, from Ethiopia. When Jackie had set out to adopt Ana, adoptions in Guatemala were, from her U.S. perspective, relatively straightforward and moving relatively quickly. Jackie had several friends who had adopted children from Guatemala with relative ease, before the country experienced multiple shut-downs. But almost immediately after Jackie flew to Guatemala to legally adopt Ana, adoptions in Guatemala were frozen, and while Jackie could have stayed in Guatemala and parented Ana, she had to return to the U.S. to work. For many months,
she visited Ana in her foster home every few weeks, flying in for the weekend whenever she could. And over the course of those months, Jackie helplessly watched as Ana’s health deteriorated. On her final visit, Jackie took Ana to the hospital, where she passed away, as a result, Jackie finally discovered, of abuse and neglect that she was subject to in her foster placement. Jackie mourned the loss of her daughter alone and with little of the traditional support that might coalesce around the loss of a child. About two years later, when Jackie felt ready to begin a new process of adoption, Ethiopia was one of the only options available to her as a single woman. But, she said, Ethiopia was an attractive option because, “I was so traumatized, I just wanted as quick a process as possible.” Ana would have been “lucky” to get a visa before she died, but does her death (or Jackie’s suffering) justify the ethical ambiguity of new adoption process that’s “as quick as possible”?

Many of the mothers whom I interviewed worked fiercely to uncover the truth about the circumstances of their children’s adoptions, and many were successful. But either way, the process of investigating their children’s adoptions brought them face-to-face with ethical ambiguity and emotional uncertainty. On the one hand, all international adoptive mothers are indeed complicit in an ethically problematic system, and some of the mothers I interviewed uncovered direct evidence of their own complicity. But mothers with differing appetites for uncertainty in their individual stories, as well as differing views on international adoption more generally, still coalesced around the idea that the adoption of their child was the best of possible outcomes because it elevated the “best interests” of their child over other concerns. As one mother told me,

“People say they know families who had their cases searched, and researched independently, and that they found that their child wasn’t a true orphan, and they found the birth family, so I don’t know. I think there certainly is a possibility that they were creating orphans for them, but for us, in our case, we haven’t questioned
it, because if he has stayed in Ethiopia he wouldn’t have survived. So, we’ve never questioned whether or not it was truly an ethical decision for his family.”

Like this mother, most of the mothers I spoke with—even Deirdre, Kate, and others who discovered their child had living birth parents—came to believe that their family was better than their child’s alternatives.

Nobody in my sample was as committed to a purely triumphal narrative as Arden, the mother whose adoption from the Congo was in process at the time of our interview. Arden explained, “I want social justice and poverty alleviation and all that, but international adoption is treated like the scapegoat. There are all these children who, because of poverty, in large part, need parents.” Arden held the firm belief that international adoption was an appropriate, and, indeed, benevolent means of poverty alleviation that only benefitted children who would otherwise be deprived of a loving family and the chance for a fulfilling life. Quite unlike Arden, though, most mothers I spoke with expressed some degree of ambivalence, as well as a sensitivity to the complex tangle of interests who have a stake in international adoption. One mother, echoing a widely understood argument in the scholarly literature on international adoption, declared, “the fight is over the United States’ relationships with sending nations”—not over the well-being of the children on the ground. She explained that she understood this position, but that it didn’t change her committed belief that her daughter “belonged” in her family. Another mother, who adopted from Ethiopia said, “it’s not really in the best interests of the [sending] countries to send kids away, and so I ask myself if [adoption] is really helpful long term.” But, in a personal yearning for resolution, she continued, “If we could make contact with the [birth] family, I would feel better about it.”

From a certain vantage point, these mothers’ desire to adopt a child—to mother—overtook their ability to clearly see the ethical implications of their actions. But these mothers also simply
lived out our broadly accepted cultural expectation that mothers are intensive, unyeilding advocates for their children, who they were determined would thrive in their new American families. These mothers mobilized their resources to extract their children from orphanages, to push-through paperwork, to out-maneuver governments. But they were too much of what they were supposed to be. They hired private investigators, they lobbied Congress, they formed advocacy groups, and their adherence to normative expectations of intensive mothering invites the accusation that they trafficked their children. In the course of their investigations, they glimpsed the possibility – or the actual, living, breathing evidence – that their children’s adoption paperwork was fraudulent, and so, despite deep ambivalence, they clung to what remains of a triumphal narrative – a belief that their children’s “best interests” have been served – in order to defend their families’ legitimacy.
CHAPTER 6: THE END OF INTERNATIONAL ADOPTION?

“If we went out [with Becca in Kathmandu], everybody took one look at us and said, ‘Nepali baby? How much did you pay?’ That was the immediate question, every single time. Or, people said, ‘Lucky baby. How much did you pay?’ So, I knew.

‘Nobody smiled, everybody looked very grim. Nobody said, ‘Oh, how nice for you.’ Or, ‘How nice for her.’ And it’s in the newspapers there constantly, that Westerners come, to take their children, to harvest their organs, to turn them into servants, that it’s a baby-seller, trafficking… Sometimes, in a clumsy way, I would try to say the money helps all the children in the orphanage. At least, I hope that’s true. Although, I suspect the people who run it have nice villas and nice cars, I don’t know. It was like I was the criminal; I was just trying to help.”

-Ivy, Nepali Adoptive Mother

This study captures a distinct historical moment and a distinct cohort of mothers. International adoptions in the United States began as a trickle of families responding to the humanitarian aftermath of World War II and the Korean and Vietnam Wars. But as highly educated, professional women and men increasingly delayed marriage and childbearing over the last decades of the twentieth century, international adoption became a full-fledged and demand-driven reproductive marketplace. As the number of international adoptions to the United States climbed over the 1990s and early 2000s, peaking at 22,991 in 2004, a “triumphal narrative” reigned. As Herman, a historian of adoption, argues, transracial adoptions, both domestic and international, represented “a longed-for symbol of national progress. Families made across borders of difference ratify a triumphal narrative in which bright lines separate the eras of Jim Crow racism and old-fashioned empire from our own age’s stated commitment to multiculturalism
and postcolonialism” (2008: 288). Wave after wave of international adoptions – from Romania, China, Guatemala, and Ethiopia – all conformed to a narrative whereby U.S. parents “save” orphans at the same time that they add a child to their families. As one mother in my study said, “everybody was really celebrating international adoption at that point.”

Beginning in the early 2000s, though, evidence – primarily journalistic – began to emerge surrounding patterns of corruption in international adoption programs around the world. At the same time, scholarly literature in the social sciences and the law began to analyze those patterns in terms of systemic global inequalities. The U.S. Department of State responded, shuttering programs in Cambodia, in Nepal, and in the Democratic Republic of Congo, while exercising increased scrutiny in a variety of other contexts. Likewise, sending nations – Guatemala, Ethiopia, China, Russia, and others – closed or seriously curtailed their programs. In 2014, the last year for which data is currently available, international adoptions were down almost 75 percent from their 2004 peak, to 6438. Equally significantly, the average age of children at adoption has increased dramatically, and fewer than one in twenty international adoptees are currently adopted as infants, compared to 40 percent in 2004 (USDOS 2016).

Table 1: International Adoptions in 2004 and 2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total International Adoptions</th>
<th>Infants under 1</th>
<th>Children Aged 1-2</th>
<th>Children over 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>22,991</td>
<td>9314 (40 percent)</td>
<td>8673 (38 percent)</td>
<td>5004 (22 percent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>6438</td>
<td>283 (4 percent)</td>
<td>2420 (38 percent)</td>
<td>3735 (58 percent)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The mothers I interviewed, by simple virtue of their timing, found the entire system of international adoption shifting under their feet. Entering into their adoption processes between 2004 and 2014, they lived through a fundamental shift in international adoption as an institution. This shift delayed and threatened many of their adoption processes. The delays and additional
bureaucratic challenges that they encountered often brought them face-to-face with the structural forces that underlie international adoption and that keep the adoption marketplace “supplied” with children. Adoptive mothers encountered more than poverty; they saw social and economic dislocation so profound that, as Briggs writes, it “so tears the social fabric that those who wish to raise their children cannot, and those who do not wish to raise their children cannot find help or friends or family who can take them in” (2012: 10). Consequently, the mothers I interviewed also encountered the fraud, corruption, and relative impunity that accompanied the growth of international adoption programs in a variety of sending nations.

In a previous era, adoption records were sealed and birthmothers remained anonymous and invisible across oceans, languages, and unabating poverty. But every single mother I interviewed who adopted from Ethiopia was taken, by their adoption agency, on an excursion from Addis Ababa to their child’s natal village, where they met their child’s biological kin. More than once, their child’s birth parents, reported to be dead, stood to the side and watched as cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents posed for photographs with the U.S. adopting couple. And they kept in touch. As more than one adoptive mother I interviewed exclaimed with (perhaps misplaced) surprise, “everyone in Ethiopia has a cell phone!” The travel, communication, and overall interconnectedness of our globalized world allowed, in many cases, for the “truth” of individual children’s adoptions stories to come to light.

Additionally, social media has played a tremendous role in many adoptive mothers’ narratives of reckoning with the institutional shifts that have, in many ways, “ended” international adoption as we knew it. Today, more than 20 percent of the global population has a Facebook profile when, just 12 years ago, at the height of international adoption in 2004, the social media platform was the exclusive domain of a few elite American college students. Indeed, all kinds of
members of the adoption community – adoptive parents, adoptees, and their biological parents, grandparents, and siblings – have flocked to social media for community and support at precisely the same time that critical media coverage of international adoption has increased. Online adoption groups share articles, links, blogs, and all manner conversational topics, many highly critical of international adoption. It is hard not to link this growth in global interconnectedness with the simultaneous increase conventional media attention to the problems of international adoption – fraud and corruption, lack of regulation, and inherent inequality. In this context, adoptive mothers have witnessed the cracking of the ideological façade of international adoption – the rupture of a triumphal narrative. Even the parents I interviewed whose individual adoption processes did not come under direct scrutiny were forced to reckon with emerging evidence of corruption in their children’s countries of birth, as well as in international adoption more generally. Others whom I interviewed tell the stories of their own discoveries of inconsistencies, lies, cover-ups, and systemic problems in their children’s adoption stories.

It is in this context that I question the ways in which a triumphal narrative has both lost its hegemonic grasp on international adoption as an institution yet nonetheless continues to hold sway with many of the mothers whom I interviewed for this project. There are three primary facets of this narrative. The first “triumph” of international adoption is that it “saves” a child from poverty, lack of opportunity, illness, and even death. The second triumph of international adoption is universalism: the notion that families – and, consequently, nations as imagined communitites – can transcend boundaries of race and of blood. The third branch of this narrative specifically concerns the role that the United States plays as host to the world’s children and as a herald of liberal democracy on the global stage. All three aspects of a triumphal narrative have been fundamentally challenged over the past decade as the numbers of international adoptions have
continued to decrease. While some of the individual stories that I present here may represent a “triumph” for an individual child or for an individual family, other stories that I present may suggest the opposite. But these three facets of a triumphal narrative are also intertwined with one another, and the ideals that are wrapped into this narrative undergird some of the most profoundly contested aspects of U.S. economic and foreign policy as the United States negotiates its evolving role in the world. My findings in this project not only concern shifts in the ways that we imagine family, motherhood, kinship, and care work, but also in the ways that we both contest a triumphal narrative and continue to produce it in new ways.

A Buyer’s Market

Pat and Rich were an older couple who wanted to be parents. Pat had worked with Guatemalan refugee women in Mexico during the armed conflict in Guatemala in the 1990s, and Rich, a former labor organizer, described himself as “part of the global working class.” While they were clear that their primary motivation for adopting was to have children, they, like most of the parents I interviewed, subscribed to the basic notion that international adoption was also beneficial for the children who came to the United States. But Pat and Rich did not subscribe to a triumphal narrative because of their international experience or their progressive politics; among the adoptive parents in my sample, commitment to a triumphal narrative cut across lines of politics and class. When Pat and Rich elected to adopt from Guatemala, adoption processes were moving quickly and seemingly smoothly. Pat acknowledges that they should have done more due diligence when they accepted a match with a baby girl, Elsa, before even submitting a complete application to the adoption agency that reached out to them. But, as Pat explained, she was very eager to become a mother. When Pat and Rich’s adoption agency lied to them, hiding Elsa’s severe cerebral
palsy, Pat and Rich backed out of the adoption. Pat and Rich’s story clearly illustrates an ethical difficulty that accompanies international adoption, and that has always accompanied all kinds of adoption, in terms of which children are deemed “adoptable” and which, for any number of reasons, are not. But Pat and Rich’s story also illuminates the market dynamics that underlie international adoption: because it’s a market, adoptive parents hold the cards. And though the supply of children may be restricted or defined by scarcity, adoptive parents drive demand. It was through their experience of a corrupt adoption agency’s fraudulent activities that Pat and Rich were able to see the commercial nature of international adoption more clearly, and it was through their ultimate choice not to adopt Elsa that they confronted – and that we can clearly see – the reality that adoptive parents are buyers in a buyers’ market.

Many of the mothers I interviewed told me that they ruled out domestic adoption because they felt that they had more agency and control, as the adopting parents, in the context of international adoption. In private domestic adoption, where birthmothers select their baby’s adoptive parent(s), the adoptive mothers I spoke with balked at having to “be chosen.” These adoptive mothers clearly act to maintain their position as privileged consumers in a marketplace. In that vein, my findings offer an opening to think about the ways in which international adoptive mothers may contribute to the literature on reproductive markets more generally. These mothers are clearly aware of their positionality vis-à-vis the market; they know that they are in a position of power and they know that the transactions surrounding adopting their children are commercial in nature. Many of them feel a deep discomfort with the commercial nature of international adoption and the fact that they became mothers through participation in a commercial enterprise. Indeed, their ethical ambivalence is well-placed, because rather than transacting genetic material, as in other kinds of reproductive markets, these mothers are transacting children. Thus, these
mothers’ experiences demand that we consider how international adoption, as a reproductive marketplace in which money is exchanged for children, demands different ethical and regulatory considerations than other types of reproductive markets. Zelizer, in particular, believes that the best way to mediate both the material inequities and the ethical problems that plague reproductive marketplaces (including domestic and international adoption) is to create the possibility for open, transparent, and well-regulated economic exchanges. But what would Zelizer’s well-regulated, transparent market have done in Pat and Rich’s case? Pat and Rich would never have been matched with a child they were unwilling to adopt, and they would have been spared the emotional turmoil of making that decision after the fact. But nothing would have changed for Elsa at all.

In theory, *homo economicus* behaves rationally, and, indeed, the mothers I interviewed describe making a series of rational – or rational-seeming – choices surrounding the attributes that they would like their future children to possess. While distasteful to some, the decision not to adopt a child with severe disabilities can be understood as a rational one. We know, from the body of work on reproductive markets, that prospective parents will pay a premium for what they consider to be the “best” genetic material for their future children and that egg and sperm “donors” are differentially compensated based on their height, weight, eye color, SAT scores, and the like. But, ultimately, little about the desire to mother, itself, is rational, as the mothers in this study who faced contested adoptions clearly illustrated through their sometimes extreme actions. Furthermore, Zelizer’s call for a well-regulated adoption marketplace may adequately address the needs of adoptive mothers who already see themselves as autonomous economic actors. But there is little evidence that it would fully address the needs of birthmothers who face the kinds of extreme social and economic dislocation that Briggs describes. Nor does it begin to consider the complexity of what constitutes the “best interests” of children in a way that respects childrens’ full
personhood. And, perhaps most centrally, when reproductive markets mean that some children are so much more likely than others to be passed over or left behind, we, as Rothman writes, “are forced to confront, in no subtle way, what makes for worth in human beings” (1989: 175). Zelizer argues, fundamentally, that economic exchange clarifies our social lives and our social world. Our social world, in that case, offers up a profound contradiction between the value that we place on “damaged” children and our claims about their humanity.

Health and “Fitness” in a Knowledge Economy

Various measures of health and “fitness” have long operated as racialized constructs within an American ethnoracial hierarchy that associates whiteness with cleanliness, respectability, and health more generally. Immigration has long challenged the black-white divide in the U.S. racial order; immigrants from Ireland, southern Europe, and Eastern Europe “became” white through upward economic mobility and assimilation into mainstream Anglo-American culture, while Chinese and other Asian immigrants morphed, in the public imagination, from a racial threat to a “model minority.” As the U.S. ethnoracial landscape continues to change, and the rigidity of ethnoracial hierarchies, however unevenly, continues to loosen, ideas about health and fitness continue to be racialized in new and evolving ways. Our economy has changed, and so today’s parents’ anxieties about their children’s health and fitness reflect the new cognitive and social-emotional demands that we perceive to be coming from the new economy. In this sense, international adoption presents a classic case of intersectionality, in which race functions differently – at least for international adoptive parents – based on different kinds of ability and disability statuses.
My findings suggest that the decisions that parents make surrounding international adoption reveal broader cultural anxieties at the intersection of race, on the one hand, and motherhood, kinship, and care on the other. One of the clearest illustrations of this process comes from Marjorie, a married mother of three children adopted from China, who explained that she adopted children from China with “minor, correctable medical needs” instead of “significantly damaged” U.S. foster children. Framing her choices in terms of concerns about children’s “health,” Marjorie doesn’t think her decision is about race; as she said to me, “I would have adopted three African American kids, but that would have been too much for my in-laws.” But setting her in-laws aside, Marjorie ruled out African American kids on her own. Indeed, Marjorie presents a glaring illustration of colorblind racism, avoiding African American children while claiming to be open to them; she ruled out private domestic adoption because she did not want contact with biological kin, and she ruled out adopting from the foster care system because “those kids are significantly damaged.” Bonilla-Silva writes that colorblind racism functions as an “elastic wall that barricades whites from the United States’ racial reality” (2006: 47). Through her colorblindness, Marjorie does not only avoid adopting black kids but she simultaneously barricades herself against the racialized nature of her own ideas about health and fitness. Marjorie is clear about what she means by “damaged” – kids with atypical neurological development – telling me, “our kids just needed surgery, and then they were fine. We could not have handled it, like, medical versus emotional issues.” Marjorie, like many mothers with whom I spoke, did not want neurologically “damaged” kids. Indeed, Marjorie explicitly ruled out adopting from Russia for that reason. In ruling out “damaged” black kids and damaged white kids, both in Russia and in U.S. foster care, Marjorie was not alone.
The continued loosening of the ethnoracial order in U.S. society has led to far more fine-grained kinds of racial categorization than existed prior to the *de facto* achievement of legal equality that defined the civil rights struggles of the mid-twentieth century. In the minds of the mothers I interviewed, blackness was not exactly desirable, but did not present the gravest of possible stigmas, either. The mothers with whom I spoke expressed a broader range of concerns surrounding their children’s integration into and success within U.S. society. Part of their inattention to race *per se* was certainly based in white Americans’ cultural commitment to colorblind discourse. But this impulse towards colorblindness also exists in tension with the reality that, under some circumstances, racial boundaries are porous; it is in the context of intersectionality that Collins argues that “skin color no longer serves as a definitive mark of racial categorization” (2004: 194). If other factors may mediate the traditional ways in which skin color alone assigns a person to a particular racial group, then the adoptive mothers with whom I spoke offer a window into the ways that atypical neurological development may racialize international adoptees who grow up in white families.

Many of the adoptive mothers I spoke with, anxious about their children’s futures, preferred to adopt what they considered to be a “healthy” black African child over a “damaged” child from a Russian orphanage. This position reveals the onion-like layers of anti-black sentiment in an era of New Racism. When the mothers I interviewed romanticized the caregivers in African orphanages as “warm” and nurturing, imagining that they carried the orphans in their care in baby slings, spoke to them, and paused their busy work days to gaze into the children’s eyes, these white mothers relied on old tropes of African culture – and black bodies – as animalistic and closer to nature, uncorrupted by the political and economic machinations that drove Russians to drink and Russian orphanages to neglect their charges. Yet concurrent with their colonial gaze, the white
adoptive mothers I interviewed held views of their black adoptive children that were fundamentally at odds with the reality of anti-black racism in our society. Many of the mothers I interviewed who adopted black children relied on a commitment to colorblindness in order to justify their preferences for neurotypical kids. Far more willing to take on what Marjorie calls “minor, correctable medical needs” than they were intellectual or social-emotional disabilities, these mothers point to a new question of how, in the context of both the new economy and of contemporary advances in medical technology, racialization may intersect with health and “fitness” in our increasingly insecure and hyper-cognitive society.

Mothering Work in the Face of Fraud

Among the women I interviewed, a plain desire to mother explains their motivations and actions surrounding their international adoption processes. But, particularly in the cases of those mothers who pursued politically and legally challenged adoptions at all costs, what other factors were at work? Indeed, why would the mothers I interviewed – without exception intelligent, well-informed, well-educated, and professional – enter into a process of international adoption when so much information about the danger and uncertainty of those processes (not to mention the ethical questions related to them) was instantaneously available through a quick Google search? More significantly, what drove these women to persevere in the face of the extreme legal, financial, and emotional difficulties that they faced once their adoption processes became challenged? The notion of an ideological compulsion to mother offers a partial answer; as Angela Davis writes, “motherhood lies just beyond the next technology” (1993: 360). The result, Davis argues, of ever-increasing technologies – in the broadest sense of the word – is an “ideological compulsion” to mother, and, therefore, to pursue those technologies to the bitter end. In the context of infertility,
Harwood (2007) calls this compulsion a “treadmill,” where one action propels the next. But my findings suggest that the mothers I interviewed were driven by other ideological compulsions as well.

My findings suggest that the mothers I interviewed displayed both a firm commitment to an ideology of intensive motherhood as well as an abiding belief in a triumphal narrative of international adoption. In terms of intensive mothering, we know that mothers, generally, assume the majority of both household management tasks and of “fertility work” at the same time that societal expectations for mothers’ involvement in their children’s lives has increased. But the allegations of fraud and corruption, as well as the simpler bureaucratic delays that the mothers I interviewed encountered, exacerbated the gendered inequality of their family arrangements. Bureaucratic delays created more work on a bureaucratic level – multiple visits to courts, doctors, and U.S. government offices to get new or additional documents were common. As one mother, who reported being inundated with paperwork, quipped, “you wouldn’t think fingerprints could expire.” But they did, and it was she, not her husband, who twice brought her older biological children for new, FBI-certified fingerprints.

The allegations of fraud and corruption that disrupted adoption processes created even more pronounced gendered dynamics. Anna, the Nepali adoptive mother who stayed in Kathmandu with her son for several months, became his sole caretaker and primary legal advocate so that her husband could return to his job in the U.S. Arden, the Congolese adoptive mother who quit her law practice, likewise embodied a total and intensive commitment to motherhood, as well as the “professionalization” of motherhood that Stone (2007) attributes to highly educated mothers who leave the labor force in order to fully dedicate themselves to mothering work. Additionally, the adjustment issues and other special needs that adopted children can face led other mothers to
scale back on their professional commitments, as in the case of Emily, who quit work to help her academically struggling daughter, or as in the case of Kate, who cut back to part-time work in order to drive her son to therapy appointments with a specialist located 150 miles from their home. When new family work emerged surrounding her son’s difficulties, Kate assumed full responsibility. When families are stressed, mothers pick up the slack. As Hochschild (1989) argues with respect to “emotion work” and Hays (1996) echoes in terms of “ideological work,” both disproportional responsibility for and increasing demands of family labor require that mothers re-up their commitment to prevailing ideologies of gender.

Allegations of fraud and evidence of corruption demanded a particular kind of both emotional and ideological work on mothers’ parts. As Ivy reported about outings in Kathmandu immediately after assuming custody of her daughter, Becca, “everybody took one look at us and said, ‘Nepali baby? How much did you pay?’… That was the immediate question, every single time… so, I knew.” Ivy came to “know” that adopting her daughter was a fundamentally commercial transaction. Ivy “knew” that, as she reported, Nepalis on the street were “very grim” about international adoption, and Ivy “knew” on a certain level that, as she said, “it was like I was the criminal.” Ivy also “knew” that she was “just trying to help.” Ivy was forced to reckon with this new knowledge: that she was complicit in a deeply – and perhaps intrinsically – flawed system. The ethical dilemma that Ivy faced called her family’s legitimacy – and her legitimacy as a mother – into question. So, just as the mothers that Hochshild interviewed thirty years ago had to adjust their feelings about unequal family work – and about motherhood – to align with prevailing ideologies about gender and families, and just as Hays suggests that mothers must work to align their ideologies about mothering to support the reality of their lives, Ivy illustrates how the mothers with whom I spoke faced a distinct kind of emotional and ideological work. Ivy also
clearly exemplifies how international adoptive mothers, at the “end” of international adoption, have been forced to reckon with the contradictions inherent in their actions and, consequently, for many, in their identities as mothers. In order to preserve the legitimacy of their actions – and, more fundamentally, of their families – these mothers turned, on a practical level, to an extremely unequal division of family work while turning, on an ideological level, to a shredded triumphal narrative.

**Triumphalism, Altruism, and Ambivalence**

After spending several months living in Kathmandu with her adopted son and lobbying the U.S. embassy on his behalf, Anna accused the U.S. Department of State of acting outside of Nepali children’s best interests. After her son’s adoption, Anna went on to become highly involved in a grass-roots lobbying effort to reopen adoptions from Nepal and immersed herself in the political dimensions of that debate within U.S. government. In our interview, Anna argued that the entire shut-down of adoptions in Nepal was politically motivated and used this assertion to brush away the notion of systemic fraud in international adoption more generally, pronouncing to me, “humans are the only species that hold their own children hostage for political reasons.” Anna’s position is interesting because, as a strong advocate for reopening international adoption in Nepal, she argues that her primary aim is to promote children’s welfare. Yet many would argue that in dismissing the potential for fraud – and outright child trafficking in international adoption – Anna is undermining the welfare of the children whom she claims to protect.

Perhaps the most fascinating thing about the accusations that Anna levels at the Department of State is that, in so doing, she occupies and advances two polarized ideological positions at once. She upholds a classic notion of triumph, whereby U.S. families “save” orphans from abroad,
transcending old boundaries of race, nation, and blood in order to both form a family and advance child welfare. But, in the same breath that she champions childrens’ “best interests,” she condemns the United States government as standing in the way of those interests. Anna shows us how the triumphal narrative is cracking and shifting while still maintaining its hold, particularly on adoptive mothers whose actions have morphed – at least in some corners of the public imagination – from Madonna-like to monstrous. Anna remained adamant that her son, as well as the other children in Neapli orphanages, were “innocent victims” of both extreme poverty and the political battles being waged around them and considered the shut-down of adoptions in Nepal an “over-correction” to the problems of fraud, corruption, and child trafficking that, in her words, “probably existed” in other sending nations. But Anna clings to a piece of a disintegrating triumphal narrative, whereby her son was “saved” from his circumstances on an individual level, and she maintains this position while fighting against the United States government, itself no longer a pillar of her narrative of triumph.

Likewise, Arden, the mother who quit work to advocate for lifting restrictions on international adoption, clung to the notion of a triumphal narrative with particular inattention to the potential for abuse in international adoption as a system. Arden acknowledged that corruption exists, but Arden’s remedy was that international adoption should be treated more like a marketplace, not less. She explained,

“I think the reason people don’t want a commercial approach to international adoption is because of inequality… [but] I spent time abroad, studying financial fraud. I do not expect adoption to be the exception to the rule in countries that struggle with corruption, but that seems to be the expectation in the Department of State. If there’s a plane crash, do we ban airline flights? No, we deal with it.”

Arden also insisted that birthmothers, however constrained their choices may be, are aware of what they’re doing when placing their children in orphanages, and she clarified that she finds it
“patronizing” to suggest otherwise. As she quite bluntly put it, “I don’t think poor people are as stupid as we make them out to be.” Alongside her staunch support for keeping (potentially corrupt) international adoption programs open, Arden maintains a fundamentally liberal positon that poor women in sending nations are capable of – and should be empowered in – making their own decisions about their reproductive and family lives. And so, despite the blunt edge of her argument, Arden’s position uncovers a real contradiction in debates about international adoption, as well as other global feminist concerns. When we, in the Global North, presume that poor women in the Global South are making autonomous, agentive choices, we run the risk of ignoring the structural constraints – extreme poverty, intractable violence, discriminatory (or disfunctional) legal systems – that we have the privilege of failing to understand. Yet if we assume that they have no choices, or are structurally incapable of making choices, we perpetuate their position of relative powerlessness. While Arden certainly does not resolve this question, she highlights the ways that ideas about birthmothers’ interests and rights tilt our debates about the ethics of international adoption as a system.

Like Anna, Arden also aligns herself with the position that promoting international adoption promotes childrens’ right to live in a family, as well as their interests, overall. Thus, Arden sees the U.S. Department of State’s intervention into international adoption programs as harmful to children’s interests, explaining,

“It’s not the State Department’s intention that tens of thousands of children be left behind and have their lives destroyed in institutions, their intention is to increase transparency and accountability. But the result is that tens of thousands of children’s lives are being destroyed to root out what may be a couple more cases of fraud. I don’t think the intention justifies what we have as the result here.”

Anna’s insistence that we depoliticize, and Arden’s insistence that, even further, we green-light international adoption programs invites the argument that without greater regulation, illicit activity
would flourish, birthmothers’ rights would be trampled on, and children would be baldly bought and sold as commodities irrespective of their “best interests.” By this measure, “a fabulous life,” as one mother described her daughter’s, would have to make up for the possibility of outright human trafficking – an uneasy proposition. And so, while clinging to the shreds of a triumphal narrative on some level, the mothers with whom I spoke (with Arden and Anna as notable exceptions) developed profound ambivalence surrounding what might have truly been in their children’s very best interests. Indeed, Danielle, a married mother of an older daughter by birth and a younger daughter adopted from China, told me, point blank, “I wouldn’t do it again.”

For some mothers, commitment to a triumphal narrative was fundamentally at odds with their own political progressivism, which welcomed the State Department’s intervention into issues of abuse and fraud and the State Department’s willingness to admit that U.S. institutions had made mistakes. These actions signify the United States’ retreat from a position of global supremacy more broadly. But such progressivism can also be understood – and experienced – as internally contradictory. Describing the complexity of the political positions surrounding international adoption, Leslie, a married lesbian mother who adopted from Nepal, explained, “you could make a chart if you wanted to, to say, okay, these are the Evangelicals teaming up with the liberal, pro-choice people, while antagonizing each other but fighting together.” Steadfast in her commitment to the notion that “children belong in families” rather than institutions, Leslie is a strong advocate of keeping international adoption programs open. A self-described “progressive feminist committed to child welfare,” Leslie applauds the UN in many of its efforts but abhors UNICEF in its insistence that children should live in institutions in their natal countries rather than in families who want to adopt them abroad. About this internally-contradictory tangle of inteterests, Leslie said, “I feel frustrated most of the time.”
The individual-level frustration and ambivalence of the mothers with whom I spoke corresponds to larger contradictions in our political thinking about international adoption. When UNICEF and others on the left argue that children “belong” in their natal countries, they’re doing so in the name of preserving cultural patrimony and serving the long-term interests of sending nations. Yet, in so doing, they’re also making an essentialist argument about where people “belong” that’s based in a fundamentally conservative notion of immutable difference. A triumphal narrative has validated U.S. colonialist-style extraction of children from poor nations and, in a context of poor regulation, has led to numerous abuses. But a triumphal narrative has also told a story of an optimistic modernism, of post-colonialism, and of the seedlings of a more pluralistic and racially egalitarian society. In this sense, the triumphal narrative has acted as a tenet of American civil religion, speaking, in theory, both to our own nationalism, as well as to some of our most progressive aspirations. This narrative has transcended political difference and continues to unite, as Leslie put it, “strange bedfellows,” across social divides. A triumphal narrative is simultaneously liberal and illiberal, as are many of the arguments against it. It’s worth asking, then, what the failure of a triumphal narrative implies.

Neoliberalism, Kinship, and Risk

On all kinds of fronts in the Culture Wars, children are turned into proxies for the competing value systems of the adults around them. Polarized cultural debates about adoption clearly illustrate this phenomenon. When adoptive parents team up across social and political divides to advocate for more, faster, and easier international adoptions, they are breathing air into a dying narrative about U.S. triumphalism on a global stage. Ultimately, though, in our contemporary context, that narrative has promoted a market-based and do-it-yourself approach.
Like neoliberal social and economic policies more generally, this approach relies upon a diminishing role for the state, as well as the emergence of distinct winners and losers in a dramatically unequal world. But the role of the state in international adoption is not diminished; it is shifting as the U.S. Department of State has, in the name of child welfare, responded to allegations of misconduct. A triumphal narrative of international adoption has generally purported to advance the best interests of children by means of their essential right to live in a family. While this certainly conforms to American cultural values, civic and religious beliefs, and current trends in neuroscience and developmental psychology, it runs counter to the positions of many players within the United Nations and a variety of sending nations. As the U.S. State Department has entertained a broadening range of arguments surrounding international adoption, several of the mothers with whom I spoke protested.

The perspective that seeks to keep international adoption programs open comes with a distinct focus on decreased regulation. From legal scholar and international adoption advocate Elizabeth Bartholet, to the mothers-turned-activists whom I interviewed, regulation is often framed not as a means of achieving, but, rather, as a barrier to child welfare because it delays adoption processes and results in more children living in institutions for longer periods of time. This creates a real problem for child welfare advocates who seek to balance complex and sometimes contradictory understandings among agencies, nations, and their various political factions of what is “best” for children. When adults decide children’s interests, they are usually advancing their own. Further, in international adoption, there are multiple, overlapping, and often contradictory sets of interests that various parties endeavor to protect. International adoption transcends the classic adoption “triad” of birthparents, adoptive parents, and adoptive child. International
adoption involves competing national interests and ethno-political interests within nations as well as the theoretically universalist interests of international law and international human rights.

At this juncture, a practical question looms for all those who hold an interest in international adoption: an era has ended, but what is going to happen now? Alongside this practical question are several areas ripe for scholarly investigation. While the market dynamics of international adoption are undeniable, promoting an open market and placing faith in market dynamics leaves adoptive parents, as I argue in chapter three, with a distinct advantage. Any suggestion that such arrangements equally serve the interests of birthmothers is irresponsible without substantial research on birthmothers’ attitudes, motivations, hopes, and fears. At present, there is practically none. The investigative journalism (reviewed in chapter two) that is most critical of international adoption tends to portray birthmothers as powerless, voiceless women, who are robbed, or duped, or otherwise coerced into relinquishing their most prized, priceless asset. When we do hear from birthmothers, it tends to be second- or third-hand. Journalist and adoption advocate Adam Pertman cites an American birthmother who, in terms of domestic adoption, relates, “All things being equal, if I’ve got a choice of couples who seem secure and loving… why wouldn’t I pick the one who can give my son the best doctors and toys and schools and the other things money can buy? That’s what everyone wants for their kids… and so do I” (2000: 268). Pertman’s implication seems to be that if we, in our cultural imagination, allow that mothers want the best for their children, this should extend to birthmothers as well. Similarly, Dubinsky, in a study of Guatemalan adoptions, interviews a Guatemalan social worker who relates a Guatemalan birth mother’s feelings of “pride and satisfaction in a photo of her daughter growing up outside the country, posed [in a photo sent to the birthmother] at a piano.” The social worker tells Dubinsky, “[The birthmother] showed the
photo to all her neighbors. ‘Look,’ she’d say, ‘this is my daughter playing a piano.’ No one in her village had even seen a piano” (2010: 126).

Both Pertman, an adoption advocate, and Dubinsky, a highly critical historian, offer the same kinds of stories about encounters with birthmothers that the adoptive mothers I interviewed shared. The birthmothers’ tone in these stories is grateful, redemptive, and ultimately – for the adoptive parents – triumphal. Moreover, these stories depict adoption, first and foremost, as a means of upward socioeconomic mobility for adopted children. Adoptive parents and adoption advocates should not speak for birthmothers, but when they do, their accounts clearly point to the ways that a triumphal narrative, as an ideological apparatus, not only promotes American exceptionalism but also directly promotes American capitalism. So the argument that international adoption should function as an open reproductive marketplace and that birthmothers abroad should be fully empowered to place their children for adoption reveals a fundamental dilemma. Certainly, all women everywhere should be fully empowered in determining the course of their reproductive lives. But a neoliberal discourse of choice erases the structural barriers and inequalities that, in the broadest sense, force people’s choices. This is, of course, particularly true in the gendered arena of reproduction, where women’s invisible and unpaid work continues to define even the most straightforward of reproductive marketplace transactions. Therefore, in the context of reproductive markets on a theoretical level, as well as in the context of the narratives of the mothers in this project, it is hard to see how an embrace of the marketplace would lead to more equitable or just international adoption arrangements. In any case, adoptive mothers cannot address birthmothers’ interests, and so further investigation is needed, in order to bring birthmothers’ voices to the table.
Another area ripe for investigation is the rapidly evolving role that fertility medicine is playing in the reproductive lives of American women. At the same time that the number of international adoptions has shrunk, the incidence of in-vitro fertilization, as well as other fertility interventions, has dramatically increased. Obviously these are not causally related phenomena and rely on political and scientific developments independent of the demand that drives reproductive markets. But, particularly in the context of an end to international adoption as we (briefly) knew it, women’s (and men’s) attitudes towards reproductive medicine and technology may answer some of the same questions that this project raises. Judith Stacey heralded an era of “brave new families” that challenged what Bartholet calls a “blood bias” in our cultural conception of kinship. Many remain committed to the idea that families can be forged beyond blood ties, and as Gamson (2015) explores, today’s brave new families are brave in a new way, confronting the profound ethical questions that accompany their privileged participation in reproductive marketplaces. But, for many, many families, nature is far from dead; as Seligman writes, “even as bio-relatedness recedes as the taken-for-granted criterion for constituting a family, technologies based on biological connections, and such connections themselves, continue to play central roles in how parents and children imagine their positions and activities in families in America” (2013: 7). There are obviously tremendous questions yet to asked, let alone answered, about how ongoing advances in reproductive technology contribute to the literature on reproductive markets, motherhood, and kinship, as well as race, health, and “fitness.”

Finally, what happens to the triumphal narrative? Today, the majority of children available for international adoption have special needs. But a turn towards special needs adoption raises its own set of questions about how the triumphal narrative may live on. The motivations and experiences of international adoptive parents who consciously adopt special needs children may
shed light not only on the survival of a triumphal narrative but also on broader questions about health and fitness in the new economy. Their stories would make an important contribution, given the extent to which the parents I interviewed for this project tried to avoid adopting special needs children. Do we frame international adoptees with special needs as, somehow, “truly” needy? Is it more understandable – or justifiable – that they would be abandoned and legitimately available for adoption? Do their special needs somehow erase – or mitigate – the broader structural issues that led to their separation from their birth families? Do we validate ourselves as Americans by continuing to “rescue” the most wretched among us? These shifts in a triumphal narrative of international adoption need to be investigated not only for what they reveal about motherhood and gendered approaches to altruism but also for what they reveal about how we understand ability and disability in a new and unstable economy.

The notion of international adoption as a triumph reveals both the most conservative and the most progressive impulses in our thinking about ourselves and our families. So does a repudiation of it. An anti-adoption position, no matter how focused on the human rights of birthmothers and adoptees, is still illiberal in the sense that it delegitimizes bonds forged by choice and essentializes “natural” family relationships. The embrace of an anti-adoption position feeds into a regressive commitment to a heteronormative family and a biogenetic basis of kinship. It also harkens back to notions of eugenics and racial purity and ugly ideas of what we mean by “health” and “fitness.” Shifts in the American economy, in operating ethnoracial hierarchies, in the gendered dimensions of family life, and in the evolution of fertility medicine all collude with the end of international adoption to disrupt every mother’s taken-for-granted desire, that all she wants is a “healthy baby.”
## APPENDIX: STUDY PARTICIPANTS

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Country of Adoption</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
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NOTES

1 UNICEF (the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund) takes the strong position that children’s best interests are best served by remaining in institutional care in their natal country.
2 The need to pay to place babies in a nursery was also due to demographic shifts because of public health initiatives that led to decreased infant and child mortality (Zelizer 1985).
3 The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service is the body responsible for issuing visas since the 2001 passage of the USA PATRIOT Act.
4 See Blum 2015.
REFERENCES


