

A Genealogy of Transracial and Transnational Adoption

The emergence of transracial and transnational adoption (TRNA) of Black, Native American, and Asian children occurred during a “contradictory” historical era of racial liberalism. W. E. B. DuBois’s prescient articulation in 1903 that “the problem of the Twentieth Century [was] the problem of the color line” continued at World War II’s end.¹ There was widespread legal and de facto segregation, President Franklin D. Roosevelt interned more than 100,000 Japanese and Japanese Americans during the war, Congress enacted policies to terminate Native Tribes, and more than two dozen states had antimiscegenation laws in place. Cold War liberalism was used to combat the negative image of America as a racist and unfree country relative to communist nations.² Racial liberalism underlined the harm of individual prejudice and segregation, while promoting legal rights for minorities and tolerance through interracial contact and family-making.³ Thus TRNAs represented ideals of inclusion and racial progress for the ways they seemingly transgressed boundaries of biology, race, culture, and nation. Prior to the 1950s, Black and Native American children were generally viewed as inferior and unadoptable, and most Asian immigrants were still barred from immigration and naturalization. How did the definition of adoptability change to enable transracial and transnational adoption? Did it change equally for all children of color? And how did communities and families of color respond?

In September of 2011, I visited the Columbia University Health and Sciences Library to look at adoption-related papers from a number of personal collections. Three years later, I went to the University of Minnesota’s Social Welfare Archive to explore various adoption-related agency collections such as the Child Welfare League of America, the National Council for Adoption, and the Children’s Home Society of Minnesota. The agency collections included agency reports, newsletters,

and correspondence, while personal collections included news media articles, correspondence, research studies, journal articles, and agency documents. Typically the archive is understood as “inert sites of storage and conservation” and a site of knowledge retrieval, but as historical anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler suggests, it is also a site of knowledge production and power relations.⁴ Knowing this enables us to read history “against the grain.”⁵ We consider not only “what was” but challenge “what is” and how it came to be.⁶

To be clear, this chapter uses archival sources to explore a *genealogy* (rather than history) of these three seemingly divergent types of transracial and transnational adoption. Genealogy, as Foucault describes it, is not concerned with historical linear development. Genealogy is constructed from “insignificant truths” and opposes “the search for ‘origins’” because there are “numberless beginnings.”⁷ A genealogical method identifies “the accidents, the minute, deviations . . . the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us; it is to discover that truth or being do not lie at the root of what we know and what we are, but the exteriority of accidents.”⁸ Thus I purposefully use “a genealogy” rather than “the history” of TRNA because the latter is not possible. With the former I examine the insignificant truths, accidents, and deviations by connecting them to the numberless beginnings and in between points. To clarify, this is not the genealogy from “genealogical bewilderment,” a term coined in the 1960s by psychologist H. J. Sants to help explain the psychological effects of not knowing one’s parents. It is to move away from adoptee identity and toward an analysis of larger forms of meaning-making and social structures.⁹ As American studies scholar Sandra Patton-Imani has noted, a critical inquiry of adoptee identity, and I would argue adoption in general, “must move beyond the family tree, to the discursive roots and routes of race, gender, and class politics embedded in the public policies and social institutions.”¹⁰

Adoption agencies exemplified racial liberalism by expanding notions of “adoptability” for Asian, Black, and Native American children, which inaugurated same-race and soon after transracial and transnational adoptions. TRNAs revealed racial anxieties rooted in biological racism that was also undergirded by anti-Blackness that made Asian, Native American, and Black children differently adoptable. Racial liberalism and depoliticized love shaped the relational racialization of White adoptive families and the U.S. nation relative to non-White families and their geographic homes as “opposite futures,” enacting structural, symbolic, and traumatic forms of violence onto separated families and communities. Yet families, communities, and organizations pushed back in various ways against these adoptions, institutional harms, and presumptions of who could provide love.

EXPANDING ADOPTABILITY AND SERVICES

During the mid-twentieth century, in the midst of an emerging racial liberalism—the shift to believing in abstract equality among other things—the adoption

industry began to expand adoptability by framing minority adoption around new institutional convictions to serve children of color. In 1948, following the rising black market of children for adoption after the Great Depression and World War II, the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) announced a shift in its beliefs about which children were adoptable. Earlier adoption practice understood adoption to be a risky endeavor, and with low demand for children, social workers focused on placing “blue-ribbon babies” who had “impeccable” health and pedigree.¹¹ Practitioners used narrow definitions of “adoptable” that were attached to tested measures and reports of psychological well-being, intellectual abilities, and “normalcy.” Pushing back against long-held views, the CWLA established that adoptability did not exist innately or biologically. Rather, it believed, “any child can be considered adoptable who can gain from family life, and for whom a family can be found which will accept him with his history and capacities.”¹²

According to the CWLA’s new position, to be adoptable, a child needed to be legally surrendered, placeable, or desirable by adoptive parents, and lastly, to have access to services. Prior to the 1950s and 1960s, adoption in the United States served mostly infertile, White, middle-class couples.¹³ Children and families of color were generally denied access to social services until the 1930s. Even then, most social service providers in the United States did not offer adoptive placement or had unequal access to child welfare services for minority children until the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁴ Statistics for 1953 show that adoption services for non-White children—from the 29 states that reported such statistics—were very limited in that only 7 percent of adopted children were non-White, which was less than half of the total non-White population in those states (15 percent). Reasons contributing to the low rates of adoption of Black children included inadequate services for Black children and poor outreach to Black families. In addition, high demand for White children concentrated services toward White children and White families.¹⁵

One of the earlier agencies to offer services to children of color was the Child Placing and Adoption Committee of the State Charities Aid Association (CPAC SCAA) in New York. Established in 1898, the CPAC SCAA in the 1930s began to think about the needs of “Negro,” “Oriental,” and “mixed race” children.¹⁶ The organization had placed a small number of non-White children in its earlier years, but in 1939 it created the Interracial Committee on Adoptive Homefinding. Using newspaper, radio, television, and other creative means such as informal neighborhood committees that provided community education and recruitment, the CPAC SCAA increased adoption services for minority children and families. On the other side of the country, in Los Angeles County, the Board of Supervisors created the Bureau of Adoptions, which issued a mandate to provide services for minority and mixed-race children who were largely ignored and denied service before 1949.¹⁷

By the 1950s, progressive adoption agencies such as the Children’s Home Society of Minnesota (CHSM) exemplified racial liberalism by making minor inroads

for adoptive placements of children of color. In their 1950 quarterly *Minnesota Children's Home Finder* (MCHF) newsletter, Florence E. Johnson, the case supervisor, wrote about the early minority placement: "We searched far and wide to find new parents for Nikki, an appealing little Nisei child. Now he is in a home of his own Japanese race, and our last report from his parents indicates that they are delighted with him. Jo, our little Indian boy and Judy, a little Negro child, are now placed in homes of their own race and are responding nicely to the affectionate care of their new parents."¹⁸ The MCHF raised the issue again in fall 1953, claiming: "We Need Homes for Babies of Minorities Races." The issue welcomed applicants who were "interested in adopting children of Negro, Indian or Oriental racial strains."¹⁹ By 1955, with continued special recruiting efforts, it placed 5 children of "minority racial background" of the 111 children total.²⁰

Another agency, Children's Services in Cleveland, Ohio, had only placed 7 "Negro" children in 73 years through 1950, but in the subsequent 3 years, they found homes for 77 "Negro" children.²¹ Likewise, Catholic Social Service of San Francisco, which established its adoption program in 1953, placed 112 "hard-to-place" children, 57 of which were of minority or mixed background, including "Mexican, Latin American (parental origin in South America), Negro, Filipino, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, American Indian, and various combinations of these groups including partial Caucasian descent."²² This trend was reflected in *Child Welfare*, a prominent journal for social workers: "We find over the country a growing conviction, translated into practice, that the color of a child's skin, the texture of his hair, or the slant of his eyes in no way affects his basic needs or the relation of his welfare to that of the total community."²³ Despite the seeming progress of increasing access to adoption for children of color, their status as adoptable did not change quickly. Whether or not adoption was deemed a suitable plan for a child oftentimes depended on resources available to assist with placement and availability of homes. The CWLA explicitly noted in 1958 that unmarried mothers and prospective adoptive parents of children from non-White backgrounds, "including Indian, Mexican, Negro, Oriental, Puerto Rican, and Spanish-American children," did not receive sufficient services to support such children.²⁴

Within a broader effort to improve services, planning, organization, administration of services, and teaching and training, the CWLA created Standards for Adoption Service in 1958 and revised them again in 1968 and 1971.²⁵ These standards not only reflected already occurring widescale beliefs and practices but also attempted to improve adoption practice. They specifically addressed—and attempted to shift—race matching in adoption, stating: "Similarities in background or characteristics should not be a major consideration in the selection of a family, except where integration of the child into the family and his identification with them may be facilitated by likeness, as in the case of some older children or some children with distinctive physical traits such as skin color." The CWLA noted that people have different levels of capacity to accept difference.²⁶ This guidance

articulated new standards but also acknowledged the difficult reality that racial difference presented in expanding “adoptability.”

THE EMERGENCE OF TRANSNATIONAL AND TRANSRACIAL ADOPTION

Transnational adoption emerged after World War II as the first significant form of transracial adoption. Its inauguration demonstrated the further shifting ideas around race, family, and nation found in racial liberalism. Passage of the Displaced Persons Act (DPA) in 1948 allowed adoptions from primarily Germany but also from 18 other countries, including Austria, Greece, Italy, Japan, and Korea.²⁷ Over the next five years Americans adopted 5,814 children.²⁸ For children in Germany and Japan, many of the adoptions involved children of U.S. servicemen, as they were “intimately connected to the prolonged presence of U.S. occupation troops and shaped by military policy.”²⁹ Despite early adoptions from Japan and Korea, the DPA was primarily conceived for Europeans, and such adoptions from Asia contradicted the logics existing in racially exclusive immigration law.³⁰ By this time the United States had also developed a military presence in South Korea, setting in motion the largest overseas adoption program in the world.³¹

In the years following the 1953 Armistice Agreement of the Korean War, mostly White American families adopted “illegitimate mixed-race G.I. babies” (also known as Amerasians) and Korean children.³² Similar to the United States, Korean society held nationalistic ideas around “racial purity” that led to the stigmatization of Korean GI babies.³³ Despite the host of structurally racist policies and laws that existed in the United States at the time, Congress passed the Refugee Relief Act of 1953. It included a provision that circumvented the continued racist quota restrictions, instead allocating 4,000 nonquota visas for orphans through 1956 regardless of “race, religion, or national origin.”³⁴ Special parole procedures granted visas to another 659 children, or 4,659 children in total.³⁵

Stories on television and in print media sparked humanitarian, religious, and patriotic concern. As more media centered Korean orphans and children of mixed heritage, the American public and specifically Christian Americanism, which combined morality and patriotism, viewed the children as objects in need of rescue and political commitments for the nation rather than children who already belonged to a family that needed assistance.³⁶ Harry and Bertha Holt were two such individuals from Oregon who were inspired by the evangelical Christian organization World Vision and influenced by media representations of Korean children. Bertha Holt garnered national media attention for her effective lobbying of Congress that led to the expedited passage of a private bill in 1955, which allowed the Holts to adopt an additional six Korean children on top of the two who were permitted under the Refugee Relief Act.³⁷ A year later, the Holts established the Holt Adoption Program. Bertha Holt believed the child welfare agency process

was too slow, costly, inefficient, and invasive: "I think of all the love-hungry, emaciated little babies over there starving and dying for want of a home . . . and all these love-hungry couples over here just pining their hearts out for children to love [and] I am forced to conclude that the Welfare needs to incorporate common sense into its program."³⁸

The Holts were not the only ones with this view. Even before they started the Holt Adoption Program, Pearl S. Buck's Welcome House opened in 1949 to overseas adoption for mixed-race children.³⁹ These efforts influenced other families across the nation to participate in adopting across racial and national lines. When the Refugee Relief Act expired in 1956 at year's end, demand for transnational adoption continued, leading Congress to create the alien orphan visa category and remove the numerical limit on the number of orphan visas that could be issued.⁴⁰ Although it is difficult to know precise numbers because some children, like those born in Germany, entered on quota visas instead of orphan visas, it is estimated that from 1954 to 1958, American families adopted approximately 10,000 foreign children.⁴¹ They were considered the "best possible immigrants," according to the Subcommittee on Immigration, "from the standpoint of their youth, flexibility, and lack of ties to any other cultures."⁴² These children were thought to assimilate easier and did not threaten U.S. political institutions in the same way as adult immigrants.⁴³

As transnational adoptions of Korean children increased, transracial adoption of Black and transnational adoption of Native American children emerged and experienced new growth, but in ways that were informed by relational constructions of race. The first transracial adoption of a Black child by White parents occurred in 1948 in Minnesota.⁴⁴ In 1950 the Los Angeles County Bureau of Adoptions was established with a mandate to provide services for minority and mixed-race children who were largely ignored and denied service before 1949. By April 1952 the Bureau of Adoptions had placed 11 Mexican American and 6 American Indian children with Anglo families.⁴⁵ The *Minnesota Children's Home Finder*, in a 1960 story titled "Minority Children Seek Love and Security," recounted a proud adoptive father proclaiming, "She's wonderful. Susan really belongs with us. Our family and friends love her almost as much as we do." The author noted that "Susan is one-half Indian, and he is Caucasian. She has been adopted by this family and can look forward to a secure and love-filled future."⁴⁶

Following its own calls to help place children of color, the Children's Home Society of Minnesota launched Parents to Adopt Minority Youngsters (PAMY) in July 1961. This referral-based program gave priority to applicants who were interested in minority adoptions.⁴⁷ While CHSM hoped that Minnesotans would "open their home to Negro, Indian, Mexican and other racial minority children," earlier appeals to White Minnesotans promoted children of racial minority background "who were not Negro" because CHSM assumed "it would not be possible to place Negro children in Caucasian homes."⁴⁸ For Black children the plan for PAMY was to reach out to Black families for adoption. The surprising adoptive placements

of a few “Negro” and “part-Negro” children with White families, however, altered this plan and expanded PAMY to include Black children for transracial placements along with already targeted “Oriental and Indian children.”⁴⁹

At the 1963 CHSM annual meeting, PAMY coordinator Harriet Fricke outlined the program’s accomplishments. In one-and-a-half years, PAMY had led to successful placement of 11 children in 9 adoptive families, with an additional 11 adoptive families having been approved but where a child had not been placed yet. In addition, 23 families were in the home-study process.⁵⁰ According to Fricke, Minnesotans were overwhelmingly in favor of transracial adoptions: “Public acceptance of PAMY literally is overwhelming. Everyone is in favor of PAMY and what PAMY is trying to do.” As fervent as Fricke was in her support, however, she knew they were still controversial, especially to people outside of Minnesota: “I can also assure you that other states believe one of two things: (1) Minnesota should be kissed on both cheeks and given a medal of valor or (2) Minnesota should be shot at dawn.”⁵¹

Despite various successes (e.g., Louise Wise Services in New York had facilitated nearly 300 transracial placements in the decade before 1963), the rise in transracial adoption was not equal across all Asian, Black, and Native American children.⁵² Racism in adoption engendered proportionally more placements of Asian and Native American children because adoption agencies viewed them as “less objectionable” than Black children in White homes.⁵³ As Canadian sociologist and adoptive parent H. David Kirk noted: “In the area of race, Oriental and American Indian children are now increasingly seen as adoptable by whites. . . . But the liberalization in outlook has not affected the Negro child. . . . The myth concerning Negro inferiority is evidently very resistant to extinction.”⁵⁴

Indeed, this dynamic played out with the Indian Adoption Project (IAP) and subsequent adoptions of Native American children after the project. The IAP formally lasted from 1958 to 1967 and was a joint effort funded by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and the U.S. Children’s Bureau and administered by the Child Welfare League of America. The IAP had three primary purposes: “(1) To stimulate the adoption of American Indian children by Caucasian families on a nationwide basis; (2) To select and place for adoption 50 to 100 or more Indian children who, because of prejudice in their home state, may never benefit from good family life through adoption; (3) To study and evaluate these placements in relation to the adoption of all children of minority races.”⁵⁵ Thus the default for the Indian Adoption Project was White adoptive families, which made them both transracial and transnational. It was also only meant to be a short-term project of three years and on a small scale of two or three East Coast agencies. Importantly, these agencies agreed to participate in follow-up research to evaluate the level of “cultural assimilation” of the Indian children.⁵⁶

Two of the main reasons why Indian children were targeted for the first federally sponsored transracial adoption project was because of widespread anti-Blackness

throughout the country, and anti-Indian prejudice was supposedly confined to states with reservations. The belief was that anti-Indian sentiment could be circumvented by relocating children to other areas.⁵⁷ In a 1962 letter to BIA commissioner Philleo Nash, CWLA executive director Joseph Reid explained that “prejudice” in states such as Montana, North Dakota, and Wisconsin had limited the number of Indian children placed for adoption.⁵⁸ A 1960 summary of the IAP noted that the American public had shown “increasing interest” in adopting Indian children. It speculated that this growing interest could be attributed to the recent adoptions of European and “Oriental” children by U.S. families.⁵⁹ Eventually, the Indian Adoption Project placed 395 Native American children in White adoptive homes, becoming more popular than the CWLA could have imagined.⁶⁰ The children came from 16 states but mostly from Arizona, South Dakota, and Wisconsin.⁶¹ The families who adopted were mainly from the Eastern and Midwestern states such as Illinois, Indiana, Massachusetts, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania. About one-half of the children were under the age of 1, but they ranged from newborn to 11, and slightly more than half were considered “full-blooded Indian.”⁶²

While the official number for the IAP is 395, multiple sources indicate that the number of Native American children removed for adoption into non-Indian homes was between 25 percent to 35 percent of all Native children. Results from one 1962 survey, in which 48 agencies of 73 responded, showed that 585 Indian children were placed for adoption that year alone.⁶³ Similarly, in 1965, 66 agencies reported that there were 696 Indian children placed in adoptive homes plus an additional 49 placed through the Indian Adoption Project. Of the 696 children, 584 (84 percent) were placed into White homes.⁶⁴ In those two years there were more Indian children adopted than the entirety of children adopted through the IAP. Success of the IAP could be summed up by a postproject report that proclaimed: “One can no longer say that the Indian child is the ‘forgotten child,’ as was indicated when the Project began in 1958.”⁶⁵ The report cited a social worker from Aberdeen, South Dakota, who gave praise to the IAP: “Here in South Dakota these activities [of the IAP] have expanded to such an extent that we really no longer consider the Indian infant a hard-to-place child.”⁶⁶

Even though transracial and transnational adoption had been happening prior to the Indian Adoption Project, the Child Welfare League of America stated that the IAP would be used as a test case to produce a “systematic record of the adjustments of these children and their families.” If the results were positive, leading to successful integration of children into families, the CWLA would promote “further adoptions across ethnic lines.”⁶⁷ By December 1962 the CWLA affirmed Indian adoptions had indeed proven to be successful and “helped agencies in the child’s home state to be more courageous in placing not only Indians, but children of all minority races.”⁶⁸ In short, Native American children were seen as easier to make “adoptable” and so could serve as the experimental subjects for the

industry's integration of racial liberalism and evolving stance on transracial and transnational adoption.

RACIAL ANXIETIES AND RELATIONAL PREFERENCES

Although transracial and transnational adoption had indicators of success and gained some institutional backing, racial liberalism could not erase the ways that race shaped anxieties and relational racial meaning tied such adoptions. Many media narratives lumped children of color together as unadoptable, hard to place, or "special needs." Such narratives implied both a racial commonality among the groups (as non-White) and racial difference between them and White children, who were perceived as the norm. This assumption of racial "commonality" among Asian, Black, and Native American children is rooted in nineteenth-century biology. Biological determinism emerged as a scientific theory that believed there were discrete racial types that could be ranked on a hierarchy, where outer looks determined inner ability and that such characteristics were fixed and inheritable.⁶⁹

By the 1950s biological determinism had declined, but adoption agencies and adoptive parents—as well as society at large—still held onto anxieties around racial difference. As adoption increased and became more standardized in the twentieth century, conducting medical examinations and psychological testing were important processes to understand "hereditary factors or pathology" that could supposedly determine the future development and success of children. The CWLA itself noted in 1955 that with current methods of medical examination and psychological testing, "it is not possible within the first year of life to predict with a high degree of accuracy an infant's future mental or physical development," but it implicitly suggested that such examination and testing could be (accurately) predictive for children who were older.⁷⁰ This showed how the idea that race was biological (and linked to characteristics such as intelligence) was still prominent and limited the degree with which love could conquer. For example, adoption agencies and prospective adoptive parents feared that a White-appearing child could develop into a "Negro" child. Such a scenario was narrated by Ruth Taft in an earlier 1953 *Child Welfare* article, the journal published by the CWLA. In a section with the subheading "Placing the 'Unadoptables,'" Taft tells the story of Rob, a fifteen-month-old boy of a White mother and a "light-complexioned Negro" father:

In appearance, Rob was a white child and the physical anthropologist who examined him supported our conviction that he should be placed as a white child. He gave the following statement: "My examination of Rob leads me to conclude that whatever Negro ancestry he may have is very slight in its genetic effect. He might readily pass as a white child since at this stage of development he reveals no obvious Negroid traits. In my opinion he is not likely to become Negroid as he grows older and I would anticipate that any children he might have in the future, assuming he married a white woman, would not be any less white in appearance than he."⁷¹

Possibly more troubling than the concern of the agency and physical anthropologist is the response by the Potters, who would eventually adopt Rob. When informed of the fact that Rob had African American ancestry and asked about whether they would disclose this to him when he was older, the Potters expressed that they did not harbor any “race prejudice,” but they also claimed that it was “unnecessary” to disclose Rob’s ancestry to him.⁷²

Not only did adoption agencies and prospective adoptive parents fear that ostensibly White children could be Black, they also worried that White-appearing children could grow up, marry a White spouse, and yet have a “Negro” child. This question was raised during the 1955 National Conference on Adoption: “Would a person who passes for White but may have some Negro antecedents produce a child with Negro characteristics?”⁷³ For children who appeared White despite having a parent with a mixed racial background, the CWLA advised that they would “adjust best in a white family.” Still, they advised that children should be examined by a geneticist or anthropologist to determine the physical development for children of mixed racial background. The agency reassured its audience, adoption practitioners and prospective adoptive parents alike, that “children of mixed Negro and white races who in appearance are white” and are married to a “white mate (without Negro ancestry)” are unlikely to have children with “Negroid characteristics.”⁷⁴ These racial (and sexual) anxieties linked back to the rule of hypodescent, which legally established individuals with a single Black ancestor (or “one drop”) to be considered Black no matter how White they were or appeared to be. Such racial ideology as well as social and legal practice was applied in determining Black subjectivity for enslavement, Jim Crow segregation, and antimiscegenation laws—and now in transracial adoption—and were always meant to keep “superior” racial groups from mixing with and having offspring with “inferior” racial groups.

Issues of “full-blooded” racial Otherness cut across groups. At a 1959 symposium hosted by International Social Service, one social worker described how agencies and workers had more difficulty in placing full Chinese children than earlier half-Japanese and half-Korean children of American fathers: “Agencies will report that a family would like to be considered for an Oriental-American child, but could not accept a *purely* Oriental child.”⁷⁵ In another study of 22 White adoptive couples, 9 said that they would accept a child of any “racial mixture” and that the child did not need to “look like them,” but 2 couples were explicit in indicating that they were not open to a “part-Oriental child.”⁷⁶ Interracial marriage was also a prominent concern for the adoption of Asian children. In reflecting on community attitudes of interracial marriage, author Thomas Maretzki expressed pessimism: “Interracial marriage, though on the increase, is still a real problem in this country.” He added: “[The ‘Oriental’ child] will have to anticipate community resistance to his marrying into the racial group to which his adoptive parents belong. So, even if the child learns to compensate for his foreign background and physical distinction by competitive striving—what about intermarriage?”⁷⁷

Race of Children Registered and Race Acceptable to Adoptive Applicants				
Race	1969		1971	
	No.	%	No.	%
White	64	29	109	28
Black	23	10	106	27
White-Black	16	7	62	16
Indian	56	25	60	15
White-Indian	31	14	26	7
Other	33	15	29	7
Total	223	100	392	100
Black or White- Black children	39	17	168	43
Indian or White- Indian children	87	39	86	22
Family willing to consider:				
Black or part- Black	18	8	150	19
Indian or part- Indian	126	59	454	56

FIGURE 1. This table on race and “race acceptable to adoptive applicants” is from a CWLA archival document titled “Supply and Demand in ARENA” (Adoption Resource Exchange of North America). Copyright © Child Welfare League of America.

While the experiences of non-White children certainly overlapped, racial difference possessed nuanced distinctions. For example, as Figure 1 shows, the logic of anti-Blackness appeared in a 1972 CWLA report of the supply and demand of Adoption Resource Exchange of North American (ARENA). The CWLA examined characteristics of children and families registered with ARENA during 1969 and

1971. The analysis found that White families constituted 90 percent of registered adoptive families.⁷⁸ By and large, there was a clear racial preference for certain children over others: “Over half the families would consider Indian or part-Indian children, and substantial proportions would accept Oriental, Chicano, Puerto Rican or Alaskan children.”⁷⁹ However, only 18 of the 215 families in 1969 (8 percent) and 150 of 805 families in 1971 (19 percent) “would consider children of black or part-black parentage.”⁸⁰ These racial preferences were also apparent in the placement data. For both years, 1969 and 1971, Black children (17 percent and 24 percent) were placed at a much lower rate than White-Black (32 percent and 68 percent), Indian (79 percent and 69 percent), and White-Indian (71 percent and 86 percent) children.⁸¹ Thus transracial and transnational adoptions were not the bridge to a postracial society as many believed or hoped. Instead, they simultaneously reshaped and concretized different racial meanings attached to bodies, families, and space.

The CWLA report underscored the hierarchy of desirability and complexity of racial meaning. U.S. society had typically defined people of mixed Black and White parentage as Black (following the *de jure* and *de facto* rules of hypodescent). This meant that a child who was “any part black” was “considered black for adoption purposes.”⁸² In 1989 social work scholar Ruth McRoy noted that adoption workers created and promulgated new terms such as “black-white child,” “child of mixed marriage,” and “interracial child” to inscribe “newly positive connotations” as a way to make the adoption of such children more acceptable and appealing: “Agencies emphasized the half-white heritage of children with black and white birth parents so that white families could, in some way, identify racially with the child they adopted.”⁸³ The 1972 “Position Statement on Trans-racial Adoptions” by the National Association of Black Social Workers similarly contended that race was changed to cater to White adoptive families: “[Transracial adoption] has brought about a re-definition of some Black children. Those born of Black-White alliances are no longer Black as decreed by immutable law and social custom for centuries. They are now Black-White, inter racial, [or] bi-racial, emphasizing the Whiteness as the adoptable quality.”⁸⁴

Similar to the ways that settler colonial logics deployed blood quantum to dilute Native American “blood,” part-White terms produced positive racial meaning, creating an assimilative effect in which the racial body and identity were made to be closer to Whiteness.⁸⁵ This did not mean that such terms were insignificant for White and Black adoptive parents alike, as the terms did recognize the complexity of identity that hypodescent customs and laws did not.⁸⁶ But it did confirm that mixed-race children were more “desirable” both to adoption agencies and adoptive families. The Los Angeles County Bureau of Adoptions used photographs of children to help make them more appealing to potential adoptive parents. One Bureau of Adoptions representative stated: “Racially mixed infants are generally beautiful children, even by Caucasian standards.” Expanding on the allure of mixed-race children, he added: “Their photogenic beauty often does a much better

job than could we.”⁸⁷ The racial contradiction here—that still exists today—was that even though children of mixed heritage were also part White, their placement in Black adoptive homes never engendered concern or were even considered transracial.⁸⁸ These racial anxieties and preferences mark the ways race was deployed symbolically and institutionally to affect adoption beliefs and outcomes.

THE TRANSRACIAL AND TRANSNATIONAL ADOPTION BOOM

Even with continued racial anxieties, adoption agencies and prospective adoptive families showed that they could and would transgress racial and national boundaries to form families. What emerged for a short period from the mid-1960s to the early 1970s was a transracial and transnational adoption boom. Placements of Asian, Black, and Native American children in White homes were happening across the country, showing the effectiveness of racial liberalism to shape notions of family for many Americans. As journalist and adoptive parent David Anderson expressed, White adoptive parents saw their children as “children of special value.”⁸⁹ By the 1970s adoptions from Korea logged then-record highs of more than 1,000 per year.⁹⁰ In that decade alone, there were more than 46,000 children adopted from Korea, and in the 1980s another 66,500, most of whom went to the United States.⁹¹ Despite attempts by the South Korean government to reduce overseas adoptions, lobbying by European-receiving countries and by the United States later in the 1980s ensured that its program would continue. South Korea’s model of transnational adoption paved the way for adoptions from other countries—in particular, Vietnam.⁹² Near the end of the Vietnam War, the South Vietnamese, international troops, and aid organizations were trying to evacuate before the imminent fall/liberation of Saigon. On April 3, 1975, amid U.S. military and aid evacuation, President Gerald Ford initiated Operation Babylift to ostensibly rescue some of the estimated one million “orphans” out of Vietnam.⁹³

International aid organizations in Vietnam—such as Holt International Children’s Services, Friends of Children of Vietnam, Friends for All Children, Catholic Relief Service, International Social Service, International Orphans, and the Pearl S. Buck Foundation—helped to evacuate nearly 2,000 children to the United States and 600 children to Canada, Europe, and Australia.⁹⁴ Calls from Americans across the country “flooded” telephone lines of the Operation Babylift headquarters in Washington, D.C., expressing that they wanted to adopt Vietnamese orphans.⁹⁵ Thousands of Bay Area volunteers came to San Francisco and hundreds assisted in the other two processing locations of Fort Lewis Army Installation in Washington State and Long Beach Naval Support Activity.⁹⁶ Operation Babylift is most known because of its size and scale, but the two years prior, 1973 and 1974, saw volunteers from organizations such as Friends for All Children and Friends of Children of Vietnam help facilitate 375 and 845 adoptions from Vietnam to the United States.⁹⁷

1958 — Louise Wise Services selected by Child Welfare League of America and United States Bureau of Indian Affairs to participate in a pilot project to find adoptive homes for American Indian children. Agency begins to serve as a field work center for student physicians from Columbia University's Community Psychiatry Program.

1959 — Placement of Negro and interracial children, older children and children with physical disabilities now accounts for almost one-third of the agency's total annual placements.

1960 — Agency breaks tradition and permits publication of stories and pictures of a group of children with serious physical disabilities, as a result of which each child finds an adoptive home. Agency begins to provide occasional residence service for non-white unmarried mothers, including Negro, Oriental and American Indian women. Budget: \$720,000.

FIGURE 2. Notable dates for Louise Wise Services, an adoption placement service.
Source: Viola Wertheim Bernard Papers, Archives & Special Collections, Columbia University Health Sciences Library.

Just years earlier, between 1967 to 1971, domestic transracial placements of Black children in White homes increased threefold, totaling approximately 10,000 Black children in White families.⁹⁸ The Louise Wise Services Annual Report for 1968–69 indicated that it had placed more than 550 non-White children since the start of the interracial adoption program in 1952.⁹⁹ Figure 2 shows how at Louise Wise Services the adoption of Korean, Native American, and Black children overlapped in the late 1950s. In another example, the New England Home for Little Wanderers sent flyers to 400 area churches promoting the need for homes for “unadoptable” Black children. From this effort many children were placed with White adoptive families who in January 1966 formed a small parents’ group to share experiences and ideas about interracial adoption. The group continued to meet and grew more popular, officially becoming Families for Interracial Adoption (FIA) in June 1967. At the outset, FIA comprised 32 adoptive families, whose goal was to “encourage and promote the adoption of homeless children without regard to racial or ethnic backgrounds of either children or adoptive parents.”¹⁰⁰ By June 1969, 147 couples in the New England area had adopted Black children,

with FIA referring more than half. Moreover, scores of Families for Interracial Adoption couples adopted Oriental (30) and Indian (50) children.¹⁰¹

One of the largest programs that facilitated transracial/transnational adoption was ARENA, which was established in 1967 by the CWLA and was part of the North American Center on Adoption. Similar to the Indian Adoption Project, which was also a national exchange, ARENA acted as a clearinghouse that assisted adoption agencies—through a registry of waiting children and families—in finding adoptive homes in cases where local homes for children had not been found.¹⁰² Prior to its establishment, there were 22 statewide Adoption Resource Exchanges (ARE), with Ohio being the first in 1949.¹⁰³ The statewide ARE programs helped bridge agencies that oftentimes ignored each other, such as public and private agencies, city and rural programs, and small agencies versus larger ones.¹⁰⁴ Thus ARENA sought to replicate the success of both the state exchanges and the IAP at a national level—ARENA was initially called the National Adoption Resource Exchange—and help overcome “regional prejudices.”¹⁰⁵ The program was meant to raise adoption standards and practices, improve interagency relationships, and expand services and programs “for all children, especially for children of minority groups.”¹⁰⁶ Because ARENA was in some ways an expansion of the IAP, the participating parents were overwhelmingly White (more than 90 percent), and the children placed through it were a majority Native American, but it also placed Black, “Oriental,” Caucasian, and mixed-raced children.¹⁰⁷ A 1970 *Reader’s Digest* story called such adoptions “miraculous” and remarked how “ARENA has broken many barriers.”¹⁰⁸

RACIAL LIBERALISM AND THE DISCOURSE OF LOVE

Many advocates of TRNAs believed that the emergence and rise of such adoptions were not due to politics or for political purposes. Rather, TRNA discourse focused on adoptive parents’ love. For example, a 1964 article in *The New Republic* explained that White adoptive parents lacked such motives: “Among the parents I have encountered none is an active crusader for an integrated society. None participates in the civil rights movement. . . . Their primary desire is to help a child because it needs them.”¹⁰⁹ Near the same time, Harriet Fricke, the director of PAMY, espoused a similar belief, stating that White couples who adopted Black children were not “causey” people: “Their motivation for adoption is based on love for a child, not involvement with racial problems.”¹¹⁰ Later adoption guidelines offered by the CWLA in 1971 explicitly listed “promoting a cause such as racial integration” as an invalid reason for adoption.¹¹¹ These examples illustrate the ways TRNAs were posited as individual and apolitical acts of love.

Yet in examining TRNAs from a broader lens, it becomes clear that they are connected to the political. Transracial and transnational adoption emerged simultaneously alongside racial liberalism, which was a form of liberalism that supposedly embraced abstract equality, racial reform, and positive developments of race relations in the United States.¹¹² The 1950s and 1960s ushered in the end of de jure

forms of discrimination such as segregation, antimiscegenation laws, and other state-sanctioned exclusions in housing, employment, and voting. Still, the 1960s and 1970s were filled with racial realities of de facto discrimination that contradicted the myth of racial liberalism. Furthermore, public polling in 1964 showed that 74 percent of Americans believed that the mass demonstrations of the civil rights movement were hurting “the Negro’s cause for racial equality,” and in 1966, nearly two-thirds of Americans (63 percent) had an unfavorable view of Martin Luther King Jr.¹¹³ These views and continued forms of discrimination occurred simultaneously with federal efforts that terminated recognition of Native Tribes (1953–1968) and that relocated more than 100,000 Native Americans from reservations to urban centers from 1952 to 1972.¹¹⁴ Both of these policies were efforts to assimilate Native Americans, end the federal trust obligations, and privatize Native lands. At the same time, views of Asians in the United States ranged from communist threat to model minority.

Racial liberalism was effective, though, precisely because it focused on racial progress and inclusion, while ignoring ideological, institutional, and ultimately structural forms of racism that continued in the form of racial capitalism, settler colonial policies, and U.S. imperial interventions abroad. To be sure, racial liberalism led to providing child services to communities that had been previously denied. Hence, providing adoption and placement services to Black, Native American, and Asian children and families was interpreted as an encouraging step toward equality, even as state and agency workers disregarded the underlying reasons of why these adoptions were necessary in the first place. Thus White families who adopted children of color exemplified racial liberalism, introducing a new and “inclusive” way to form and expand American families.

Adoption institutions such as the Children’s Home Society of Minnesota and the Child Welfare League of America expressed racial liberalism in their promotion of adoption. The former, for example, had one article in their 1968 *Minnesota Children’s Home Finder* titled “Adoption: Bold Plan for Greater Racial Understanding” (see Figure 3). It asserted that interracial adoptions have “far-reaching, positive ramifications” and contribute to the “broader social goal of greater racial understanding.”¹¹⁵ Authors in the prominently circulated CWLA journal cited that the transracial adoption of Black children kept with “the commitment to racial integration of society at the time.”¹¹⁶ This was true for transnational adoptions as well. A final congressional report on the Refugee Relief Act of 1953 included a section on the “completely successful” Orphan Program, which stated: “Aside from the new families, new homes and new futures which this program has made possible for over 4,000 destitute children and the happiness brought to many childless American homes, the friendly international relations engendered by America’s helping hand stretched out to these children were a forward step toward better international understanding and lasting peace in the world.”¹¹⁷

Media contributed to the circulation of this narrative. Dick Pollard, a *Life* magazine correspondent, expressed his desire to photograph an adoptive family,

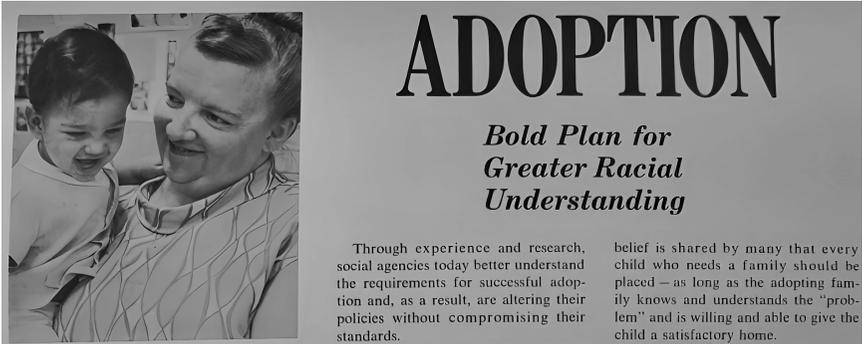


FIGURE 3. An article appearing in the Fall 1968 issue of *Minnesota Children’s Home Finder*, published by the Children’s Home Society of Minnesota.

stating: “I wish you could realize how a general knowledge of your ‘United Nations’ family could help our country. . . . Anti-American propoganda abroad emphasizes our intolerant side. If people in other countries could open a copy of *Life* and learn about your interracial family, they would see our better side, a glimpse of democracy in action.”¹¹⁸ Rather than being nonpolitical or antipolitical as some tried to claim, TRNAs were often the consummate examples of “great racial understanding,” “racial integration,” “racial bridge,” and even “world peace” that were captured in racial liberalism.

Paired with racial liberalism was the prominent notion of love. Adoptive parents, practitioners, media, and researchers produced and circulated the notion that such adoptions were steeped in love and were powerful mechanisms and symbols of racial progress. For example, in spring 1965 the *Minnesota Children’s Home Finder* encouraged prospective adoptive parents to consider adopting a minority child. In its call, CHSM referenced love as a transcendent force in adoption, stating: “Love is kind, love is giving, love is accepting. The love of a child is a rich and life giving experience—the love given a child is life fulfilling—it knows no color.”¹¹⁹ One magazine article, titled “A Rare Lesson about Love,” quoted adoptive mother Katherine Roberts, who felt that proximity to people of different backgrounds reduced prejudice: “We have found that people are fundamentally decent and fair, and our neighbors have been wonderful. Fear and suspicion and prejudice disappear when people of different racial backgrounds get acquainted. You can be told this, but you have to experience it to know it. We are all human beings, so what’s the fuss about?”¹²⁰ Roberts’s claim aligned with a long-held sociological theory about assimilation and race relations proffered by prominent sociologist Robert Park. Park’s theory claimed that reducing “social distance” between groups would help with both assimilation and race relations.

Adoptive parents, in this way, helped break the racial social distance barrier. In reviewing the emergent dynamics of transracial adoption, Dr. Judd Marmor believed that transracial adoptive parents were less “ethnocentric” and that the

increase in transracial adoption was due in part to the improving race relations and recognition of Black Americans as human beings. Marmor concluded by admitting to not knowing how adoptees would fare as they grew older in terms of identity and feelings of belonging, but he believed that this mattered less:

In the ultimate evaluations of [transracial adoptees'] development, however, the basis for comparison should not be some ideal norm, but rather, what their fates and personalities would have been if they had been allowed to grow up, un-adopted, in a series of generally less-than-satisfactory foster homes. I have little doubt that such comparison will demonstrate that these children, in the total balance, will have been benefited immeasurably by the kind of love, support, and understanding that these white parents will have given them. And even more importantly, in the long run, humanity itself will have gained by this new proof that the brotherhood of man transcends the color of his skin.¹²¹

Marmor's statement encapsulates the ways love was deployed in transracial adoption discourse, by him and other supporters, as a given for not only adoption success but liberal, multicultural racial progress in ways that would not only help children but benefit U.S. society. At the same time, his statement creates temporal distinction between an ensured negative future (the "fates and personalities" that "would have been" had the child of color not been adopted) and the presumed opposite future (that adoption "will" provide "immeasurable" benefits). Moreover, TRNAs pointed to a new, broader future for American culture. For example, Rick Friedman, an adoptive father in Brighton, Staten Island, explained: "It's going to be different 10 years from now. Our kids are going to grow up in a world where race and color won't make any difference. We're ahead of our time—but not much ahead."¹²² For Friedman, transracial adoption signified a shift that pointed toward a postracial society.

Love was understood as powerful enough to overcome other obstacles that transracial and transnational adoption might present. As one Chicago-area adoptive mother of four—one Native American son, one mixed-raced daughter, and two White brothers—stated, regarding future problems pertaining to racial identity: "We believe that if we give the children support and love at home they can face inevitable problems much better than if they didn't have us." This sentiment was echoed by Bernice Erwin, supervisor to a Chicago-area children's home: "What's the alternative? Of course there will be problems. . . . The question is just this: Are the problems going to be greater if he's placed in a home where he can have a good education, love, and security, or if he grows up in foster homes, probably several institutions, going on his own at 18, maybe winding up as a state charge?"¹²³

Statements such as these minimized the challenges tied to adoption. Babies and children of color were simply in "need." The sentiment was that, although they might have varying sorts of "racial struggle," those challenges were never anything that intrepid adoptive parents could not overcome or that were any worse than the average child of color would face. While racial liberalism and love

produced “progress” in terms of increased adoptive placements for children of color and “inclusion” into White families, they were at the cost of addressing structural inequality that produced the need for such adoptions in the first place. This matched the broader context in which racial liberalism focused on “inclusion” and integration through a limited rights framework and humanitarian efforts that worked in tandem with conservative Cold War politics of anticommunism and military imperial efforts abroad.¹²⁴ In other words, racial liberalism was unable to solve different forms of violence attached to adoption at individual, institutional, and structural levels.

OPPOSITE FUTURES AND SAVIOR NARRATIVES

In addition to discourse and practices driven by racial liberalism, some adoptive families and adoption advocates used love to advance rescue narratives that were in part about racial progress but also centered saviorism and a biopolitics of opposite futures whereby the orphan had a bleak future with birth parents or a full life with adoptive American parents. As noted earlier, some adoptive parents and adoption workers rejected labels such as rescuer and savior. Yet scholars have shown how these terms were applicable in many contexts. In one explicit example, during a 1977 congressional hearing about adoption subsidies, Senator Alan Cranson (D-Calif.) told six adoptive parents, including Ruthann and Henry Haussling, a White couple who adopted five Black children: “You really are absolute saints.”¹²⁵ As numerous critical adoption scholars contend, the humanitarian adoption discourse often missed the political-economic conditions that were the root causes of abandonment. Such discourse produced the foster child and orphan as an object (rather than subject), something abject that must be saved.¹²⁶

While narratives of rescue seemingly centered children, they often spoke more to the image that adoptive parents, the public, or the nation had of itself. Claims of rescue were not always overt; some were subtle. For instance, Colin Reed, an adoptive parent to Noël, who is Native American, rebuffed the rescuer brand, but Arlene Silberman, author of a *Good Housekeeping* article, wholly disagreed with Mr. Reed, whom she interviewed, asserting: “But the fact of the matter is that interracial adoptions are still so new that each family that crosses the color line is, by definition, pioneering. Each family *is* proving something, a most important something at that: that parental love is fully capable of leaping over barriers of race, religion, or almost anything.”¹²⁷ Silberman’s statement draws on racial liberalism and the power of adoptive parental love, which is imbued with a near omnipotent power to overcome “almost anything.” Silberman did not stop there, though, revealing how she perceives the ways love and rescue intersect with race. She offers a “stark contrast” between Reed’s remodeled home and the life on an “Indian reservation where Noël was born and where he might have had to spend his growing years.”

Silberman enumerates the high poverty and unemployment rates, poor housing (inadequate space, sanitation, heating, and electricity), shorter life expectancy, high infant mortality rate, dismal education, and disproportionate rate of unwed motherhood to paint the picture of what might have been. Adoption is often framed as rescue and saviorism because of the ways it seems to address immediate needs, vulnerability, and harm. But adoption is also about the future. Silberman and Reed did not explicitly claim that adoption was a form of rescue for Noël, but the construction of racialized spaces presupposed what I call *opposite futures* for adopted children—a spatiotemporal reference—where adoption rescues children from the certainty of a bleak future and the space attached to it that not placing for adoption portends. Thus the reservation space is not only a negatively racialized space but also a negatively racialized future—one that is fixed and unchangeable—in comparison to the incomparably bright and loving future and home (space) with the Reeds.

For Silberman and the Reeds it was not only the relational (opposite) racialization of space and future but also the belief in love that would enable Noël's success. Racism that Noël might face was brushed aside with love: "We'll cross each bridge when we come to it. And it's a little early to worry about a four-year-old's dating problems, isn't it? We're giving Noël as solid a foundation of love and self-confidence as we know how to give," stated Mrs. Reed. For many adoptive parents the issue of Native American children was critical. "If professionals wait until the entire burden of proof about interracial adoptions is in," Silberman concluded, "another generation of children of minority races will have grown up under subhuman conditions. Somebody must have the daring to begin." Narratives such as these were effective, as Silberman's story moved readers to submit more than 1,200 inquiries to adopt Native American children. Yet they dismissed and minimized the difficulties produced by adoption in general and transracial and transnational adoption in particular. They also did not question why or how those subhuman conditions were created in the first place and the degree that settler colonialism and structural racism played in Noël's separation from his family and the conditions of his Tribe and reservation.

The opposite future narrative characterized adoption as an inherently good endeavor and in the best interest of all parties, from the child to the birth and adoptive parents to society as a whole. And it was not reserved just for Native American children. For example, Margaret Valk, senior case consultant for the American Branch of the International Social Service (ISS), explained how agencies were unsure about the soundness of "uprooting children from so far away and so different a cultural background and racial composition." To this, Valk explained that there were more than 50,000 children of full Korean descent needing homes. There were also mixed-race children who were "completely ostracized, socially and culturally," vulnerable to "contempt and hostility" from other children and the general public. They had no prospects of schooling, employment, or marriage

as Korea prided itself in racial purity, Valk contended. To be sure, other scholars have noted how South Korea used transnational adoption as a surrogate welfare system.¹²⁸ Yet Valk's views ironically ignored how 24 states in the United States had laws banning interracial marriage (and thus a de facto ban on biracial children) in 1957, let alone all of the other forms of racial discrimination.¹²⁹ "The only solution for these children," she concluded, "is placement outside their own country in good Caucasian and Negro homes. In the absence of such placements, they will not live or if they do, will have nothing to live for."¹³⁰

In describing Korean mothers, Valk offered derogatory statements, stating that children were rejected or resented. She strangely added: "Mothers have made pathetic attempts to disguise the identity of their children by dyeing their hair and eyelashes black, or keeping their hair always covered up."¹³¹ She concluded: "Many more of these children face a bleak future unless similar solutions can be found for them."¹³² For Valk it did not matter that many Korean women did what they could to provide a life for their children. For her and so many other advocates of transnational adoption, they believed birth mothers were unworthy, where the "only solution" was biopolitical—to promote the "orphan's" life while letting the mother die via adoption. Valk's statements illustrate a double move that on the one hand saw the adoption of Korean orphans as a way to relationally repair the image of the United States based on the individual mistakes of servicemen who caused the condition of mixed-race children, while negatively racializing Korea. On the other hand, in constructing Korea as an opposite future, Valk elides the devastating effects of U.S. military imperialism—as well as militarized humanitarianism—based on anticommunist ideology that exacerbated conditions for single mothers, families, and children.¹³³ The liberal gesture of inclusion of Asian children into the U.S. national body politic was necessarily premised and founded on characterizations of the United States as morally, economically, and politically superior to Asian countries.¹³⁴

Narratives of saviorism echoed into the next wave of adoptions from Asia, following the Vietnam War. In the years after the U.S. government's increased involvement in Vietnam, adoption officials warned against the urge to repeat the mass transnational adoptions that happened following the Korean War. Paul Cherney, general director of International Social Service, American Branch, stated that Vietnamese children should only be placed for adoption in the United States after all other possibilities had been exhausted. Cherney observed that many of the homeless Vietnamese children were "only temporarily homeless." He warned: "All work with war orphans and other children affected by war and post-war conditions should have as its objective the restoring of children to their families or to substitute families. *This objective did not exist in Korea and I do not see any evidence of it in Vietnam at this time. So what has happened in Korea may very well be repeated in Vietnam.*"¹³⁵ The American Council of Voluntary Agencies for Foreign Service, Inc. offered additional guidance in February 1967. It noted that while

many presume orphanages are the best humanitarian solution, such an approach “tends to perpetuate itself and should be considered only a temporary measure.”¹³⁶ Evidence such as this shows the complexity of adoption history in which agencies and organizations attempted to curb harmful practices. At the same time, some of these very institutions, such as ISS, facilitated and made transnational adoption possible in the first place. Certainly there was a push from prominent voices to go in this latter direction.

Catherine Pomeroy Collins, in a 1973 *McCall's* article, recounted her journey searching for and eventually adopting “nobody’s child” from Vietnam. A widowed mother of older children, Collins wrote of being “haunted” by a World Adoption International Fund brochure that had a picture of a child on a cold, windy hillside with a caption that read: “Why is it, I wonder, I am nobody’s child?” This made her realize that she “wanted a war-damaged child” that nobody else wanted. Recounting her visit to Vietnamese orphanages, Collins wrote of the lack of certain foods—milk, eggs, meat, fruit—and how rice was the staple along with stewed greens and “rotted fish,” ironically stating how the “children loved it.” She added: “One first impression was the gentleness of all of the women who looked after the children. Another was the surprising evidence that children will be happy, will giggle and play even under the grimmest circumstances.” This latter comment contradicted the narrative that children received no meaningful care or love and that they were not and could never be happy. The focus of the story, however, centered Collins meeting her future son on one of the orphanage trips and the adoption process when she returned to the United States. When she wrote of her experience two years later, she concluded: “He is so radiant now, such a happy, giving child, it doesn’t seem possible that he could have known another life.”¹³⁷

What Collins’s article also misses is that many children in orphanages were not true orphans because they had parents who were still alive but unable to fully care for their children. They often left their children in such care with the intention that it would be temporary. Hence, the reality was that “nobody’s child” was typically not parentless but rather somebody’s child who was separated because of war and poverty. Sentiments such as Collins’s, despite early warnings against overreactions, led to widescale mobilization. After an initial unauthorized Babylift flight of 55 children by World Airways president Edward Daly, president Gerald Ford authorized \$2 million for Operation Babylift on April 3, 1975.¹³⁸ “This is the least we can do,” Ford stated, “and we will do much, much more.”¹³⁹

Media captured the president and first lady meeting the plane after it landed at the Presidio military base in San Francisco. Ford boarded the plane and then disembarked holding an infant on the aircraft steps. Media excitement about the Babylift was matched by public urgency. Organizations such as the Friends for All Children made clear declarations about rescuing children. In a full-page



FIGURE 4. Aftermath of the C-5 cargo plane that crashed into a rice paddy shortly after leaving Vietnam on April 4, 1975. Photo credit: Associated Press.

advertisement in the *New York Times*, the organization proclaimed: “Yes, there is something you can do for the children of Vietnam,” “THE MORE MONEY WE RAISE, THE MORE CHILDREN WE CAN RESCUE, AND FERRY TO FREEDOM,” and “YOUR DOLLARS CAN LITERALLY BUY THESE KIDS THEIR TICKET TO A NEW LIFE.”¹⁴⁰ For the adoption of Asian children the need for rescue was self-evident and the expression of that message was explicit.

This image of humanitarian rescue, however, belied the inauspicious start to the operation. The first flight was on a C-5A military aircraft that had just returned from delivering 17 105mm howitzers for the South Vietnamese forces. Children, volunteer sponsors, military, and flight crew loaded onto the plane, which reached 10 miles off the coast of Vietnam before having to emergency crash-land in a rice paddy back in Vietnam (shown in Figure 4).¹⁴¹ The crash killed 138 of the people on board, including 78 of the 228 children.¹⁴² In tragic irony the aircraft that the U.S. military attempted to repurpose from its necropolitical war enabling purpose to a biopolitical war rescuing one could not complete its mission, producing further waves of violence. Undeterred, Ford vowed to continue Operation Babylift. Just days after Babylift began, the International Children’s Fund issued a press release that expressed concern for the “well intentioned but perhaps misdirected” Vietnam “orphan” airlift. By the operation’s end, a total of approximately 2,600 children had been airlifted out of Vietnam, 2,000 of whom came to the United States.

Militarized humanitarian discourse and practice was embedded as a part of adoption discourse and practice. This flowed especially from earlier transnational adoptions such as the GI humanitarianism during the Korean War.¹⁴³ Despite their predominance, critics pointed to the contradictions of humanitarian efforts in response to problems the United States helped create in Vietnam. In one clear example, prominent journalist Shana Alexander wrote a *Newsweek* article titled “A Sentimental Binge,” which critiqued Operation Babylift in similar fashion: “The baby lift was chiefly a symbolic act, designed less to assist the helpless children than to ease our own sense of helplessness in a time of horror. . . . We respond by filling the sky with orphans. . . . We cannot and will never wave a white flag. Instead we fill the skies with innocents, tiny human peace symbols borne aloft in the same planes that flew the bombs that made them orphans in the first place.”¹⁴⁴

Despite Alexander’s critique, many Americans believed that Vietnamese “orphans” would be afforded a better life in the United States versus remaining in Vietnam, which would invariably lead to suffering and death, especially for children who were fathered by U.S. soldiers and considered Amerasian.¹⁴⁵ Ford’s appearance at the tarmac to receive children from Operation Babylift attempted to reaffirm America’s role as benevolent and exceptional instead of imperialistic and harmful. After engaging in the necropolitics of war, the United States used Operation Babylift as a form of biopolitics to “save” life and “make live.” To combat this contradictory reality, news media produced what critical refugee and ethnic studies scholar Yên Lê Espiritu calls the “good war” narrative, which was paired with the myth that the United States was a nation of refuge.¹⁴⁶ Vietnamese refugees and transnational adoptees were by-products of U.S. militarism, yet this production was hidden by militarized humanitarianism and humanitarian discourse and efforts such as Operation Babylift that affirmed racialized and gendered notions of paternalistic rescue, where the masculinized United States was the moral savior of victimized children from the backward and feminized Vietnam.¹⁴⁷ Such representation enabled America to hide the violence of war with the cloak of adoption.

These opposite future media and agency narratives, which were not just limited to transnational cases, rarely addressed the conditions and contexts in which the need for such adoptions were produced in the first place. Why were the futures of Native, Black, and Asian families and spaces so bleak? How did settler colonialism, war, and systemic racism contribute to these challenging circumstances for these marginalized communities? Long-held practices of forced removal of Native children into boarding schools, U.S. military policies that promoted male soldiers to engage in “rest and relaxation” during their tours, and the hyperpolicing and criminalization of Black families are just a few of the structural ways that BIPOC families faced systemic racism that affected and separated their families and communities. In many cases, Black, Indigenous, and Asian mothers (and families) and the spaces in which they lived were constructed as predetermined sources of

harm to their children, enabling White adoptive families, homes, and futures to be opposite spaces of loving rescue.

PUSHBACK AGAINST THE DESTRUCTION
OF FAMILIES, COMMUNITIES, AND TRIBES

Amid the boom of TRNAs, numerous actors pushed back against such adoptions and the narratives that enabled them about which families could provide love, support, and a better future. Operation Babylift provides an example in which some birth parents fought to save their families from being “saved.” They used U.S. courts to appeal for the return of their Vietnamese children. On April 29, 1975, Muoi McConnell, a former Vietnamese nurse; Thomas Millar, a Bay Area attorney; and the Center for Constitutional Rights filed a class-action lawsuit in the federal district court in San Francisco on behalf of Vietnamese children brought to the United States in Operation Babylift.¹⁴⁸ The suit claimed that “several hundred Vietnamese children” from the Babylift were not orphans, wanted to return to Vietnam, or were sent to the United States to be reunited with their parents.¹⁴⁹ There were no efforts to find or reunite parents with children, and instead they were being held for the purposes of adoption. According to the complaint, some parents placed their children in orphanages as a form of temporary care in order to work or to help feed their children but not with the intent to have them adopted.¹⁵⁰ Even though a court-ordered INS investigation found that at least 338 of 1,995 children were not “eligible” orphans, the suit was unsuccessful.¹⁵¹

Still, some Vietnamese parents who found help took further direct legal action. The results were mixed, with some regaining parental rights and others being retraumatized by legal losses. These cases show how birth parents tried to navigate their impossible situations in Vietnam only to face the trauma of family separation and immense obstacles in the United States as well. Mrs. Hai Thi Popp of Newbury Park, California, penned an emotional letter that stated her children were sold “like they were water buffalo or ducks. . . . To understand my story, think you are caught in a burning house. To save your babies’ lives you drop them to people on the ground to catch. It’s good people that would catch them, but then you find a way to get out of the fire too, and thank the people for catching your babies, and you try to take your babies with you. But the people say, ‘Oh no, these are our babies now, you can’t have them back.’”¹⁵² Ultimately, only just over a dozen children were reunited with their families.¹⁵³ The collective and individual legal battles, nevertheless, exemplify how Vietnamese children were loved and not simply unwanted orphans. While U.S. couples undoubtedly cared for the Vietnamese children that they adopted or were attempting to adopt, these cases underscored how governmental “humanitarian” and legal structures favored U.S. families, their homes, and their futures over Vietnamese families, homes, and futures. They show how the biopolitics of child “rescue” through adoption was made possible by

and produced the structural, symbolic, and traumatic forms of violence that were attached to love.

While there was some criticism of transnational adoptions from Asia and recognition that many alleged orphans still had family in their birth country, the battles were fought mostly on a case-by-case basis. For the adoption of Black and Native American children, however, there were two notable moments in the genealogy of TRNAs in which clear opposition was expressed regarding these adoptions. Both of these moments of pushback show how communities resisted differently to the structural, symbolic, and traumatic forms of violence tied to TRNAs. The first was the “Position Statement on Trans-racial Adoptions” by the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW), which was released in September 1972. It took a “vehement stand against the placement of Black children in white homes for any reasons.”¹⁵⁴ TRNA supporters widely criticized the NABSW for what they believed was a “separatist,” “militant,” and “racist” approach. For example, David Smith, an official of the New York Council on Adoptable Children, stated: “The separatists are playing the racist game on this thing. I just think they’re offended by the sight of a black in a white family. It contradicts the stereotype that all white families are racist.”¹⁵⁵ The Boys and Girls Aid Society of Oregon lamented the “militancy” of NABSW’s stance.¹⁵⁶ White adoptive parents had expected possible bigotry and rejection from other White people but were not prepared for the backlash from Black social workers and others in the Black community.¹⁵⁷

The NABSW’s position statement, however, was not only critiquing transracial adoption by White adoptive families, but it was also marking the importance of preserving Black families and affirming notions of Blackness.¹⁵⁸ It highlighted the social construction, and in particular the devaluation, of Blackness and how Black people were beginning to shed negative connotations, along with desires to assimilate. Additionally, the organization believed the physical, psychological, and cultural needs of Black children could not be met by White families who existed within White America: “The historically established and cultivated psychological perceptions and social orientation of white America have developed from their social, political, educational, and religious institutional systems. Consequently, these are the environmental effects they have to transmit and their teachings are not consistent with the realities of the social system for the Black child.”¹⁵⁹ Thus the issue was not solely about the inadequacy of White families but that White families could not be divorced from their White psychological, social, religious, educational, and community social settings.

The NABSW also questioned the timing of transracial adoption, noting that the demand for Black children came at the moment when the supply of White children had nearly vanished, which undermined beliefs about altruistic concerns for Black children. The response by TRNA supporters was that such adoptions increased and were necessary because there were not enough Black families to adopt Black children. Louise Wise executive director Florence G. Brown stated

that “the number of Negro and part Negro children needing adoptive placement is so large that there is no alternative.”¹⁶⁰ Despite this dominant narrative, the reality was that most adoption agencies were serving White families and not Black families. According to the North American Council on Adoptable Children, private agencies placed 50 percent of their minority children transracially. Many private agencies who placed children of color did not specialize in the recruitment of minority families and in fact established prohibitive fee structures for families of color, in effect creating a superficial suppression of demand since many of them could not afford such high costs.¹⁶¹ Service agencies failed to change policies and practices or diversify staff in ways that would have improved services for Black children and potential Black adoptive families. Mostly White social work staff preferred transracial placements because they had fewer contacts with Black families or were more at ease working with White adoptive families. For them it was the easiest way to “serve” Black children.

The NABSW position statement angered and shocked many, including some in the Black community, but for other non-Black folks it indeed made sense. In a 1975 letter to Viola W. Bernard, Doris McKelvy, the associate director of Louis Wise Services, noted that the transracial adoption picture in New York mirrored what colleagues in other parts of the country were witnessing, which was a downward trend in transracial adoption. While she believed the NABSW’s statement had contributed to the decline, she also stated: “I don’t see the position of the NABSW as a ‘militant’ one but as a position that is extremely realistic in relation to the kinds of children who are in need of care.”¹⁶² The historical context of the NABSW statement was such that Black people and social workers were frustrated and angry by the discrimination and dehumanization they faced.

A National Urban League study showed the extent to which Black families were “screened out” rather than “screened in.” It reported that of 800 Black families who applied to be adoptive parents, only one-quarter of 1 percent was approved compared to the national average of 10 percent of applicants. Agencies that were successful at placing Black children with Black families, disproving the “hard-to-place” narrative, included agencies that had Black representation on their board of directors, created satellite offices in Black communities, hired Black administrators and staff, and eliminated strict eligibility requirements.¹⁶³ For agencies that did poorly, instead of holding themselves accountable, they blamed Black children and Black families.¹⁶⁴ As social work scholar Ruth McRoy notes: “The children were labeled ‘hard to place’ and the families ‘hard to reach.’ Soon, the myth that ‘black families don’t adopt’ was promulgated and used as a convenient excuse for the white agencies’ failures to place black children in homes.”¹⁶⁵ The NABSW argued that if agencies committed to the “basic concept of Black families for Black children,” they could find solutions by changing requirements that would “screen in” Black families rather than screen them out, using interstate placement mechanisms and seeking extended family members for placement.

Actions by Native activists, organizations, and Tribes against the widespread child removal pushed Congress to pass the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) in 1978, as a means to protect Native American children, families, and Tribes. Just months before the NABSW published its position paper, the Sisseton Wahpeton Sioux Tribe passed a resolution highlighting the involuntary and state-sanctioned practice of placing Sisseton Wahpeton children in non-Indian foster and adoptive homes. The resolution declared the Tribe's intent to establish sovereign status and jurisdiction to keep their children on the reservation.¹⁶⁶ Four years earlier, Executive Director William Byler and Executive Secretary Dr. Daniel J. O'Connell of the Association on American Indian Affairs, Inc. (AAIA) raised the issue of Indian children being removed from their homes and placed in non-Indian foster and adoptive homes as well as Indian boarding schools. They connected these issues of child removal and family separation to the larger concern of child, family, and tribal welfare in general.¹⁶⁷

Disproportionate foster care and adoptive placements of Native children led to congressional hearings in 1974 on "Problems that American Indian Families Face in Raising their Children and How These Problems are Affected by Federal Action or Inaction." The hearings included testimonies from Indian parents, professionals, and leaders about the harm and violence caused by the removal of Native American children into boarding schools and non-Indian adoptive and foster homes. They highlighted the settler colonial, racial, and gendered logics at play such as constructions of Indian families, parents, and specifically mothers as "unfit." Standards for suitable or "fit" homes were based on White middle-class values such as floor and bed space, plumbing (hot water and indoor running water), and income levels.¹⁶⁸ Moreover, the lack of due process engendered exposure, and thus vulnerability, to involuntary and state-sanctioned removals.¹⁶⁹ While Byler did not use the terms, what he pointed to were what scholars and activists now name as the family policing system and prison industrial complex. Native American parents and children experienced various types of emotional, mental, social, and physical consequences from removal and family separation. For the latter group, they included issues such as loss of culture, identity confusion, disproportionate school drop-out rates, and disproportionate rates of alcoholism, homicide, and suicide.¹⁷⁰

Byler was the first of many who testified at the 1974 hearings about the crisis of Native American children. He—along with other professionals—provided numerous statistics about the dire state of Indian removal and family separation. Surveys from 1969 and 1974 of states with high Indian populations showed that approximately 25 percent to 35 percent of Native American children were removed from their families and placed in boarding schools, foster homes, or adoptive homes. Of these children, 85 percent of foster care placements and 90 percent of adoptive placements were in non-Indian homes.¹⁷¹ James Antrim, a supervisor for the Department of Social Services in South Dakota, explained how such violent practices were justified as in the best interest of the child: "I'm not interested in the

tribe. It's good policy in general that children should be adopted away from their home where their identity is not known, where they can have a new life, a new beginning. We follow the same policy with non-Indian children."¹⁷²

Nearly three dozen people, most of whom were Native, testified. One person was Betty Jack, a mother from Lac du Flambeau, Wisconsin, and chair of the board of directors for the American Indian child development program in the state. She told the subcommittee how in 1962, two of her children were taken from her and placed by the Evangelical Child and Welfare Society. The court declared that she was unfit to care for her children, but she had never had a court hearing or procedure, nor had she ever had any legal representation. In her position as a worker for the Wisconsin Indian foster care program, Jack learned of more horror stories. One mother, after having a daughter taken from her, was promised that if she was sterilized, she would be able to keep her other four children. She agreed, but after the procedure the state took her children anyway.¹⁷³

The testimonies framed the issue of Native American child removal and family separation around the larger claim to sovereignty and self-determination. As Bertram Hirsch, staff attorney for the Association on American Indian Affairs, stated, state courts had exceeded their jurisdiction, which was afforded to tribal courts under federal law. One of AAIAs recommendations was explicitly affording Tribes jurisdiction over child welfare matters because, according to Hirsch, "it goes to the very heart of the existence of the tribes," and the self-determination in the parent-child relation constitute the "essence of the survival of the tribe."¹⁷⁴ Yet the special relationship—that is, the nation-to-nation political (not racial) relationship—was one that many government officials either ignored or did not fully comprehend. For Native advocates poverty was not the root cause of family breakdown. Instead, the primary reasons were settler colonial processes of "detrribalization and the deculturalization," where federal, state, and local policies carried out by officials attempted to make Indians White.¹⁷⁵

While congressional hearings can easily be considered an "official" state record that typically contains the "normative" and dominant discourse, the hearings that preceded and were the impetus for the Indian Child Welfare Act, which was passed in 1978 (discussed in greater detail in chapter 5), presented a moment where knowledge was contested. The testimonies of Native American leaders, professionals, and parents demonstrated how Native resistance operated and sought to affect the boundaries of the federal governmental system. The testimonies provided a new way of framing and thinking about the issue of Native American children, family separation, tribal rights, and sovereignty. Written materials submitted for the hearings such as newsletters, resolutions, and statements outlined tribal sentiment, settler colonial harms, and demonstrated past and current efforts as well as future goals to combat such harms.¹⁷⁶ Indian youth and tribal group homes; child-care programs; a model dorm program that had 12 to 1 ratio instead of the usual 200 to 1; and a subsidized adoption and foster care program for Native American

parents and families existed, and proposed alternatives to the violence of the current system.¹⁷⁷ The testimonies, research, and activism by tribal members, leaders, and experts provide a clear example of how they resisted structural, symbolic, and traumatic violence that was enacted onto Native families and Tribes that posited them as illegible parents, families, and communities. Instead, they asserted their collective power to pass federal legislation that is now considered by many the gold standard of child welfare.

CONCLUSION

TRNAs emerged from racial liberalism, but that ideology was still attached to White supremacist, settler colonial, and imperial logics—that is, racial liberalism promoted abstract equality but was not invested in undoing or stopping structures of harm. This helps explain how children of color became “adoptable” and began to receive child welfare services, but how institutions and the government turned to White families to adopt children of color without considering or addressing the conditions and the causes for why they were “in need” of adoption in the first place. Narratives of love and rescue informed by racial liberalism molded TRNAs. While children of color might not have been the most desired children, their negative racial particularities were not irresolvable and could be negated through loving adoptions—unlike those of their parents whose plights never registered the same concerns. Through TRNA, adoptees could escape the horizon of death and reappear before the horizon of life as supposedly modern subjects because of the ways that U.S. adoptive families, their homes, and the nation were racialized as spaces and futures of love, opportunity, and freedom.¹⁷⁸ This representation was in relation to birth families, homes, cultures, and nations that were racialized negatively as spaces and futures of harm, devoid of love, and awaiting probable death. Of course, this “promise” of love, stability, freedom, and inclusion was not guaranteed because of the different forms of violence attached to adoption, including the ways Black, Native American, and Asian children were differently adoptable. Although individual families were transgressing previously stark boundaries of race, culture, and nation, the U.S. adoption industry, government, and adoptive families perpetuated structural, symbolic, and traumatic forms of violence.

Bringing the NABSW statement and the push for ICWA together into a genealogical conversation along with the legal appeals by Vietnamese parents highlights the political nature of adoption. While adoption is posited as individual acts of love by birth and adoptive parents, the reality was (and is) that the need for such adoptions did not exist in a vacuum. As larger political groups, Black social workers and Native American advocates understood TRNAs from historical (or even genealogical) context of not only forced family separation through slavery, boarding schools, forced adoptions, and incarceration but also the survival of Black and Native families despite such state-sanctioned violence. Black social workers noted

the timing of increased transracial adoptions coincided with the decrease in availability of White infants because of social changes such as legal access to abortion and birth control as well as the increase of single parenting. This context, paired with institutional resistance to engage and work with communities of color to address child welfare and family needs, contributed to the TRNA boom.

The 1970s pushback against domestic transracial adoption of Black children and transracial and transnational adoption of Native American children contributed to the dramatic rise in adoptions from Korea, Vietnam, and eventually China (the latter is discussed in chapter 4). It led to continued anxieties and uncertainty about the power of love and adoption. In response to the uncertainty around adoption in general, but TRNAs in particular, the adoption industry and social scientists attempted to positively define transracial and transnational adoption. Chapter 2 explores how positive adoption language and social scientific outcome studies changed adoption discourse and knowledge in ways that attempted to ascribe certainty (positivity), normalcy, and positive affirmation to TRNAs.