

The New Normal

Positively Defining (Adoptive) Motherhood and Family

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

In her seminal book *Kinship by Design: A History of Adoption in the Modern United States*, historian Ellen Herman argues that one way adoption was destigmatized during the first half of the twentieth century was through a process of interpretation at the beginning stages of each adoption. She describes this process as involving professional helpers such as social workers and psychiatrists who “investigated, adjusted, and normalized” behaviors and personalities in order to instill and cultivate a feeling of “realness” for adoptive parents and adoptees and reduce the perceived risks of adoption.⁴ She suggests that “interpretation” happened systematically but in a way that targeted adopted children and adoptive

parents individually and mostly at the psychological and emotional levels in order to convince them that adoption was authentic and real. For example, interpretation required social workers to be “psychologists” to interpret the child’s personality, devise a plan for facilitating the best adjustment to adoption, and determine if couples expressed good motivations for wanting to adopt.⁵ This chapter extends Herman’s concept of interpretation by considering how it operated at a broader social level of normalization for domestic as well as transnational and transracial adoptions (TRA and TNA, or TRNA when discussed together).

Normalization, however, was more than just convincing individual adoptive families and adopted children that adoption was or could be real. It was different from what Herman describes as efforts to “mirror” nature through “naturalization.” Instead, the goal of normalization as an expansive form of interpretation, I contend, was to elevate adoption in the eyes of the public so that it could be *equal to* and *just as normal as* families formed through biological reproduction and genetic kinship. Race was a central dilemma for normalization as a mode of interpretation. The adoptions of Black, Native American, and Asian children by White parents exemplified racial liberalism and became a new way to form and expand American families. A result, though, was the inability to reconstruct “nature” through racial matching in adoption. Native American, Black, and Asian children physically stood out from their White parents, who often lived in rural, racially homogenous towns. The racial transgressions posed by transracial adoption and transnational adoption meant that naturalization—that is, the attempt to mimic nature—was an impossible feat, and this jeopardized the goal of interpretation. The 1970s through the 1990s were a watershed moment in not only the number of adoptions of Asian, Black, and Native American children but also how they existed in relation to the important circulation of new knowledge about traditional same-race White adoptions.

This chapter juxtaposes these increasingly visible TRNAs with the emergence and overlap of two types of knowledge production: professional language—through the emergence and promotion of “positive and respectful adoption language” (commonly known as PAL and RAL)—and scientific research.⁶ I argue that PAL was a loving (and positive) strategy for interpreting adoption and adoptive motherhood as normal, valid, and real to fight their stigmatization. Nevertheless, this both ignored and enacted symbolic violence by relationally constructing White adoptive mothers over and against birth mothers of color—temporally, spatially, and discursively—which limited the diverse meanings of family. This symbolic violence was further entrenched by scientific outcome studies of TRAs and TNAs that constructed racial meaning and positively established the “fact” of normalization during the 1960s through the 1990s. Although these studies were rife with methodological and conceptual shortcomings, they provided “objective proof” that love transcended race by establishing that transracial and transnational

adoptees were healthy and well-adjusted and that transracial and transnational adoptive family-making was just as good as same-race adoptive families and even biological families.

Positive adoption language and social scientific research are two important sites of adoption knowledge production that become the foundations for articulations of love. Yet they were tied to and ignored the structural-historical violence that produced the “need” for adoption and positive adoption language, as well as any traumatic violence and symbolic violence that might be enacted by instituting PAL or claiming that TRAs and TNAs have always had positive outcomes. In addition, they reproduced precisely those norms of gender, race, and family that adoption generally, and TRNAs in particular, inherently disrupt. The legitimacy and normalcy of adoptive parents and their families, as well as birth parents and their families, were at stake in such adoption discourses. The point is not to restigmatize adoptive relationships in favor of biological ones. Familial bonds that transcend the (hetero)biological have deeply important affective, political, and social value. Rather than privileging one form of family-making over the other, the goal is to examine how we can engage the violence that produces and emerges from both. This critique of the violence of love opens a more complicated understanding of how race was ignored or poorly addressed yet integral in the efforts to “positively” define, in language and science, adoptive mothers and families.

DESTIGMATIZING ADOPTION

Making a family can be a cause for anxiety (along with hurt, disappointment, fear, etc.), but for many adoptive parents this issue is amplified. Although families are formed in diverse ways—through blood, law (marriage), social custom (in-laws), and love—adoption, which is linked by law and love, is perhaps the familial relationship that is most devalued.⁷ Many scholars have noted that adoption has historically been recognized as being different from and less than biological families.⁸ Closed adoptions and sealed records, which began in Minnesota in 1917 and spread to nearly every state by 1948, did much of the symbolic and structural work to shift this reality and make adoptive parents the “real” parents.⁹ Most explicitly, adoption law and practice created a legal fiction by “erasing” the name, identity, parents, and origin of birth of the child and creating a wholly new (amended) birth certificate that lists the adoptive parents along with a new name and even birth place. Simultaneously, in cases where there is a birth certificate, it is sealed with other adoption records.¹⁰ Yet realness still needed to be stated and affirmed. In its “A Guide to Adoption,” the Open Door Society indicated the distinction: “The real parent is the person who provides a child with his principal source of security, love, and guidance; that is real parenting.” It added: “Recognizing the difference between the biological production of children and parenthood is an important step for the prospective adoptive parent.”¹¹

Feelings of realness were linked to the process of “telling” adopted children their adoptive status and information about their history. Despite general agreement among adoption professionals that telling was healthy and necessary, many adoptive parents believed they were protecting their child from stigma and harm by concealing or delaying this fact. Upwards of one-half of adoptees during the early decades of the twentieth century were not told of their adoption.¹² A 1962 *Good Housekeeping* article described how some adoptive parents dealt with these “unpleasant problems” by telling adopted children their birth parents were dead.¹³ Social workers were also at times deceptive in the information they gave to or withheld from the adoptive parents regarding health, personal history, and background.¹⁴ While TRNAs did not always have the same issue of whether to tell or not—because it was typically obvious—there were plenty of occasions on which mixed-race children were not told the truth about their origins, and even more cases when adoptive parents created elaborate stories that “killed off” the birth parents. The numerous anxieties underscored the seemingly tenuous nature of adoption.

Adoptive families continued to be judged, stigmatized, and discredited by society as abnormal, unnatural, and the second or last choice—types of symbolic violence. Adoptive mothers in particular were constructed in popular discourse as infertile and emotionally unstable due to their inability to bear children.¹⁵ With regulation and standardization by the state and adoption agencies, adoptive parents have faced scrutiny in ways that biological parents typically did not experience, including meeting age, income, work (or stay-at-home), health, marriage, and home-study requirements (the exceptions included parents of children placed in foster care who tried to reunify with them). In addition, adoptive parents, and mothers more specifically, have had to contend with pervasive invasion of their privacy, where strangers and friends felt that it was acceptable to ask prying questions or offer off-the-cuff remarks that were offensive and hurtful to adoptive parents and adoptees.¹⁶

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, agencies, social workers, and adoptive parents began to combat the stigmatization and shame attached to adoption and adoptive families through new language. They specifically revised adoption terminology to reflect what they perceived as the accurate outcome and beauty of adoption (see Box 1 for a list of positive and negative adoption language). Surprisingly, very little has been written about PAL or RAL beyond the fact that it should be the preferred terminology.¹⁷ In 1979 veteran social worker Marietta Spencer wrote a brief but influential journal article on adoption language and terminology, which she would later term “positive adoption language.” She was the program director for Post Legal Adoption Services at Children’s Home Society of Minnesota, the first of its kind in the United States, and co-director of the Adoption Builds Families project.¹⁸ Despite her unsentimental view of genetic history, saying it was like “washing instructions” for clothes, Spencer helped many adopted persons find their birth

parents.¹⁹ She passionately worked with adoptive parents, adopted persons, and birth parents and published more than 20 articles and sponsored 3 national conferences in the area of postlegal adoption services.²⁰

According to Spencer, PAL was premised on the beliefs that words educate, evoke feelings, carry emotional weight, produce labels, have multiple and changing meanings, and must be used with care. Her goal was to provide a “correct” and commonsense language standard for social service professionals and adoptive parents in an effort to displace language considered problematic, negative, and imprecise.²¹ Two decades later, Patricia Irwin Johnston, one of the foremost educators and advocates for respectful adoption language, claimed that RAL was a vocabulary that reflected “maximum respect, dignity, responsibility and objectivity about the decisions made by birthparents and adoptive parents in discussing the family planning decisions they have made for children who have been adopted.”²² The goal of using and sharing both PAL and RAL, as *Adoptive Families* magazine stated, is to help such terminology “someday become the norm.”²³

Box 1 shows a compilation of the terms and phrases that Spencer and Johnston offered as ways to destigmatize adoptive relations. For example, when using terms related to children, especially when introducing them to strangers, Spencer argued that adoptive parents should state plainly that “this is my child” and avoid language such as “this is my adopted child” or “adopted son/daughter.” The qualifier “adopted” accentuated the difference between him or her and a possible biological child.²⁴ More specifically, it perpetuated biological chauvinism, which most adoptive parents were already trying to fight.²⁵ The issue of difference that is highlighted when using the qualifier “adopted” is something that children who are adopted contend with because even if adoptive parents know not to use this language, inquiring strangers often do not. As Johnston claimed, adoption is one of many events in a person’s life, not an immutable personal trait or condition.²⁶ (Many adopted people might argue otherwise that adoption is not merely an event but a lifelong process.) This was the same reasoning Spencer and others gave for avoiding the term “adoptee,” which similarly “labels the whole person.”²⁷ Dropping the modifier “adopted” affirmed kinship through adoption and destigmatized this status by situating the child on the same level as biological children.

Similar to avoiding the language of “adopted child,” Spencer advocated minimal use of the qualifier “adoptive” to describe parents who adopt. As a result of this stigmatization, adoptive parents often struggled with the feeling of entitlement and sense of “realness”—that the child was “unconditionally (and exclusively) their own child.”²⁸ Using the “adoptive parent” label outside of specific contexts would permanently and unfairly label the parents by the process by which they acquired a child, which would question the permanence and authenticity of the family tie and highlight their difference and “abnormality.”²⁹ This language was

BOX 1. POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE ADOPTION LANGUAGE

POSITIVE	NEGATIVE
Adoption triad / adoption-circle / adoption-tapestry	Adoption triangle
My child / was adopted	Adopted child / is adopted
Parent	Adoptive parent
Birth / biological parent / Birthgiver* / Woman who gave birth	Natural / real parent
Birth child	Own child
Birth father / mother / parent	Real / natural father / mother / parent
Genetic ancestors	Blood relative
Born to unmarried parents / outside of marriage	Illegitimate
Waiting child / children in need of adoption	Adoptable child / available child
Court termination	Child taken away
Make an adoption plan / choose adoption / transferring or terminating parental rights	Give away / give up / put up / abandon / relinquish / surrender
Child placed for adoption / unplanned	Unwanted child
To parent	To keep
Parent preparation / preadoptive counseling	Homestudy
Intercountry adoption	Foreign adoption
Interracial	Mixed race
Child from abroad	Foreign child
Child with special needs	Handicapped child / hard-to-place
Search / making contact or meeting with / locate	Track down parents / reunion

* This term is used only by some.

Source: Marietta Spencer's "Terminology of Adoption" (1979) and Patricia Johnston's *Speaking Positively: Using Respectful Adoption Language* (2004).

ostensibly universal and race-neutral, but it had profoundly different effects along racial lines for the different people involved in adoption.

RACE-NEUTRAL LANGUAGE

While Spencer never explicitly addresses the issue of race, her omission suggests that the language is race-neutral in ways that would apply to all members of society. However, a closer look reveals that this language applied differently and had profoundly distinctive effects for White birth mothers, birth mothers of color, and White adoptive mothers. One of the main reasons Spencer promoted the use of PAL was because it reflected both the legal outcome and the moral purposes of the adoption process. According to Spencer, terms concerning the transfer of the child needed to reflect the reassignment of parental rights and the legal outcome from “biological parents to the parents of adoption.” Language such as “put up for adoption” and “adopted out” were used in the late 1800s, when children were literally put on blocks for adoption or adopted out via orphan trains, but these terms were no longer applicable to the current process.³⁰

In addition, phrases and terms such as “given away” and “abandoned” portrayed the biological parents as callous and uncaring, while “given up,” “relinquished,” and “surrendered” implied that the child was torn out of their arms. The latter terms also encouraged children to fantasize about improbable reunions. Spencer offered a plethora of suggestions that better described the transfer of children, including “arranging for an adoption,” “making a placement plan for a child,” “delegating an agency to find permanent parents for a child,” “arranging for a transfer of parental rights,” “transferring parenting to others who are ready for this long-term task,” “finding a family who will adopt a child,” and “selecting an appropriate family to parent the child.” These suggestions were based on her claim that parents cannot “give up a child” because a child is not something that is owned, but they can “give up parental rights.” Spencer rebutted the claim that children can be removed from parents against their will by claiming: “When the court steps in to terminate parental rights without consent of the bioparents, the chances are that the latter filled the role inadequately or not at all.”³¹

Johnston echoed this sentiment. Without making clear distinctions about race, she argued that all birth parents are “thoughtful and responsible people” with “authority and responsibility.” For Johnston, respectful adoption language was about using emotionally correct terms over emotionally charged ones: “These emotion-laden terms, conjuring up images of babies torn from the arms of unwilling parents, are no longer valid except in those unusual cases in which a birthparent’s rights are involuntarily terminated by court action after abuse or neglect.”³² The logic of PAL and RAL relied on the perspective that adoption benefited all parties: birth parents were no longer forced or coerced to “surrender” their child but instead “choose” to make an informed and voluntary adoption

“plan”; adoptive parents now had a socially embraced way to create and/or expand a family and thus were simply “parents,” not adoptive parents; and adoptees benefited the most because they received a caring and loving family, a permanent home, and a bright future. Although Johnston suggested that this mutually beneficial relationship could be described as an adoption circle, the majority of adoption outcomes resemble a moral teleology. The continued state-facilitated legal nature and process of adoption terminates rights for birth parents and transfers them to the adoptive parents. Adoption in this sense is not just a good outcome; it is considered the *best* outcome.

Significantly, the rationale behind choosing “emotionally correct,” “positive,” and seemingly race-neutral terms ignored the dynamics of TRNAs of Black, Asian, and Native American children, for whom the issue of race was infused, which complicated the presumed universality of PAL and RAL. For example, the “thoughtful” and “responsible” language of PAL and RAL used to describe birth mothers’ decisions implied that all, regardless of color, were perceived and treated by society in this way. For Spencer and Johnston, birth mothers never had to surrender or relinquish their child against their own will. Those who did experience this were partially or wholly “inadequate bioparents,” deserving of state intervention to be separated from their child. This meant that only those birth mothers who were truly undeserving parents had experienced child removal against their will.

Their language about deservedness shockingly mirrored early twentieth-century beliefs that considered unwed mothers as needing saving or sterilization.³³ This is perhaps most infamously illustrated in *Buck v. Bell* (1927) in which the Supreme Court ruled 8 to 1 that it was permissible and in the state’s interest to sterilize Carrie Buck, who was argued to be an illegitimate child (an untrue claim) and promiscuous (even though she was raped by the nephew of her foster family).³⁴ For baby brokers who fed the early adoption black markets, birth mothers were not people or mothers in need of care and support; rather, these brokers provided mechanisms to produce White infants for White adoptive couples. For agency workers, birth mothers were too young, naïve, and irresponsible. They were incapable of not only parenting but of making the decision whether to parent or not in the first place: “It is rare that she, without experienced help, can make a beneficial and wise decision for herself and her baby. The very forces which brought about her unmarried motherhood prohibit this.”³⁵ This dominant view about unwed motherhood and problem parents receded to some degree for White mothers and parents, especially as agencies realized that “old morals, old impulses, old ideas, and old indignations” needed to be changed to better meet the health, welfare, and rights of the unwed mother and child.³⁶ Indeed, this shift in the protection of birth mother rights was beneficial for adoptive parents because birth mothers would be less likely to change their minds about relinquishment.³⁷

Although views of White single motherhood slowly changed, Spencer and Johnston’s beliefs about deservedness ignored the ways that adoption depended

on and indeed engendered stratified reproduction.³⁸ Poor mothers, mothers of color, overseas mothers, and Native mothers were in different ways forced to interact with heightened government regulation, punishment, and family separation because of racial bias and their constructed non-normativity. Even the anti-poverty programs from the 1970s and on had brought families of color closer to government monitoring by social service agencies and thus higher probabilities of being declared unfit mothers or parents. As historian Rickie Solinger has noted, the transnational and domestic contexts for women of color mirrored each other to some degree in that the issue of adoption was rarely about individual choices (and planning) that mothers make. Rather, it was about “the abject choicelessness of some resourceless women.”³⁹

For the domestic context, non-White families have historically been perceived by society as inherently non-heteronormative.⁴⁰ Mothers of color in particular have been constructed as unfit parents and opposite of normative motherhood.⁴¹ This racial ideology was especially concretized with the emergent representations of “culture of poverty” and “welfare queen” that were inscribed onto families and mothers of color in the 1960s. Oscar Lewis’s culture of poverty theory racialized Mexican families as developing a culture of habits that enabled poverty that were carried to subsequent generations.⁴² Daniel Patrick Moynihan added to this account by arguing that Black families were deviant, hypersexual, and poorly structured, which led to a “tangle of pathology.”⁴³ Black families constituted gender and sexual non-normativity that needed to be disciplined by the state.⁴⁴

What emerged from Lewis’s and Moynihan’s racialized explanations, and with the help of media perpetuating these cultural representations, was the racial, gendered, and sexualized figure of the welfare queen, which constructed Black, Brown, and Native American women as deviant able-bodied mothers who were lazy and purposely had more children to garner undeserved taxpayer support.⁴⁵ Chapter 1 gave multiple examples of Native mothers who lost their children for no other reason beyond racist, classist, and settler colonial logics. The disproportionate removal of Native children from Native families was staggering, and the involuntary family separation was the primary reason why Congress passed the Indian Child Welfare Act (1978). Similarly, social workers, health care professionals, and government officials “shattered the bonds” of thousands of Black families.⁴⁶ These racialized, gendered, and sexualized representations help explain why the specific identities, stigmas, and subjectivities of birth mothers of color were unaddressed not only by this new language but by the “solution” of adoption in general. Unlike White birth mothers and White adoptive mothers, non-White birth mothers’ identities could not be changed or recuperated through adoption.

Like the domestic circumstance, Spencer’s aversion to terms such as “relinquished” and “surrendered” ignored race, gender, and class in the transnational context. But there were also national inequalities produced by war and military intervention that contributed to the situation that many Korean and Vietnamese

mothers faced, who had little choice after conceiving children of mixed race with U.S. soldiers. While poverty and social stigma in Korea and Vietnam contributed to these conditions, U.S. military intervention, devastation, and abandonment in both cases created impossible situations for birth mothers who relinquished their children. Such “positive” and “respectful” language glossed over the numerous cases in which birth parents never intended to fully relinquish parental rights. Many desperate mothers left their children at orphanages with the full intent of returning later. In these cases, and ones that include coercion and outright child trafficking, “surrender” and “planning” never occurred. Asian birth mothers, like mothers of color in the United States, were the absent presence in PAL and RAL because how does one “positively” and “respectfully” convey the effects of military imperialism or adoptions that continued as a way to not only combat overpopulation but develop political and trade relations between Asian and Western nations?⁴⁷

While mostly White adoptive parents had the privilege to choose adoption as a means of family building or expansion, it was at the expense of overseas, Native, and Black women who were forced to relinquish or had their children taken from them. Although Spencer could not have predicted the continued predominance of such adoptions in the late 1970s, both Spencer and Johnston were promoting this language into the beginning of the twenty-first century at the peak of transnational adoption. Even as Johnston concedes that there are a few exceptions when birth parents do not make adoption plans, the language they both promoted universalized the White birth parent/mother experience in an entirely Western context. The categories of “adoptive mother” and “birth mother” in PAL and RAL were presupposed and already constituted “regardless of class, ethnic or racial location,” which placed the marked woman/mother of color as an object without agency.⁴⁸

(DE)NATURALIZING MOTHERHOOD

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

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

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

"Real mother." *"Real father."* What constitutes a "real" parent? In terms of familial relationships and social functions, the "real" parents are the adoptive parents, not biological parents. The adoptive parents care for the child, nurture growth, transmit knowledge and values. The biological parents brought a child into the world; the adoptive parents help the child to cope with the world—a challenging task, and just as "real." To apply the term exclusively to biological parents is grossly inaccurate.⁴⁹

Spencer and other PAL/RAL advocates encouraged using more "correct" terms such as "birth mother," "mother of birth," and "biological parent." Terms such as "natural parent" and "real parent" used to describe birth parents were "emotionally charged" and threatened the legitimacy of both the adoptee and adoptive parents because they did not reflect the *legal* outcome of adoption, which severed the rights, legal and moral responsibilities, and ties of the birth parents from the child. Using the term "real parent" to refer to the biological parents' violently implied adoptive relationships were "artificial and tentative" and that adoptive families were inferior or "second-best."⁵⁰ In recognizing the legitimacy of birth parents, Johnston states: "Indeed in adoption children will always have TWO 'real' families: one by birth and one by adoption." However, the goal of PAL and RAL in effect was to solidify the placement of adoptive parents *over and against* birth parents. The new language designated and differentiated the biological realities from the social realities of "real (adoptive) parents." Moreover, it diffused "competition or conflict" by cultivating understanding within and about the "adoption triad." The role of birth parents among the three parties of the adoption triad was clarified as being that of the "man and woman who shared in a child's conception and who planned adoption for the child."⁵¹ In this way PAL and RAL were supposedly respectful of birth parents too, depicting them as responsible individuals who chose to transfer the right and responsibility of parenting to adoptive parents.

While first used by prominent author and adoption supporter Pearl Buck, the term "birth parent" or "birth mother" gained greater prominence in the mid-1970s.⁵² As a singular word, "birthparent" or "birthmother," germinated from an effort by activist Lee Campbell, a birth mother herself who formed a group to address the needs of "parents who had surrendered children for adoption." Campbell opposed the term "biological parents" because she and other parents were more than "procreating protoplasm"; she also disliked the term "natural parents" because it defined adoptive parents as unnatural. "Birth parent" had existed in the lexicon, but Campbell combined the two to create a more appealing acronym for her new organization, Concerned United Birthparents. For Campbell, "birthparent" conveyed the feeling and social history of being a mother along with the prenatal, natal, and postnatal aspects of birthing. After all, the process of birthing everlastingly connects birthparents to their child.⁵³

Yet within the past two decades, some activists have strongly rejected the term “birth mother” or “birthparent.” Diane Turski, an activist who calls herself a natural mother, argues that the term “birth mother” is a euphemism for incubator or breeder and was established under “positive” adoption language. She contends that this move was more of an attempt to break the natural bond between the mother and her child to make the adoptive family feel less threatened, more comfortable, and more natural. Another natural mother of an adoptee critiques the term “birthmother” as well: “And its meaning [birthmother] is clear: that we are no longer mothers (emotionally, socially, or legally) to the children we surrendered for adoption. That the sole parent and mother of our lost child is the woman who adopted our baby.”⁵⁴

In 1999, Spencer published an updated guide on correct adoption vocabulary, which gives credence to Turski’s claim that PAL makes birth mothers and parents illegible as such. She states that terms such as “birthgiver” and “woman who gave birth” are accurate descriptors, while “biological mother/father” are not. Spencer relegates birth parents to “the woman and man whose egg and sperm combined” to conceive a child, and whose main importance is merely being a source for hereditary and health information for the adopted child.⁵⁵ In fact, birth mothers often experience this assignment of birth mother or birth giver even *before* the adoption is finalized, during the pre-adoptive process.⁵⁶ As adoptive parents were concerned with how society viewed their family, the goal of detaching pregnancy and labor from motherhood (two identity-defining moments for many mothers) and instead highlighting the legal outcome of adoption was paramount. This was a main reason why “adoption triangle” was classified as a negative term because it connotes that lines were still attached.⁵⁷ Thus the term “birth parent,” in relation to just “parent,” reinforced the act of severing ties between the child and their natural mother. The line distinguishing who the real parent was legally and socially would no longer be blurred.

Here, the birth mother, as an actual person and symbolic figure, was discursively distanced from the identity of mother. Her teenage, unmarried, and unready statuses positioned her as incompatible with the heteropatriarchal and nuclear ideals of a married two-parent family. Spencer promoted steering clear of the terms “illegitimate child” and “unwanted child” because the former was better stated as “out of wedlock” and the latter was not necessarily precise because often it was the role of the “parent” that was primarily unwanted.⁵⁸ For Spencer, “out of wedlock” was supposed to be a less negative term than “illegitimate” and more exact than “unwanted,” but the language of “out of wedlock” still provided rationale for the birth mother to relinquish her child. By the 1940s social welfare professionals had attached neurosis to unwed motherhood, but the status of an unfit mother could be redeemed if she relinquished her child for married couples to adopt.⁵⁹ Thus, rather than questioning the heteropatriarchal requirement of marriage to raise a child and the social context that made illegitimacy a negative status or the lack of

social support to keep and parent her child, PAL and RAL suggested a sanitized version of “out of wedlock” that ultimately upheld the birth mother as an undeserving figure, whose sole option for redemption was ironically to only give birth but not to mother.

I argue that the solution to the symbolic violence (adoption stigma) that adoptive parents and families faced enacted what social theorist Denise Ferreira da Silva calls “productive violence,” which produces certain meaning and representation while destroying or rejecting something else. Early TRNAs represented the strategy of containment of the racial Other, which meant they were accepted mainly because the practice of cultural assimilation limited the harmful biological reproduction of the racial Other (i.e., transracial and transnational adoptees who largely grew up in a White habitus would marry White spouses), while rescuing “orphans” from Communist countries, Native reservations, and Black ghettos promoted racial liberalism.⁶⁰ However, positive and respectful adoptive language, especially in the context of TRNAs, emerged as a strategy of displacement through symbolic negation and foreclosure, where adoptive parents were labeled “real” parents.⁶¹

Jacques Derrida’s theorization of representation through the sign and instituted trace helps us understand how this displacement and discursive difference severed the birth parent from their child. He explains that the sign (in the sign, signifier, and signified relationship) is something that is always becoming—that is, its definition and symbolism, or representation, are never fully concrete. Its becoming, or development, is dependent on the line that separates the signifier and the signified. That line, the trace, is what polices and determines which signifiers are legible and illegible.⁶² The hitherto “unmotivated” line, Derrida contends, dictates which signifiers are (in)eligible to represent the signified meaning. Signifiers that are determined to be ineligible by the trace are illegible. They are still there—still present—but they are hidden, obscured, or even erased. In other words, PAL and RAL became the instituted trace, the affirming light for adoption, and the violent arbiters of who could be the *only* signifiers and therefore legible as the real parent, mother, and family. The discursive move to discard “natural” from and ascribe “birth,” “plan,” and “responsible” to the natal mother and parents accomplished the symbolic processes of denaturalization of birth and normalization of adoptive. It recuperated White birth parents as good subjects who enabled heteropatriarchal family relations, while concretizing the term “birth mother” to refer only to the undertaking of birth, erasing or foreclosing any claims to or future as mother/parent.

This discursive negation was worsened in cases of transnational adoption that engendered a vast spatial and temporal distance between the non-White birth mother and her child and the identity of the mother. Yet discarding the descriptors “adoptive” and “natural” from (White) adoptive parents and (non-White) birth mothers, respectively, did not provide adoptive parents with the

assurance of having a “natural” family. The racial markers distinguishing adoptive parent and child remained for transracial and transnational adoptions. The primary recourse was to attempt to normalize transnational adoptions and narrow the definition of motherhood, parenthood, and family. Thus, while PAL and RAL eased the concerns of adoptive parents because most of them were White, the new terms ignored how racial difference operated materially and symbolically. PAL and RAL never addressed the needs of birth mothers of color, both in the United States and elsewhere, who lacked the resources to make or reject a “responsible adoption plan.”

Spencer also opposed the term “reunion” to describe cases when adoptees both seek and see their biological parents, which in most cases meant the birth mother. Spencer argued that the term delegitimized the legal status of adoption and implied that the adoption was (or could be) dissolved even though the adoptee did not rejoin the biological family. Reunion’s celebrated status, along with the search and open records movements in general, has positioned adoptive mothers as deficient and even harmful to the well-being of adoptees.⁶³ Spencer characterized “reunions” as a minor curiosity: “In reality, the desire to establish contact often reflects no more than the wish of many adopted persons to take a look at their biological ancestors.” By avoiding the term “reunion,” the meeting could be represented as temporary, singular, or at most a discrete event. Only in the case in which the adoptee “remembers being parented by her or his biological family” could the meeting be described as a “reunion.” For Spencer, phrases such as “making contact with,” “meeting with,” or “getting in touch with” described these encounters more precisely.⁶⁴ Johnston was in full agreement with this perspective on reunions: “While children adopted at an older age may indeed experience a reunion, most adoptees join their families as infants, and as such they have no common store of memories or experience such as are traditionally shared in a reunion. The more objective descriptor for a meeting between a child and the birthparents who planned his adoption (a term which neither boosts unrealistic expectations for the event nor implies a competition for loyalties between birthparents and adoptive parents) is *meeting*.”⁶⁵

Like Spencer, Johnston was making an “objective” argument about accuracy and emotional correctness in language use. For both, “reunion” was an emotionally charged word that discredited adoptive families and adoptive mothers while implying a bond that may have “never existed” or will ever exist. Indeed, these terms carefully avoided any indication of a familial relationship between the adoptees and their birth parents and diminished the actual desires of many adoptees and birth parents who wanted to know more or reconnect with each other. This event was “no more than” a “look at” or “meeting with” one’s disconnected biological past. Thus Spencer, Johnston, and other proponents of PAL and RAL argued that the symbolic violence of traditional adoption terminology, which attached the descriptors “natural” and “real” to biological and genetic motherhood, required

the introduction of new, commonsense language that would destigmatize and validate adoptive families, mothers, and parenthood.

POSITIVELY VIOLENT

The problem with the deployment of specific PAL and RAL terms was that it did not consider the unique conditions of TRNAs. The established terminology was universal and theoretically applied to all adoptions in a race-neutral way. In defining motherhood so narrowly, the universal terms they offered engendered symbolic (and institutional, as it was made and disseminated by the adoption industry) violence by dismissing the biological ties and disregarding the inequalities endured by birth mothers, both White and non-White. This language reiterated heteropatriarchal ideals that children only have two real parents through marriage and more significantly erased the importance of birth mothers, parents, and family. It denaturalized the relationship between birth mothers and their children to the extent that if they ever saw each other again, it would be as if they were strangers rather than family.

In addition, positive adoption language contributed to the common adoptee feeling of needing to outwardly reject their birth parents as parents or extended family to protect the legitimacy of their adoptive parents and adoptive family. Adoptees are not supposed to feel sadness or loss about their birth family, or disconnection from their adoptive family, which can further traumatic violence. As ethnic studies scholar and Korean adoptee Kim Park Nelson has explained, attempts at normalization in general by adoptive families and adoptees can be a form of self-erasure that “has been less about changing societal expectations of what constitutes a normal family than about imposing the preexisting definition of normality on adoptive families.”⁶⁶ In other words, rather than embrace their difference and the possibilities in expanding families through adoptive kinships, the adoption industry and families restricted themselves to the normative ideal.

The battle over language did not stop after Spencer introduced PAL in 1979, as individuals and institutions continued to promote the use of positive adoption vocabulary. For example, the director of St. Elizabeth Foundation in Baton Rouge, which is a nonprofit organization that provides pregnancy counseling, maternity, and adoption services, submitted a guest column in 1989 to *The Advocate*, to inform news writers and the public to recognize and avoid “biased/faulty terminology”: “Adoption is all about love. It is also about choice. It is about building families. It is about permanence. It is about commitment. The birth mother who isn’t ready or able to parent, as the one mentioned in Cullen’s article makes a difficult and loving choice to give to her baby a better chance by making an adoption plan. The adoptive parents choose to offer their love and nurture to the

baby by giving family, permanence, commitment.”⁶⁷ In another example, *The Daily Oklahoman* educated readers about positive adoption language during National Adoption Month in 1993.⁶⁸

Those who educated the public felt compelled because traditional adoption language was abundant. Spencer stated that the purpose of outlining positive adoption language was to provide insight for people and the public who unwittingly “continue to confuse and distort” adoption terminology. She claimed that adoption was “an essentially simple and orderly human transaction” that “should not be confused or made more complex by the use of imprecise language.” She reaffirmed that love was embedded in the creation of a family through adoption and in her effort to transform adoption terminology: “After all, the language of adoption is *loving* communication among members of a family created by social contract, sustained by their life together, and supported by an informed society that validates the integrity of the family.”⁶⁹

Despite the explicit allusion to love and “positivity,” PAL and RAL were both effects of power deployed by social workers, adoption professionals, and adoptive parents (as knowledge producers rather than birth parents and adoptees) and instruments of power that have been used to violently define motherhood and family, which has significantly shaped the adoption industry and discourse. The new language guidelines are fairly standard now for agencies, and tables delineating positive and respectful language from negative and old language can be found across the internet in ways that still ignore the minimization of birth parents and the nuances of race. PAL and RAL changed adoption discourse among the industry and the parents and families involved and normalized adoptive relations. However, nonbiological family-making still had to be legitimized on a broader stage. Social science research on adoption outcomes stepped in to continue and deepen the interpretation process for TRNAs.

NORMALIZING ADOPTION THROUGH SCIENTIFIC STUDIES

While the new, universalized adoption language failed to address the ways in which race played a part in “positively” defining motherhood and family, the issue of race, the specter of the birth mother, and the battle for legitimacy in TRNAs could not be ignored. The undeniable public visibility of these adoptions due to physical differences between adoptive parents and adopted children meant that family-making was not and could not be a private or secret matter. But even before controversy over TRNAs existed, the uncertainty of and dichotomous views on adoption prompted countless social scientific outcome studies, in the fields of psychology and social work especially, to determine whether adoption in general had positive or negative outcomes. New questions of success, benefit, and harm

emerged as adoption began shifting away from early orphan trains and child labor toward family-making. Science was the response to the uncertainty of adoption: it would reassure adopting parents, social workers, and the state that adoptions could not only be safe but successful and beneficial. More important, select studies would prove—in a positivistic way—that with proper intervention and risk management, nature could yield to nurture. Love could displace nature, affirming that it has the power to overcome any negative possibilities.⁷⁰

While researchers who are engaged in outcome studies have referenced and reviewed the broader literature of these studies, the discussion of such research beyond the context of “these studies are important and more refined studies are necessary” has been very marginal. Most scholars who support transracial and transnational adoptions cite these studies as expert and scientific proof that they do not cause harm. They illustrate how such adoptions can produce loving families with healthy and well-adjusted children.⁷¹ A few scholars have delved deeper to examine their role in shaping adoption.⁷² For example, Kim Park Nelson provides a stronger critique of methods in TRNA outcome studies that primarily relied on adoptive parents’ perspectives rather than centering adult adoptee experiences; conflated measurements of “adjustment” with racial and cultural assimilation; and minimized problems and challenges found in such adoptions.⁷³

Building from Park Nelson, I critically examine how transracial adoption and transnational adoption outcome studies framed adoption and interpreted race. My intervention here is not to reexamine the studies or to completely dismiss them, but rather to suggest that they helped establish a specific narrative about transracial and transnational adoptive family-making. First, while the studies broadly claimed that domestic and transnational transracial adopted children had healthy outcomes, I argue that the studies were equally important because the positivistic method (where experimentation and observation led to “truth”) inherent in such studies transformed the uncertainty of adoption into positive (certain and affirming) knowledge about TRNA. They helped normalize both TRNAs and the adoptive families to be “just as good” as same-race (also called “inracial”) adoptions and in some cases nonadoptive families.

This positivistic approach produced another significant issue in the way race was (mis)measured and (mis)interpreted. Race was almost always framed as a genetic descriptor or simplistic identity that one possessed or did not possess, which failed to capture the complex ways race is constructed (internally and externally), intersects with other identities, and changes. Hence, I argue that this mismeasure of race meant the studies were never as conclusive as they claimed. Yet they still produced crucial “objective” knowledge about TRA’s and TNA’s success. As a result, TRA and TNA advocates employed this research to underscore the transcendence of love: despite same-race adoptions being favored by researchers (because they could achieve “naturalization” not just normalization), love in

TRNAs could overcome racial difference and produce a positively defined form of family-making.

DOMESTIC AND TRANSNATIONAL TRANSRACIAL STUDIES

Matching was the easiest way to re-create naturalization, but this strategy was clearly inhibited by the racial difference that was visible in TRA and TNA. For many people, institutions, and the nation these adoptions symbolized the racial liberalism of the post-World War II era and anticommunist sentiment from the Cold War. Yet, paired with the historical context of slavery, settler colonialism, eugenics, immigrant exclusion, segregation, and antimiscegenation laws in the United States and its imperial tendencies abroad, such adoptions evoked mixed feelings from the American public. Controversy around them came to a head in the 1970s when non-White organizations and communities called into question the motives and effects of White parents, adoption agencies, and state and federal governments that were adopting or facilitating the adoption of Black, Native American, and Asian children in greater numbers.

In 1972 the National Association for Black Social Workers (NABSW) published a position paper that addressed their concerns about the history, present, and future of African American children and families. The paper was widely reviled and labeled as a cultural nationalist and reverse-racist statement by transracial adoption advocates.⁷⁴ It affirmed the importance of “positive” ethnicity in the historical context of suppressed Black identity and asserted the belief that family is the basic unit of society, crucial for the physical, psychological, and cultural development of identity. In highlighting the structural racism embedded “at every level” of society, the paper affirmed the necessity of the Black family to raise Black children, who would always be posited as racially different from White children and parents, in order to pass on positive cultural identity and survival skills to negotiate racism.⁷⁵ Indeed, many transracial adoption outcome studies often framed their research inquiry, at least in part, on the opposition articulated by the NABSW and other critics of transracial adoption.⁷⁶ Despite wide disagreement within the social work profession, the Child Welfare League of America revised its suggested standards in 1973. Before the NABSW position paper, the CWLA had publicly supported transracial adoptions. Afterward, however, it reversed course in a way that faintly followed the NABSW, supporting the belief that same-race placements were preferred over transracial ones.⁷⁷

As TRA and TNA adoption began to increase in the 1960s and 1970s, and then continue despite their controversy, researchers started looking into the question of whether these placements were beneficial or harmful to adoptees of color. These early scientific studies examined numerous independent variables. The main

one was the child's ethnoracial background, where race was conceived as a static physical and genetic descriptor rather than a fluid identity and mode of power. Other independent variables included gender (which like race was reduced to a static category), age at the time of placement, age at the time of the study, sibling composition, racial isolation/disapproval, and neighborhood and school environment, among other categories. They were used to measure just as many dependent variables such as educational performance, level of functioning, discrimination, and problem behavior, with the main ones being self-esteem, ethnoracial identity, and overall adjustment. By and large, TRA and TNA were summarized as just as successful as inracial adoptions.

Self-esteem was considered a mainstay of healthy development and has been investigated in many outcome studies. Low self-esteem had been strongly connected to negative outcomes such as aggression, antisocial behavior, and delinquency. Psychology professor David Brodzinsky and colleagues noted that "being adopted can complicate the development of self-image and self-esteem" because of feelings of being cut off or rejected by birth parents and perceived differences between themselves and their adoptive family members, especially with transracial adoptions.⁷⁸ Studies done at various stages of growth (including childhood, adolescence, and adulthood) on self-esteem have generally determined little to no difference between adopted and nonadopted children. Social work professor Ruth McRoy and colleagues conducted a comparative study in 1984 of Black children from transracial and inracial adoptions and found no differences overall in self-esteem, which was even as high as the general population of nonadopted children. They suggested that "positive self-esteem [could] be generated as effectively among black children in white adoptive families as in black adoptive families."⁷⁹ Femmie Juffer and Marinus IJzendoorn, child and family scholars in the Netherlands, did a meta-analysis of 88 outcome studies and confirmed that adoptees of all categories, international and domestic as well as transracial and inracial, showed "normative levels of self-esteem."⁸⁰ Studies thus produced positivistic proof that transracial adoption had no negative effects on children's self-esteem.

Research studies were also concerned with ethnoracial identity, especially after criticism of TRA and TNA grew. This question of ethnoracial identity was important because many adoptive parents lived in small cities and rural towns. The widely practiced strategy of cultural assimilation was criticized for stripping non-White children of the right to their "birth culture." The obvious critique was that an adopted child could have high self-esteem but still have a negative view of their racial identity. Thus one of the central areas of investigation for adoption researchers was: "Did living in mostly white neighborhoods, going to school with mostly white students, and being raised by white parents hurt ethnoracial identity development?"

Devon Brooks and Richard Barth, professors in social work, published a comparative study in 1999 of White, Black, and Korean adolescents adopted by White

parents. In a survey of adoptive parents, the study found that there were no significant differences among the groups in dealing with “ethnoracial discrimination and identity,” where the latter included “discomfort over their ethnoracial appearance and their pride, shame, and embarrassment in their ethnoracial birth group.” Despite multiple measures indicating racial identity concerns, summary measures narrated more positive outcomes. Black adoptees faced discrimination at high rates (42 percent female and 50 percent male experienced it “sometimes/often”); Asian male and female and Black male adoptees felt “discomfort over appearance” (all three groups near 50 percent); and Asian male and female adoptees “hardly ever/never” felt pride in their birth group (both at 65 percent). But collectively, according to the researchers, 65 percent of the children had “secure racial identities,” 35 percent retained “strong racial identities,” and none possessed “weak racial identity.” This led Brooks and Barth to conclude that the “present findings demonstrate that Caucasian parents, too, are capable of raising African-American and Asian children and meeting their children’s ethnoracial needs.”⁸¹

In her comparative study of Black adolescents from transracial and same-race adoptions, researcher Karen Vroegh argued that there was no evidence, from her studies or others, that everyday relationships with Black people were necessary to the development of a Black racial identity.⁸² Sociologists Arnold Silverman and William Feigelman stated it most forcefully that the findings from their research and other studies showed that the push to curtail transracial placements was highly questionable: “[Our] evidence indicates that whatever problems may be generated by transracial adoption, the benefits to the child outweigh its costs. There is no evidence that any of the serious problems of adjustment suggested by the critics of transracial adoption are present in any meaningful proportion for nonwhite children who have been adopted by white parents.”⁸³ Such studies “proved” that racial identity was not negatively affected by TRNAs.

The predominant picture was that White parents were able to provide nurturing, loving, and permanent homes that fostered healthy, well-adjusted transracial adoptees who were aware of their heritage and had high self-esteem.⁸⁴ As Minnesota social worker and researcher Harriet Fricke put it, “[White couples] have all the attributes of good adoptive parents—with an important plus: they are tremendously secure people who do not need constant community or larger-family support to survive.”⁸⁵ Likewise, in 1975, Lucille Grow and Deborah Shapiro, research associates for the CWLA Research Center, found a success rate of 77 percent for the adoption of Black children by White parents, which approximated other studies of “conventional White infant adoptions.” They concluded: “Thus, the predominant picture is that of healthy and well-adjusted children, aware of their heritage, living with parents who were highly satisfied with their adoption experience.”⁸⁶ Child welfare researcher David Fanshel found similar results and claimed overall success of the Indian Adoption Project, where 78 percent of the adjustment outcomes for adoptees were adequate or excellent, with only 10 percent receiving

greater doubt.⁸⁷ Silverman and Feigelman, in their 1984 study, found that Korean adoptees were *better* adjusted than their White counterparts.⁸⁸

In their review of transracial adoption outcome research, Rita Simon and Howard Altstein, two of the most cited researchers on TRA and TNA outcome studies, concluded that “the quality of parenting was more important than whether the Black child had been inracially or transracially adopted” and that “transracial adoptees had developed pride in being black and were comfortable in their interactions with both black and white races.”⁸⁹ Simon and Altstein fervently maintained that their “objective,” “unmotivated,” “depoliticized” scientific inquiries and studies demonstrate that transracial adoption is best for the child and society:

After three decades and several volumes of research, this is our final examination of transracial adoption. We enter this area of inquiry with no social or political agenda. We exit with none. We were interested in looking at how races could live together in so intimate an environment as the family at a time when we thought the races could not get much further apart (mid-1960s). To the best of our ability we sought the truth. We think we found it, as far as that abstract can be found. . . . What we have found is that in the overwhelming majority of cases, transracial adoption is a win-win situation.⁹⁰

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

RACIAL REALITIES OF OUTCOME RESEARCH

The reality of adoption research, however, was that outcome studies often produced negative, mixed, or inconclusive results.⁹¹ A primary reason was the studies’ methodological choices, including ignoring adoptive parents’ limitations, not accounting for high attrition rates, downplaying how race mattered to adoption success, failing to account for the social construction of race, and ignoring the structural violence that preceded adoption. For example, some studies pre-selected respondents who were composed of families that were better educated, were higher-income earners, and had adopted younger and healthier children. In addition, children filled out questionnaires in the presence of their parents, which made their answers less reliable as that presence may have influenced their answers.⁹² Early studies were largely dependent on adoptive parents’ perceptions as expressed in interviews or surveys.⁹³ Silverman and Feigelman even acknowledged that it was reasonable to ask if such perceptions could be “reliable,” but they had confidence in parental perception because of results from other studies. Fanshel’s 1972 study of Native American children, for instance, claimed that parents’ perceptions “closely correlated with the assessments made by trained interviewers and clinicians.”⁹⁴

Early studies did not account for how reluctant parents might be to discuss negative outcomes. Ironically, Silverman and Feigelman's argument in their 1984 study of Korean adoptees contradicted their research done in a 1977 study of White couples who had adopted Vietnamese children before and after Operation Baby-lift.⁹⁵ They found that Vietnamese adoptees who were adopted *after* the historical moment of Operation Baby-lift had adjusted just as well as Vietnamese children adopted *before* it happened, which ran counter to both common sense and their hypothesis. They believed that anti-Vietnamese sentiment and critiques in the media about the desirability and feasibility of these adoptions would increase adjustment problems for later adoptions. They cautiously reasoned and cited another researcher that "even if there were no sudden surge in public hostility toward their adoptions, these parents might be *reluctant to admit the existence of problems*. H. David Kirk, in his 1964 study of adopting families, has described the reluctance of adoptive parents to admit problems in their adoptions."⁹⁶ Silverman and Feigelman, among many other researchers, therefore ignored the limitations of depending on adoptive parents, who might be reluctant to admit problems that they had explained a few years earlier in their own study.

Another important weakness of adoption outcome research was that longitudinal studies used samples that had high participant attrition rates.⁹⁷ While high attrition rates are not uncommon, it was uncertain whether these studies were showing good outcomes, where usually 70 percent or more of the children who were adopted transracially "adjusted well," or if they were merely showing the positive outcomes of adoptive parents who were still connected to their adoption agency—which was the typical avenue for participant recruitment—and were more willing to share their success stories.⁹⁸ Perhaps even more significant than just high attrition rates was the fact that outcome studies never mentioned or included disruption (where the process of adoption has ended before the adoption was finalized), or dissolution (where the legal tie between the adoptive parents and the adopted child was severed after the adoption had already been finalized), or discontinuity (where children are estranged from their adoptive family).⁹⁹

Other studies ignored or downplayed how race mattered. A supposedly "non-determining" factor, race was in reality very significant in various studies that were conducted in different decades, which contradicted generalized claims in other studies that it was "not statistically significant." For example, sociologist Laurence Falk—in a 1970 study of same-race White adoption and transracial adoptions of "Negro," "Indian," and "Oriental" children—found that White adoptive parents of transracial adoptees faced greater isolation and resistance from relatives; that parents were slightly less inclined to do it again if they had to; they were more likely to think that it was more difficult to raise a child of a different race; and they were less likely to recommend TRA than inracial couples were to recommend inracial adoption.¹⁰⁰ Moreover, despite the claims by Vroegh as well as Silverman and Feigelman, child psychiatrists Don Heacock and Cheryl Cunningham in 1976 reported that in a comparison of 12 TRAs and 12 same-race placements of Black

children, “the Black children [adopted by Black families] clearly were less ambivalent about their color and were more favorably inclined to see themselves as Black and to see black in a positive light, whereas the white family children were ambivalent and preferred White to Black.”¹⁰¹

Similarly, McRoy and colleagues found in 1982 positive self-esteem in transracial adoptees *but* lower levels in their sense of racial identity.¹⁰² Those who attended integrated schools, lived in integrated communities, and had parents who accepted their racial identity felt positive about themselves as Black persons. Transracial adoptees who did not have those experiences—that is, their racial identity was deemphasized and they had no Black role models—tended to devalue their racial identity. Some children who had no contact with Black people within their neighborhood or school had negative perceptions of Black people in general: “blacks are poor,” “many are militant,” and “they use bad English.”¹⁰³ White adoptive parents, McRoy and colleagues stated, should be aware of and accept that the racial identity of their child is different from their own. They should be willing to make changes to help their child’s development by moving to integrated neighborhoods, enrolling in integrated schools, and establishing social relationships with Black families. The researchers concluded by claiming: “Although most white adoptive families applying to adopt black children probably can provide loving homes for the children, not all of them can fulfill black children’s need to feel positive about their black identity.”¹⁰⁴ Thus they offered a conditional endorsement of transracial adoptive placements that “if necessary,” the parents should meet “specific criteria” and that adoption agencies investigate the larger “racial milieu” to determine whether they can successfully nurture healthy, racial identity for their child.¹⁰⁵

Outcome studies on adoptions from Asia also revealed that race matters. In an early 1978 study on Korean adoptees, Dong Soo Kim found that adoptees worried about their physical appearance and rejected their racial background.¹⁰⁶ In a contemporaneous study of families who adopted from Korea, Jiannbin Lee Shiao and colleagues found in 2004 that most White parents, when dealing with racial differences, often took a color-evasive approach, encouraging the adoptees to assimilate because it was easier than dealing with unfamiliar racial issues. They argued that this approach actually led to a White perspective that tried to “normalize” their children, which, “consciously or not, worked to include their own children in the White category.”¹⁰⁷ White adoptive parents were “able to fully love the nonwhite children in their lives without having to examine their own prejudice” and “point to their children as proof of their tolerance.”¹⁰⁸ Even when adoptive parents did want to cultivate cultural interests, they expressed uncertainty on how to achieve those goals.¹⁰⁹

This has been a challenge for many adoptive parents who live in predominately White spaces and do not have meaningful connections with people in other communities. Additional evidence from surveys has shown that many Korean adoptees considered themselves as White, indicating they did not possess positive

ethnoracial identities. In a 2000 survey of 167 adult Korean adoptees, nearly 60 percent considered themselves either “Caucasian” or “American/European” while growing up. More specifically, 36 percent of the adoptees considered themselves “Caucasian” and 22 percent considered themselves “American/European.”¹¹⁰ Beyond what adoptees identified as, another study in 2009 showed that Chinese adoptees wished they did not look Chinese (32 percent; $n = 1,233$) and those from India wished they were White (49 percent; $n = 200$).¹¹¹ White adoptive parents of children from Korea held similar views about race. More than two-thirds of respondents (68 percent for mothers and 73 percent for fathers) in a 2003 study reported that “their transracial adoption did not change the racial characteristics of their family.”¹¹² These studies strongly contradict the claim that there has been “no evidence” of “any significant proportion” showing that transracial and transnational adoptions are affected by notions of race.

Although a few researchers understood and were interested in the social notion of race (as opposed to it being only a biological trait or a self-ascribed identity), they, along with other researchers who did not make this distinction, conflated children who were perceived “fully” within a singular racial category with children who were deemed “mixed-race” or “bi-racial.”¹¹³ In their 1975 study of 125 Black children in White homes, Lucille Grow and Deborah Shapiro stated that “most were described as having fair or light brown skin coloring and some Negroid features, but only slightly more than half were ‘obviously’ black, according to their parents.”¹¹⁴ For Vroegh’s 1997 follow-up study, of the 34 “black” children who were adopted by White parents, 74 percent ($n = 25$) were of mixed Black and White background.¹¹⁵ In an early 1972 study of White parents in Los Angeles County who adopted “Negro-White” children, Ryo Suzuki and Marilyn Horn found that “our records indicate that some of the Caucasian families who expressed interest in a child who was racially different and who were fully accepting of the child with a Negro label, did not wish to adopt a child who was visibly Negro. Children who were ‘part-Negro’ but looked Caucasian were, therefore, the ones that were selected for these families.”¹¹⁶

Closer examination of these studies illustrates how race operated in the U.S. social imagination. Despite the children in Suzuki and Horn’s study being able to pass as White, they were still labeled as “Negro” because of legal traditions that have historically used hypodescent (e.g., the “one-drop rule”) to define Blackness. Even though the children were not visibly Black, the study treated them as Black and claimed that the adopted children were adjusting well and that racial issues were “not as great as they had anticipated.” Yet the study did admit that the two families “whose children’s appearance was Negroid” did experience difficulties.¹¹⁷ Thus there was an acknowledgment of different experiences between the two “Black” groups of children without exploring how anti-Blackness and colorism might have played roles in those differences. Rather, the study presented a general conclusion that racial issues “were not as great” as expected. Important to note is

that “Caucasian” itself is a pseudoscientific term that was coined in the late eighteenth century by German anatomist Johann Blumenbach, who visited the Caucasus Mountains and believed that region was the site of human origination, and people from there, along with the rest of Europe, belonged to the most intelligent of five races (Caucasian, Mongolian, Malay, American, and Ethiopian).¹¹⁸ While the term is still widely used colloquially and in many institutional as well as local, state, and federal contexts, it is a term rooted in debunked pseudoscience.

Disaggregating racial categories for analysis would not have necessarily reversed or improved research outcomes. Both the decision of *whom* to adopt—that is, the difference between adopting a child who is “obviously Black” versus a child who is racially ambiguous—and how individuals, family members, society, and even adoptees themselves reacted to this were affected by race in different and intricate ways. In fact, disaggregation might have led to more positivistic claims about “mixed-race” children. Nevertheless, “race” was often simplified in social scientific studies, where race was a proxy for ancestry. While the concept of race can tell us much about identity, experience, and inequality, it could not do this well when it was reduced to a fixed concept. Social scientific adoption outcome studies have confined race to an independent biological marker attached to heredity on the one hand and the measurement of “(ethno)racial identity” as a static finite goal over time on the other.

But race and racial identity are far more complex social constructions that are linked to individual and broader material consequences that can be contradictory and change over time. For example, social work scholar Tien Ung and colleagues theorize racial identity in relation to ecology, where “racial identity is embedded within multiple complex systems” that are interdependent and fluid, as well as existing not just at the individual level but also at the familial, community, and societal levels.¹¹⁹ Racial identity as an ecological system can hold, for instance, the diversity and contradictions of positive self-esteem and strong ethnoracial identity as a young child but also changed attitudes as adoptees become adolescents, young adults, or older adults because ecologies might have transformed over a lifetime from shifting environmental impacts. Yet these nuances were rarely explored in outcome studies. Instead, what many of these studies indirectly showed in adoptive parents’ preferences to adopt White children or biracial children was the symbolic value of Whiteness. While biracial children were being categorized wholly within the White parent–Black child binary, their perceived “racial make-up” was appealing precisely for the opposite reason—in that they were closer to Whiteness and further from Blackness.

In Fanshel’s 1972 study of White parents who adopted Native American children through the Indian Adoption Project, his research revealed that all transracial adoptions were not considered equal, showing a distinct racial preference. When asked about alternatives to Native American adoptions, 15.6 percent of adoptive mothers responded that they would have “adopted easily” a child who was mixed

“Negro-white” but who looked obviously “Negro,” while 58.3 percent responded that they “could not consider” such an adoption (see chapter 1). When adoptive mothers were asked if they would consider the adoption of an “Oriental,” the percentages reversed; 70.8 percent responded that they would have “adopted easily” and 6.3 percent said they “could not consider.” Sociologist Sara Dorow explains this phenomenon in her study of White parents who were making adoption and surrogacy plans and choices. She argues that “whiteness” operates as the invisible background noise. Asian babies are perceived as being desirably different and relatively baggage-free, which allows for the celebration of positive culture while washing away negative cultural particularities, but U.S. Black babies remain baggage-laden, tainted with abjectness, illegality, and criminality.¹²⁰ Even as Whiteness held symbolic value, methodologically it was an unmarked and uninvestigated aspect of race. Researchers who were invested in ideas of positivism and objectivity (and in some cases adoptive parents themselves) did not find it necessary to reflect upon their own racial and adoptive parent positionalities.¹²¹ Nor did they consider the ways adoptive parents’ racial and adoptive positionality might affect how they answered questions about their children.

A “LOVING” SOLUTION

Countless social scientific studies had “proven” that TRAs and TNAs indeed could be successful and therefore normal in terms of identity, behavioral, and psychological adjustment when compared to same-race adoptions.¹²² Simon argued that two-and-a-half decades’ worth of studies have shown that TRA and TNA do not produce harm and are “unequivocally” in the children’s “best interest.”¹²³ Similarly, Harvard law professor Elizabeth Bartholet, a strong advocate for TRA and TNA, has argued that there is no credible evidence to suggest that transracial adoptions produce harm, but that there is evidence to suggest that children are indeed harmed by institutional care that “delays adoptive placement or denies adoption altogether.”¹²⁴

By ignoring the nuances of race and making broad claims about the success of TRA and TNA, researchers assisted in normalizing and legitimizing such adoptions. These adoptions already could not reproduce the efforts of “naturalization” in the same way that same-race adoption could, and opposition existed from many people who held overtly racist views about multiracial families. There was credible criticism by organizations such as the NABSW and parts of the general public who questioned the ability of White couples to raise non-White children, their motives, the historical and social contexts, and government priorities concerning transracial and transnational adoption. Some of the studies even admitted that in-racial placements were preferred, and that transracial adoption should be allowed only in the circumstances where there were not enough non-White parents to adopt.¹²⁵ These scientific outcome studies were an explicit response to public and

professional anxiety and disapproval surrounding such adoptions. They became a form of interpretation that validated this way of family-making as a desirable and viable option by claiming unequivocal success even when results were often mixed and various research limitations affected the ability to make absolute claims.

Adoption research emerged as a primary strategy for producing knowledge that could demonstrate the success and strength of not only recent TRA and TNA adoptions but future ones as well. Just as significant, though, was that these TRA and TNA studies enabled supporters to point to love as the reason for success. As Park Nelson has asserted, the “almost universal support” derived from the research was a “major factor in the expansion” of TRNAs.¹²⁶ Vocal TRA and TNA supporters used these early studies to proclaim that such adoptions were successful regardless of the racial background of adoptive parents precisely *because* they provided love and took a color-evasive approach to adoption (further explored in chapter 3).¹²⁷ Issues pertaining to racial difference, alienation, and probable racism that adoptees would face were dismissed by the power of “personal commitment” and love, which were deemed more important than “racial knowledge.” Juffer and IJzendoorn noted that these risk factors, which can lead to less optimal development, were counteracted by “protective factors” provided by adoptive families that engendered resilience in adopted children.¹²⁸ Similarly, Silverman and Feigelman reported that the success of these controversial adoptions was attributed to “the impact of a positive home and family environment [which] can undo much of the damage created by previous deprivation in young children.”¹²⁹ Likewise, the question of who parented children of color was unimportant: “What parentless children need most of all is not someone who looks like them but someone who *loves* them.”¹³⁰

While Simon and Altstein do warn that more than just love is needed, they also declare: “The results show that these children feel loved, secure, committed to their adoptive families, and comfortable with their racial/ethnic identities.”¹³¹ For them, affective assimilation (the marriage of love and attachment) was more important and demonstrated the success of transracial and transnational adoptive families. As adoption researcher Lene Myong and gender studies scholar Mons Bissenbakker argue about the adoption of Korean children in Denmark, the investments in love and attachment “sooth and mend the unequal and racialized power relations between adoptee and adopter,” such as negative feelings about adoption but also “the impact of inequality, displacement, and loss of transnational adoption.”¹³² Despite most outcome studies finding approximately 20 percent to 30 percent of children still having had adjustment and/or identity issues (not to mention the adoptions that were disrupted, dissolved, or experienced discontinuities before such studies), they were used to confirm the temporality of TRNAs that harm existed in the past, while love, healing, and success existed in the present and future. They were the solution to violence rather than the cause of harm. In short, the certainty of success and promise of love from such studies ignored the complexity of TRNAs.

The approach of using the studies to prove the success of love ignored the structural and historical violence that preceded adoption. None of the early studies examined the conditions and context for why adoption was “needed” in the first place or ways to prevent the state of crisis that “compelled” society to accept transracial and transnational adoption.¹³³ Fanshel in fact did quite the opposite by blaming the condition of Native American children on Native American “culture” and personal irresponsibility that produced unmarried mothers, illegitimate children, poverty, and other child welfare issues.¹³⁴ In 1972, under the auspices of the Child Welfare League of America, Fanshel published *Far from the Reservation*, a report on the Indian Adoption Project, five years after its official ending. The study began in 1960, during which researchers interviewed 97 families that adopted 98 Native American children between 1958 and 1966. Although the title of the report suggested that it focused on the children who were adopted, most of the report centered on the adoptive parents. Once again, adopted children were not interviewed, in part because they were too young at the time but also because adoptive parents were told: “In your own way you are an expert.”¹³⁵ The purpose was to study the nature of the Indian Adoption Project: “the motives of the parents in adopting an Indian child, their backgrounds and social attitudes, the experiences of the children with their adoptive families, and their development and adjustment in their new families.”¹³⁶

Fanshel’s report claimed the Indian Adoption Project was an overall success. He paired it with a clear and larger story that suggested Native American cultural practices and irresponsibility had been harmful to Indian children, which had caused the need for non-Indian adoptions. Like the news articles on the adoption of Native American children by White couples highlighted in chapter 1, Fanshel narrated the adoptions as a progressive and necessary step to help the plight of the Native Americans, but it too did not address the violence and the structural racism that produced the conditions of poverty in the first place.¹³⁷ For example, under the heading “Major Problems of the Project,” Fanshel never mentioned the violation of tribal sovereignty; coerced and forced removal of children; nor did he connect the project to the larger history of sterilization, boarding schools, civilizing projects, and tribal termination.

While Fanshel admitted the solution to the “suffering” of Native American children should not be centered on removing them from their families, he ended with a different and more recognizable conclusion.¹³⁸ Some Indian leaders might understand that “some children may have to be *saved* through adoption,” but that “even with the *benign* outcomes reported here, it may be that Indian leaders would *rather* see their children share the fate of their fellow Indians than lose them in the white world.”¹³⁹ For Fanshel and others who studied TNA and TRA, adoption was never a structural issue. Rather, it was framed—especially for Black and Native communities—as resentful “minority groups” that cared more about group pride than the well-being of their children.

The dismissal of broader conditions was even easier for transnational adoption. Simon and Altstein argued that the “international component” of TNA in fact simplified adoption rather than making it more complex because Asian children did not carry the “historical baggage” that Black children possessed: “True, there are other issues of wealth, power, race, deception, kidnapping, class exploitation, colonialism, and imperialism, but these conditions are not as ‘close to home’ as the troubled and at times violent history of race in the United States.”¹⁴⁰ Their statement acknowledged the violence involved in transnational adoption but simultaneously negated its importance in how we might think about TRA and TNA in a larger context and in relation to each other. None of the early research studies examined the effects of denying Native sovereignty, breaking treaties, disproportionate child service reporting, criminalization, the war on drugs, the prison industrial complex, neoliberal policies such as welfare reform, militarism, and war. Dawn Day, a Black social worker, was the one of the few researchers to mention in 1979 the discriminatory nature of child welfare services and the need for prevention in addition and prior to adoption.¹⁴¹

CONCLUSION

By looking at the positive adoption language that emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s (and its contemporary form in respectful adoption language), we can better understand how adoption social workers and parents tried to actively interpret the loving possibilities of adoption in new ways. These efforts were intended to destigmatize adoption, adoptive motherhood, and parenthood, which would in turn legitimize them as a normal form of family-making and an avenue to parenthood. This public education effort to change adoption terminology by narrowing the meaning of mother, parent, and family, however, had considerable repercussions for birth mothers (and families), especially for those who were non-White and not categorized as “responsible choice-makers.” The visibility of constructed racial differences complicated the goal of normalization for TRA and TNA. It served as a reminder that the discursive process of denaturalization of the birth mother and naturalization of the adoptive mother was not as smooth and solely a “positive” act, especially for transracial and transnational adoption.

Positive adoption language revealed how adoptive mothers, White birth mothers, and birth mothers of color were stigmatized in different ways as relational racial and gendered subjects. While (White) adoptive mothers could be recuperated within heteropatriarchal ideals of motherhood by adopting a child and becoming a nuclear family by fully disconnecting from the birth family, White birth mothers could only be redeemed through making the “positive choice” of adoption and being severed (legally and symbolically through PAL and RAL) from “real” and “natural” motherhood. Lastly, birth mothers of color were invisible subjects in terms of PAL and RAL. Neither adoption nor positive and respectful

adoption language addressed their identities, subjectivities, and experiences. Racism, settler colonialism, and militarized humanitarianism situated them as “illegitimate” mothers who were outside of the idealized concept of the universal woman. Yet the controversy of TRAs and TNAs meant that the birth mothers of color would be the most haunting and disruptive specter for adoptive families. In attempting to positively define and sanitize the process of adoption, positive and respectful adoption language in fact hid existing forms of symbolic violence and produced new ones.

Where PAL and RAL largely failed to engage with the dynamics of race in TRNAs, social scientific research by and large simplistically addressed race, concluding that such adoptions would not harm adoptees. Early outcome studies tried to show that adoption could produce healthy and happy adoptees and families. Studies that focused on transracial and transnational adoptions attempted to answer whether these adoptions had any deleterious effects on adoptee self-esteem, ethnoracial pride, or ethnoracial identity. Despite obvious limitations and contradictory results, many of the studies made broad conclusions that transracial and transnational adoptions were just as good as same-race adoptive families and biological families. They were invested in Black, Asian, and Native well-being because it was in relation to White love and care as well as notions of racial liberalism and inclusion. Belief in the veracity of “objective” and “positivistic” TRA and TNA outcome research became hegemonic and indisputable. This enabled adoption researchers and adoption supporters to assert that transracial and transnational adoptions should be the solution to the moral crises of overseas orphans, neglected children on reservations, and an overcrowded foster care system.¹⁴²

Ignored or minimized were any symbolic, institutional, or structural harms that produced these adoptions in the first place; prevented Black, Asian, and Native parents from maintaining their families; denied or limited access to adoption services for parents of color; or that might have been the effect of such adoptions. Indeed, they were overshadowed by the “objective” outcomes, moralization, and statements of love, which posited love as superseding any racial factor. My aim here is not to argue that had scientists been more objective and accounted for the various research limitations, they would have produced better studies or that PAL and the studies were invested in an inauthentic form of love. Instead, I juxtapose positive and respectful adoption language with social scientific research to show what was at stake in the efforts of social workers, adoptive parents, and researchers. Although more recent outcome studies in the past twenty years have offered a more complex look at TRNA, the knowledge and narrative produced by early studies left an extended legacy on adoption law, policies, and discourse.¹⁴³

Indeed, both PAL and outcome studies produced new knowledge and representations that had serious symbolic and material consequences for the adoption industry, adoptees, adoptive mothers/parents, and birth mothers/parents—all in the effort to legitimize TRA and TNA as normal and loving. As Myong and

Bissenbakker might suggest, they enabled “certain forms of kinship, intimacy, and liveability and foreclose[d] others.”¹⁴⁴ The reality is that the lives of adopted individuals and the mothers who birthed them exceed what positivistic studies and universalistic language can capture. Chapter 3 explores the ways in which the government participated in knowledge formation, discursive representations, and ultimately legal production that situated children and families in specific ways that furthered the cause of domestic transracial adoption of Black children.