

Conclusion

Love, Alternative Kinships, and Imagining Otherwise

Violence is attached to the transracial and transnational adoptions of Black, Asian, and Native American children in the United States. These adoptions emerged out of individual, institutional, and state forms of love, yet structural, symbolic, and traumatic forms of violence created the conditions and/or became the effects of TRNAs. Violence affected adoption temporally (before, during, and after) as well as spatially—inside, outside, and beyond the act of TRNAs. These multiple forms of violence contributed to the relational, differential, and intersectional construction of racial meaning that made Black, Asian, and Native American children “differently adoptable” by White American families. Racial liberalism, neoliberalism, and settler colonial logics were just some of the ideologies that employed notions of love to justify TRNAs. These adoptions not only constructed racial meaning for the children and families of color and their spaces of origin but also relationally made White families, their homes, and the United States as the opposite future.

A RETURN TO LOVE

To conclude, I want to return to love. This book centers the examination of hidden types of violence attached to adoption and outlines ways that love has been monopolized by normative adoption discourse. In thinking about love, feminist scholar Sara Ahmed asks, “How has politics become a struggle over who has the right to name themselves as acting out of love?”¹ Eleanor Wilkinson, a feminist geographer, adds that we must understand “how love—even in its most charitable and benevolent form—can still be a source of power, domination, and exclusion.”²

Contrast this to what late adoptee and budding scholar Sunny Reed wrote: “Adoptees feel compelled to stay silent or risk serious conflict and emotional upheaval if they try to push conversations past and through *love*.”³ These quotes underscore the ways that love is not as simple as we think, especially when it comes to adoption. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Caribbean philosopher Frantz Fanon explores anti-Blackness that existed not only in the minds of White European colonizers but also internalized in the consciousness of Black people in Martinique. “Today I believe in the possibility of love,” he wrote; “that is why I endeavor to trace its imperfections, its perversions.”⁴ Fanon suggests that love has the potential to facilitate liberation but that it must be interrogated to ensure that we do not reproduce old systems of structural and psychological oppression. We know from thinkers Paulo Freire and bell hooks that love can be revolutionary and liberatory.⁵ But hooks also reminds us: “There can be no love without justice.”⁶

The question is, How do we get to love and justice? Where do we begin? Black feminist scholar Jennifer Nash explains how love is not just about loving others but also about laboring to love the self. This love of the self is not simply to center the self but, citing the writer Alice Walker, Nash describes self-love as the love that enables other loves.⁷ This reorienting the self toward difference acknowledges the limits of the self, and the self acknowledges that its experiences and needs are different from and yet still connected to the experiences and needs of others. Activist and faith leader Valerie Kaur eloquently adds to this understanding: “‘Revolutionary love’ is the choice to enter into labor for *others*, for our *opponents*, and for *ourselves* in order to transform the world around us.” Revolutionary love requires all three, and it must be practiced in community, as “a choice that we make over and over again.”⁸ This type of self-love, public love, and revolutionary love is understanding that love is a commitment. Love requires risk, vulnerability, and accountability. It may also include discomfort or pain. But most generally, in revolutionary love we are committing to being in relation differently.

Revolutionary love understands that the remedy to structural (historical and institutional) inequities does not reside within the state. On the path toward abolishing the current child welfare system, what can we do? For those who are less marginalized in adoption or even outside of adoption, how can we be with and for those who are most harmed? For those who hold righteous rage, how do we love those who might have perpetrated harm? Not because we owe anyone a debt of gratitude, but because alternative futures require relationality. For those who feel as though they have given everything to their adopted children, how do you put forth further love to hold the violence that adoption carries (for your child and others), regardless of how you view your own child’s adoption experience? These questions are not meant to gloss over the realities of strained and estranged adoptive relationships but to consider the ways that relationality in adoption could acknowledge violence and resist perpetrating further violence.

I believe that most people connected to adoption communities are moved by this thing we call love. It is my hope that as we continue our various individual and collective lives and projects—in whichever way they might relate to adoption—that we consider Elizabeth Povinelli's, Fanon's, and hooks's words about the political aspect and imperfect power of love in order to engage with rather than ignore the violence of adoption. This project believes that rather than holding on to an ideal conception of the nuclear adoptive family as solely a thing of love, we need to recognize and engage the violence. By its very nature of family separation, among so many other aspects, adoption is a violent process, where the problem of violence cannot be "solved." But acknowledging, confronting, and encircling violence allows the past to exist and intermingle with the present and future so that it is not simply minimized or dismissed.⁹ Again, what is at stake for my project is not the need to decipher whether TRNAs are "good" or "bad" but to understand how race, love, and violence have mutually constituted the creation of individuals, families, and spaces. It is not only concerned with the limits of love but how to reimagine love for alternative purposes. I conclude by thinking about anger, different forms of kinship, Indigenous knowledge, reproductive justice, and abolition as resistance and alternatives to institutionalized adoption.

RETURNING TO LOVE DOES NOT MEAN ERASING ANGER

Why are some adoptees angry, even when many grew up with a loving family? This is a common question, but I think the better question is, Why do so many people question the anger of adoptees? Korean adoptee and scholar Kimberly McKee draws from Sara Ahmed's concept of the feminist killjoy to posit the adoptee killjoy as a subject who refuses to perform happiness and gratitude. In contradistinction to the happy and grateful adoptee, the adoptee killjoy "disrupts" and "unsettles" narratives of adoption as humanitarian rescue and can even sabotage adoption's future.¹⁰ The adoptee killjoy possesses what feminist Alison Jaggar would call "outlaw emotions." Such emotions are "conventionally unacceptable" and incompatible with "dominant perceptions and values," yet they are necessary for developing critical and alternative perspectives. She adds that "discordant emotions should be attended to seriously and respectfully rather than condemned, ignored, discounted or suppressed."¹¹

Returning to Wilkinson, she asserts that love should comprehend the "messiness, ambiguities, and unruliness" of life.¹² Thus love should not be averse to "bad feelings." As Kaur states: "Rage carries vital information."¹³ I believe love should acknowledge pain, harm, and anger outside and *inside* of (i.e., caused by) love. This acknowledges that our experiences with structures of oppression inform uneven distributions and capacity to give and receive love. Love understands that

love is not always reciprocated, and we must never demand it as such; otherwise, it is not love. Wilkinson asks: “What if the encounters that you perceive as joyful are experienced as sadness by others?”¹⁴ Or, I might add, what if their joy later turns into or exists alongside sadness and anger?

Although these emotions can still feel very outlawed, today they feel less so. Social media has connected adoptees in unprecedented ways, which has allowed for a stronger collective voice. In November 2014 adult women adoptees from the Lost Daughters writing project began the #flipthescript movement during National Adoption Month. As Amira, an adoptee, explains: “When I think about National Adoption Month, I think that it’s a month of a very loud, single story, told by certain people and not by adoptees.”¹⁵ Indeed, the annual monthlong celebration is dominated by adoption professionals and adoptive parents. That same year, NPR had interviewed Angela Tucker, who is a writer, speaker, and Black transracial adoptee, for its “Sunday Conversation” segment, but instead decided to air a story featuring White adoptive parents. On her blog Tucker responded to NPR: “BREAKING NEWS: We no longer need to speculate about the challenges trans-racially adopted children may face as they grow. The first-hand answers for these important questions can be answered by qualified, educated, articulate adult adoptees (or birthparents) found by doing a quick Google search. . . . [We] no longer need our parents to speak for us. We are grown up now. We can do it.”¹⁶ There are thousands of adoptees across the globe who have collectively created Adoptee Twitter/X and Adoptee TikTok. It is a good time to find adoptee voices and listen with love.

TOWARD KINSHIP

When I began my graduate school in 2006, I believed that my research was on adoption. By the time I finished my dissertation, I understood that it was an analysis of adoption and family, and I continued to think about the ways we could reform adoption and think differently about family. In these past few years, however, I have shifted my belief away from adoption reform and the idea of family toward the ideas of kinship and care. This shift is not based on belief that adoption and family are devoid of value. Rather, I believe that kinship and care offer more broadly and deeply what adoption and family attempt to do.

Even though the concept of family has stretched beyond its traditional discursive and institutional boundaries to include aspects that hold space for “chosen families,” LGBT families, and adoptions by gay and lesbian couples, queer studies scholars have shown how the inclusion of queer families has reinscribed traditional family ideals and previous adoption practices for the (neo)liberal state, which despite this “acceptance”—through same-sex marriage and adoption—still abhors women, people of color (here and abroad), and those who are queer.¹⁷ Geographers Eleanor Wilkinson and David Bell note that we should “expand our understandings of intimate life *beyond* the family,” which for them is not abandoning or permanently

shifting away from family but thinking of family as part of a “broader study of intimate life,” to “retain the family while simultaneously decentering it.”¹⁸ Thus I am trying to think about how kinship (rather than family) as a descriptor and analytic might be more capacious for adoption praxis. “Family” typically describes identity relations and roles among people through blood, marriage, or adoption. “Kinship,” however, understands the constructed nature of identities, interactions, and relations and is interested in how they are formed. To be sure, similar to the idea and institution of family, kinship has not always been kind to adoption. For transracial and transnational adoption especially, not only are consanguineal and genetic ties absent but their absence is amplified by phenotypical differences. Therefore they have been described as “fictive” and interpreted as “less than” or merely “as if” real kinship, which has engendered desires by adoptive families to replicate and claim normative kinship.

Nevertheless, critical kinship studies can disrupt these previous notions of kinship. Scholars of cultural anthropology such as Marshall Sahlins argue that kinship is the “mutuality of being” and consists of “people who are intrinsic to another’s existence.”¹⁹ Similarly, Kath Weston summarizes that kinship studies shifted to understand that “*all* kinship ties (indeed, all social ties) could be characterized as fictive.”²⁰ In other words, “whatever is construed genealogically may also be constructed socially,” because even genealogical ties are given meaning and value through society—that is, blood ties are not inherently meaningful, as we understand many other species where offspring must survive without parents.²¹ This shift expressed by Sahlins and Weston is largely credited to cultural anthropologist David Schneider, who discusses family as a paradigm of kinship that is tied to the notion of love, where “love can be translated freely as *enduring diffuse solidarity*.”²² For Schneider the phrase “enduring diffuse solidarity” means “doing what is good for or right for the other person, without regard for its effect on the doer.” Typically, this enduring diffuse solidarity is attached to family because, by definition, they are enduring, whereas friendships are chosen.²³ However, if we think about kinship more broadly (rather than family as the paradigm), then in the context of adoption, kinship could seemingly hold biological, adoptive, affinal (e.g., adoptee relationships with other adoptees), and geographical ties (e.g., connections to homeland), where connections are not imaginative or impossible but significantly attached to people, common experience, and place.

ADOPTEE KINSHIP: AN INVISIBLE NEED

In the preface I wrote about my experience working with summer camps for transnational and transracial adoptees, and I want to return to this experience and space in comparison to birth culture camps. The importance of birth culture varies among adoptees and fluctuates over time. Greg, the Adoptee Camp director who had also attended and worked at heritage camps for more than a decade, offered

that the birth culture component in heritage camps is usually not the driving reason why adoptees enjoy them. From his own experience, he explained: “I hated it when relatives would ask me later about birth culture. And I understand now that of course that’s because it was never what was important to me. What was important was being among other adoptees and seeing my friends.”²⁴ While birth culture was relevant to adoptees in some ways, it was only one aspect of their much larger adoptee identity and desire to be with other adoptees.

In other words, this disjuncture between birth-culture pedagogy, most often organized by loving adoptive parents, and the actual experiential outcomes for transracial and transnational adoptees that arise because issues of race, racism, adoption, and birth family—all of which get limited to no attention in heritage camps—has greater meaning for adoptees.²⁵ Former postadoption services social worker Steve Kalb explains that the adoption industry feels that birth culture is a pillar for supporting healthy transnational adoptee identity. He says it can be helpful in describing difference and where adoptees are from, but once they get older, the questions are too complex.²⁶ Thus more important than birth culture is what Greg calls an “invisible need.” The adoptee community is something that transracial and transnational adoptees desire and need but might not realize it until they have experienced being part of such a group. The fact that so many adoptees enjoy heritage camp has led to the misattribution of birth culture as the main reason why these camps are so popular.²⁷ Indeed, adoption psychologist and scholar Amanda Baden’s study of a Korean culture camp suggests that adoption socialization might be more important than racial-ethnic socialization when considering the success of culture camps.²⁸ These revelations, among many others, led to changing the Adoptee Camp from its previous iteration as a heritage camp that used birth culture pedagogy to the now existing version that uses critical adoptee pedagogy.

Anthropologist Signe Howell’s concept of kinning is useful here. Howell describes kinning as the universal process of bringing “any previously unconnected individual” into a “*significant and permanent* relationship with a group of people, and the connection is expressed in a conventional kin idiom.”²⁹ We must note Howell’s inclusion of “significant and permanent” because of how this differs from traditional kinning based on blood, which enables the establishment of kinship connections in the absence of significant time and space (e.g., when a relative proclaims, “Your grandparents are cousins, so you are related even though this is your first time meeting”). The kinning that happens in these instances of immediate connection of distant relatives is also socially constructed, but it takes less kinning work. As Howell clarifies for those with blood ties: “The passage of time, geographical distance, and absence of interaction are not in themselves barriers to an experience of being related once the blood connection is established.”³⁰ For adoption, that kin work is, at its heart, making a child part of the family. This exists in the form of preadoption preparations (sending letters or gifts, setting up the room, etc.), narratives of destiny, creating “adoption/gotcha day” celebrations,

giving the child a new name, and changing the birth certificate. This process of kinning that Howell describes is typically private.

I argue that critical adoptee pedagogy at the Adoptee Camp—which centered the concepts of community, identity, adoption, and racism—sought to practice a form of kinning that publicly brought together previously unconnected adoptees into significant relationships. This kinning might not necessarily be permanent or enduring in the ways Howell and Schneider suggest, though many times they are, but they are rooted in a deeply complex shared or collective experience of adoption, which includes family separation, orphanage or foster care, adoption, and all of the nuances and challenges that accompany those experiences. Adoptee kinship at the Adoptee Camp was both public and collective, where space and time mattered but in ways that were different from traditional kin forms. Whereas traditional kinship is based on genealogical time and space—that is, we come from the same family tree that can be traced to specific people who (usually) have lived in similar places—adoptee kinship is based on adoptive time and space, which is produced by the genealogy of adoption instead of genealogy of the family.

This applies to adult adoptees too. For example, in 2015, I teamed up with Amanda Baden, a Hong Kong adoptee (HKAD), and we conducted interviews and surveys on a group of HKADs who gathered in Hong Kong. Our research showed that being together in Hong Kong formed a type of adoptee kinship. HKADs who were interviewed conveyed this in many ways. One stated that the significance of the HKAD group was that it was “a kinship” and “a bond.” Another spoke of an unconscious “shared history,” “collective memory,” and being in the “same shoes” or having a “common background.” Others stated that it was like connecting with “missing sisters and brothers,” and some discovered that they were in fact “orphanage sisters,” which created “deep bonds.” One Hong Kong adoptee remarked that finding other HKADs “has deeply affected me in words I can’t even describe.”³¹ In the framework of adoptee kinship, adoptees often share with other adoptees, who they may have just met, questions and desires that they have *never* previously shared because family, friends, or strangers might have minimized or dismissed earlier feelings and expressions.³²

Anthropologist and adoption scholar Eleana Kim has made this argument about adoptee kinship for Korean adoptees. She puts forth adoptee kinship as “a set of [public] relationships actively created out of social practice and cultural representations” derived from “adoptees’ common experiences of disconnection, disidentification, and displacement” as well as to “practices of care and reciprocity.”³³ On the point of care, at the Adoptee Camp one of the main things we emphasized was creating safe spaces for all adoptee experiences, questions, and thoughts whether they fit in with the larger adoption narrative or especially for the times when they did not. Korean adoptees, both in smaller organizations and as a collective, have led the way in this regard. For example, Kimberly McKee shows how in the context of an annual Korean Adoption Conference, Korean adoptees have

created adoptee-only spaces and fostered safety, care, and public intimacy to build kinship with each other.³⁴ In addition, overseas Korean adoptees have supported each other to create visions and practices of kinship that are “beyond state-sanctioned, legally protected, or genetically determined forms of bonding.”³⁵

Transracial and transnational adoptees by their very nature of being adopted have had access to a discourse of “positive things said” about adoption. At the same time, many, if not most, have lacked access to language outside of that normative discourse. Adoptees have generally used the term “in the fog” to describe those who are not conscious of the complexities and harms of adoption.³⁶ This helps explain the invisibility of the need or desire to be with other adoptees, as Greg theorizes. Social work scholar and Chinese adoptee Grace Newton notes that the trauma adoptees face is not as well recognized, even by adoptees themselves, because typically it is not historical, collective, or intergenerational, although she details some exceptions.³⁷ Yet, there is indeed no singular historical adoption event that is collectively shared *and* passed down from parents to children because those ties have been disrupted. What were collective experiences—adoption because of the Korean War, Operation Babylift, and the Indian Adoption Project—have disappeared into individualized histories with no ascending or descending family to comprehend the trauma. Instead, adoptee trauma can be ambiguous because loss is not definitive or certain; belonging can be tenuous; and all the while, love can be present. This is why adoptees often discover adoption harms or traumas in later life stages when they are no longer protected by their adoptive family; learn of other adoptee experiences; or become a parent themselves.³⁸

Adoptees who meet a community, or communities, of other adoptees develop a more complex and sophisticated understanding of adoption experiences, ideologies, and practices, and they are given space to hold complex feelings about adoption. Susan Branco, JaeRan Kim, and Grace Newton, who are all adoptee scholars and licensed professionals, developed the “adoptee consciousness model” to help explain how adoptees, individually *and* collectively (where the idea of “fog” is usually individualized, i.e., “coming out of the fog”), develop consciousness that can lead them to engage in deeper awareness, reflection, and activism across their lifespan.³⁹ This coming to consciousness—learning about “violent, oppressive, and exploitative acts” that have happened to people with whom you share an identity—can produce a new form of trauma, but it can also be a form of healing.⁴⁰ Pairing adoptee kinship with adoptive time and space enables another understanding of adoptees’ shared past, where adoption is not only a kinship of gain (of an adoptive family) but what transracial adoptee writer and scholar Shannon Gibney calls a “kinship of loss.”⁴¹ For some, such as Korean adoptee Rachel Rostad, the loss produced by adoption is almost unspeakable: “Loss is especially confusing to measure when it appears as if I haven’t lost anything at all. What I want no one can give me because I don’t even know what it is. The grief has no fillable outline. It’s not missing like an organ; it’s missing like wherever dreams go when you blink awake into

the morning light. The grief has no endpoint; it only demands that I listen, again and again.”⁴² Regardless of the depth of loss, all adoptees lose something, even those who have experienced happy adoptions or are in open adoptions.

This is the (collective) genealogy of adoption. When we think of loss, we must also think about the ways in which loss happens. What were the particular conditions that allowed, sanctioned, or facilitated loss? We must consider the nature of loss, which shifts depending on the object—displacement of adoptee bodies, deprivation of birth culture, detachment from land, disappearance of language and memories, and forfeiture of “outlawed” emotions, and as Gibney notes, the loss of anonymity for transracial adoptees.⁴³ Perhaps the most significant loss is the dispossession and ambiguous loss of birth family. For many adoptees this loss is ambiguous because “there are no clear boundaries, no clear ending, and often no societally recognized mechanism or rituals for grieving or acknowledging what has been lost.”⁴⁴ Even for adoptees who find their birth family, as is the case for Rostad, the loss of time, closeness, and ability to communicate are not easily regained and can be difficult to excavate. And how was the fact of loss treated? Was it held with care or was it ignored, minimized, or weaponized to make the subject of loss the villain?

We must be careful not to romanticize adoptee kinship and these connections because such a move erases the violence that can happen among adoptees (laterally) such as sexual violence or other forms of harm such as homophobia and ableism.⁴⁵ We should always seek an intersectional path and framework no matter the relations we foster. Gibney concludes that a kinship of loss has radical potential: “This shimmering-on-the-horizon, ever-changing, transformative opportunity for authentic connection *because* of loss, not *despite* it, this kinship of loss, can be a radical antidote to the profound isolation and melancholy that have brought so many of us transracial adoptees into being.”⁴⁶ Adoptee kinships create connections, consciousness, and solidarity on the basis of collectively shared histories and experiences that can be significant and enduring.

GHOSTLY KINSHIP AND PRESENT ABSENCE

Howell notes that kinning is a process that happens before and after adoption to make the child related to the kin network.⁴⁷ She states that kinning is a universal process conducted in all societies, even in nonadoptive biological families but is not recognized as such.⁴⁸ Part of the process for adoptive kinning is the need to de-kin the child from their birth family—that is, how the relational category of motherhood is unmade by law and adoption practice.⁴⁹ For nearly all transnational adoptees and most domestic adoptees who are in closed adoptions, the concept of one’s birth family is unknown. To add to the process of de-kinning, adoptees are regularly encouraged by others, including sometimes by members of their adoptive family, to forget or not dwell on their past because their real family

adopted them.⁵⁰ This has led adoptees to ignore, deny, and suppress their desires to think about and/or find birth family.

If we return to the example of the birth culture camps, what does it mean to have adoptive parents plan, volunteer for, and participate in family birth-culture camps and how does this affect the way birth parents are situated? At these camps adoptive parents and adoptees are continuously confronted, especially by cultural activities or in adoption discussions, by the specter of birth parents. This “absent presence” of the birth parents can have an arresting effect because their void is precisely the reason why birth-culture pedagogy is presumably needed. In other words, birth parents are a ghostly presence, conjuring uncomfortable topics and traumatic pasts, which many adoptive parents and adoptees may try to ignore, constrain, negate, displace, or resolve.⁵¹ Here, I want to pose the birth family not simply as a haunting specter or absent presence but as “ghostly kin” or a “present absence.”

Scholars of kinship have tried to move the idea beyond blood ties, but kinship remains tethered to the material, positive feelings, immediacy, and an “economy of presence”—that is, that we are in touching proximity with and hold loving views of kin.⁵² In the absence of material and known kinship (most adoptees literally do not know their birth family), how do we capture kinship of the unknown—that which exists in our bones, grieves in our hearts, perhaps fades in our memories, or meets us in our dreams and haunts our nightmares? I contend that ghostly kinship is a way to think about and practice kinship beyond the limits of time, space, the state, rights, and the law. Theorizing on ghosts, sociologist Avery Gordon states: “Haunting describes how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence.”⁵³ For Gordon, ghosts are a sign that a haunting is taking place, which can produce apprehension and arrest (a common response by many adoptive parents and adoptees). Cultural studies scholar Esther Peeren adds that ghosts appear as existential threats and “unwelcomed reminders of past transgressions, causing personal or historical traumas to rise to the surface and pursuing those they hold responsible.”⁵⁴ Yet, for Gordon, they can also provoke “profane illumination,” which means: “When you know in a way that you did not know before, then you have been notified of your involvement. You are *already* involved, implicated, in one way or another, and this is why . . . when it appears to you, the ghost will inaugurate the necessity of doing something about it.”⁵⁵ What would it mean to engage with ghosts?

The Adoptee Camp operated from the perspective that birth parents would haunt the camp, and critical adoptee pedagogy understood the imperative to “do something” about their ghostly presence. This was explicit in a particular activity centering on birth parents that asked 12- to 16-year-old adoptee campers to imagine that their birth parents were suddenly outside the door. Campers were asked to share what they would ask their birth parents. Questions included:

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

This activity seemed to resonate with most adoptees even as some were resistant to the idea of making psychological and emotional space for their birth parents. In all of the “adoption” discussions the camp manager (an adoptee) gave further social context for why many birth parents are forced to relinquish or are unable to parent their children, such as poverty, unmarried status, family pressure, or some sort of crisis, which was an allusion to militarism and war. The camp manager explained the letter-exchange service provided by the adoption agency that operates the Adoptee Camp, which allows adoptees when they are eighteen years old to write letters to their birth parents and can in rare cases lead to reunions. There was also a session in which adoptees asked other campers specifically about birth parents and birth searches. Questions included:

How many of you want to meet your birth parents?⁵⁶
 Is it actually possible to meet your birth parents?
 How many [adoptees] successfully find their birth parents?
 How do you begin a birth search?
 If you had the chance would you go back and live with your birth parents?

While these questions invoked a flood of emotions for which there were no easy answers, the important thing was that there was space for participants to share their experiences and desires, ask questions, have their voices heard, and speak about birth families. New perspectives arose from the discussion and ensuing revelation that birth parents could still be alive, sometimes desired and did seek contact with their relinquished children, and often expressed strong feelings of love for their child as well as sorrow, regret, and happiness about the fact that their child was adopted. For many campers of all ages, the thought of contact with their birth parents (or even providing space for birth parents to exist in their thoughts) was not a fully conceptualized possibility. The purpose of these activities was to engage with the birth parents’ ghostly presence—not as an absent presence that we tend to forget, ignore, or hide out of fear, but as a present absence.

Here, they may not be physically present, but they are brought into the space with intention and are acknowledged instead of being overlooked or disregarded.⁵⁷

Imperial wars, settler colonialism, structural racism, global capitalism, heteropatriarchy, and the adoption industry have contributed to the separation of families and the making of ghosts. To practice ghostly kinship is to create a language through radical love and hold other formations of kinship that are uncertain, not material, and not immediate. Ghostly kinship disrupts normative ideas of family, time, and space. It enables a sort of nonlinear, nonphysical accompaniment in which adoptees can reclaim time, connection, and relationality with their birth family. Ghostly kinship helps describe the relationships that have existed, emerged, and continued due to the act of adoption and the act of resisting normative adoption discourse and practice. The goal should not only be to petition the state for recognition of the adoptees and their families (through adoptee, birth family, and adoptive family rights) but rather to think about how we can build and cultivate relationships outside of these normative adoption practices that reproduce structural, symbolic, and traumatic forms of violence.

OPEN ADOPTIONS: BETTER BUT NOT THE ANSWER

*When adoption is done ethically, when it is the right thing for all of the parents, birth and adoptive, when the extended families have been educated and worked with and when the community is well prepared, then we all know we have expanded our lives, expanded our families, and expanded our hearts.*⁵⁸

—JOYCE MAGUIRE PAVAO

There is no doubt that thousands of individual children have benefitted from adoption, and there is also no doubt that thousands of adoptees and adoptive parents have loved and continue to immensely love each other. There have been adoption and child welfare reforms such as the enactment of Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), ratification of the Hague Adoption Convention, and the passage of the Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018 (FFPSA).⁵⁹ Nevertheless, this book has presented a particular perspective on adoption, one that believes a vast majority of adoptions have components that are not ethical. This can include the conditions of poverty and incarceration; social welfare or health provider investigations that lead to disparate removals and family separations; coercion, misinformation, or payment relating to relinquishment; records misconduct in the form of omission or fabrication; poor legal representation or lack of due process for birth parents; impossible timelines and reunification plans; or the ways that termination of parental rights (TPRs) can produce trauma, disillusionment, self-harming behavior, and “disenfranchised grief” that is unrecognized and not accepted.⁶⁰ Even for kinship adoptions, TPRs are harmful because they drive a wedge in the family, unlike alternatives such as guardianship, which can engender

a “collaborative, consensual arrangement.”⁶¹ We must also contend with adoption disruption, dissolution, rehoming, and estrangement.

Amelia Frank Meyer, founder of a Minnesota nonprofit that aims to transform the child welfare system, argues that our system designed to help children actually produces more harm: “By every measure—the voice of youth, the long-term outcome data, and even the social return on investments—our investments in out-of-home care produced negative impacts for all involved.”⁶² Adoption has only thought of the “best interests of the child” after families have either been forced or allowed to be separated, and then that pretext of “best interest of the child” has been, in a circuitous fashion, used to justify family separation. As they and so many scholars, practitioners, and activists are starting to argue, family ties do not need to be legally severed. Even in the cases of severe abuse, children who are adopted do not need new birth certificates with new names, and their records do not need to be court-sealed.

So what then of open adoptions? Surely, practices of openness have transformed adoption for the better. Since the 1980s and 1990s, domestic and a very small number of transnational adoptions have moved from mostly secret to now mostly “open.”⁶³ Adam Pertman, an adoption policy expert, has described this shift as “nothing less than a revolution.”⁶⁴ Such adoptions help address many of the concerns about adoptees not knowing their past, losing contact with biological family members, and maintaining racial and cultural mirrors. Birth parents can keep connections with children and lessen the trauma of relinquishment, but openness depends on the type of adoption. A 2012 report estimated that 95 percent of infant private agency adoptions were “open.”⁶⁵ A 2007 survey found that 68 percent of private domestic adoptions had postadoption contact, but that number was lower for foster care adoptions (39 percent) and lowest for transnational adoptions (6 percent).⁶⁶ In addition, what constitutes “openness” also has a wide range, which can include relationships such as treating birth families like extended families; maintaining regular contact via phone or social media with occasional visits; simply meeting before the adoption and communicating through the adoption agency; or exchanging letters without the adoptee ever meeting the birth parents.⁶⁷

Moreover, postadoption contact agreements (PACAs) are in many cases limited, breached, or ended entirely, in part because they are used as a backdoor to closed adoptions, where adoptive parents agree to openness and slowly close the door in order to gain full control. There are 29 states plus the District of Columbia that have PACA enforcement laws, but many loopholes exist.⁶⁸ For example, agreements are only enforceable if they are filed with the adoption proceedings.⁶⁹ Only one state provides a lawyer to enforce postadoption contact agreements, while others require mediation first or to pay legal costs if birth parents lose. In addition, birth parents may have to prove that enforcement is in the best interest of the child rather than requiring adoptive parents to show that enforcement would

harm the child.⁷⁰ In other words, open adoptions still require TPR and in the vast majority of cases do not meaningfully change the uneven power dynamics within adoptive families. Maintained connections in open adoption are more of a testament to family members who want to remain connected than the virtues of open adoption itself.⁷¹

LOVE, CARE, AND IMAGINING OTHERWISE

*Love is not just a generative power for good; love can also close down dialogue, narrow our worlds and limit our imaginaries.*⁷²

—ELEANOR WILKINSON

*Love takes off masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within.*⁷³

—JAMES BALDWIN

The late cultural theorist Lauren Berlant wrote that love is normative and that we need “other modes of relating” beyond just love to animate a “bigger imagination of the affective dimensions that it would take to (re)build a world.”⁷⁴ Berlant’s words help us understand the limits and even dangers of normative love that Wilkinson describes. Yet Baldwin, like Fanon, seems to believe in love precisely because of its potential. In adoption, love *is* the mask. It masks the non-normative creation of family, so that it (the “fictive”) can be included, accepted, valid, and real. It masks the structural-historical, symbolic, and traumatic forms of violence attached to adoption to create notions of permanency, belonging, and yes, love—even as we know this approach to be harmful for most adoptees as well as untenable and unlivable for other adoptees, who will grow up and come to different levels of consciousness about adoption and kinship. Love is the mask, but love can also help remove the mask and hold space for “other modes of relating” if we think of love not by itself but in conjunction with kinship, care, and relationality.

But what does care mean? It seems to naturally fit with adoption, parenting, family, and kinship. According to the many definitions from *Merriam-Webster*, “care” as a noun can, among other things, mean a state of uncertainty or worry; watchful attention; a form of maintenance; or a charge or supervision especially with regards to health, well-being, and safety. As a verb, “care” can mean to feel concern or to give care. Taking these definitions together, I want to think about how we care about care. What type of care do we privilege? Is the care out of obligation? Do we expect something in return? Are we willing to invest resources into care? Eleana Kim suggests that we move toward care and not just kinship. Care, she argues, can be more open-ended beyond the social reproduction of conventional roles and obligations that are attached to kinship. In her keynote address at the Alliance for the Study of Adoption and Culture in 2021, Kim posits that the question should not be “how can we care more” but “how to care,” such that care is not a “predetermined set of affective practices.” While kinship is traditionally the

basis or precondition of care in an obligatory sense (“I have adopted this child, therefore I must care for them”), Kim offers that care should be the “performative basis of kinship” (“I care for this individual, therefore we are kin”). She provocatively concludes by stating we should be “taking care” rather than “making kin.”⁷⁵

In 1958 the *Afro-American* weekly newspaper published a story about a mother who, in a “bizarre twist,” sought the adoption of herself and her two kids to help with care for the whole family while she worked. “I’m not just looking for a baby sitter whose only interest would be in the financial return,” the mother explained. “What I really want is someone who might be willing to take us in as members of the family and give us the love and affection which children need. What we need most is some kind of emotional security.”⁷⁶ Presently, we are experiencing a shift in thinking about adoption and care. Transnational adoptions are down to the lowest numbers since the late 1960s.⁷⁷ In 2018, Congress passed the bipartisan Family First Prevention Services Act, focusing on ways to prevent family separation and support family reunification.⁷⁸ Lastly, ICWA was not only upheld in *Brackeen* but is slowly being understood as the gold standard in child welfare because of the ways it ensures active efforts to maintain ties to birth and extended family, community, and cultural identity, which can be beneficial for all children.⁷⁹ At the same time, many scholars and activists have articulated the need for more than these reforms—to imagine otherwise and build alternative futures.

SOVEREIGNTY AND NATIVE KINSHIP

Love, care, and imagining otherwise means upholding tribal sovereignty and learning from Indigenous ontology (ways of being) and epistemology (ways of knowing). *Adoptive Couple v. Baby Girl* was primarily about who could be considered Indian. Settler colonial classification of what or who counts as Indian “has had profound impacts on the ways that non-Aboriginal people view Aboriginal people and on how some Aboriginal people view themselves.”⁸⁰ When stripped down, both Supreme Court cases, *Adoptive Couple v. Baby Girl* (2013) and *Haaland v. Brackeen* (2023), were about who gets to love and care for Indian children and who gets to make that decision. Hence, Tribes having the power to decide who is a member is vital to Native self-determination. Tribes value their children as part of a larger community, yet they have been criticized for not upholding “true love”—unlike non-Indian adoptive parents. Yet according to Lindsay Nixon, Cree-Métis-Saulteaux scholar and artist, who writes on love and kinship, “ethical love is a pedagogy of relationality taught to Indigenous peoples by their kin” and is activated by “attentiveness to kinship responsibilities.”⁸¹

The kinship responsibilities that Indigenous peoples hold are not just tied to people. In thinking about land, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar, argues that the opposite of dispossession is not possession: “It is deep, reciprocal, consensual *attachment*. Indigenous bodies don’t relate to the land by possessing or owning it or having control over it. We relate to land

through connection—generative, affirmative, complex, overlapping, and nonlinear *relationship*.”⁸² Although Simpson is writing about land, she is also speaking about people in relation to one another. Kim TallBear, Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate scholar, adds that in addition to being separated from each other and dispossessed from land, Indigenous peoples are detached from nonhuman kin: “It’s not just our children that were stolen from our communities, our families were disrupted in that way. But our non-human relatives were also . . . were severed as well. All of our kinship relations were severed, as settlers attempted to force us into these settler state institutions.”⁸³ The expropriation, privatization, and commodification of land has disrupted the ecology of kinship among Indigenous people and the nonhuman world, including animals, land, water, and the sky.⁸⁴ TallBear advocates for broader notions of kinship, care, and love: “What is possible with a model in which *love* and *relations* are not considered scarce objects to be hoarded and protected, but which will proliferate beyond the confines of the socially constituted couple and nuclear family?”⁸⁵ For TallBear it is about leaning on extended kinship networks to share responsibilities.

The U.S. child welfare system could learn from Native forms of responsibility and care. Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice argues that kinship is “best thought of as a verb rather than a noun” because it conveys the active role that people engage in to create and maintain kin relationality with humans and the nonhuman world.⁸⁶ The easiest example is ICWA. ICWA is not a perfect law in that it has not and cannot protect all Native families and children. Disproportionality still affects Native children in child removal and foster care placements, but ICWA is considered the gold standard by many child welfare workers and officials because it requires “active” (doing) rather than “reasonable” (passive) efforts. As social welfare scholars Katharine Briar-Lawson and colleagues state: “Active efforts literally mean ‘more than reasonable efforts.’ . . . If active efforts were applied universally to children and families in child welfare, fewer children would be removed, and more tailored help would be provided to families.”⁸⁷ What would happen if we repealed the Adoption and Safe Families Act and replaced it with one that included, and even expanded upon, the protections provided in ICWA? Also, what could non-Native adoptees do to fight in solidarity with Native Tribes and communities to not only protect ICWA from future attacks but also to protect other encroachments of Native land, sovereignty, and self-determination, especially now that we understand how land is tied to kinship?

REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE

Love, care, and imagining otherwise means prioritizing reproductive justice. A reproductive justice framework reminds us that we should protect “the right to *not* have a child; the right to *have* a child; and the right to *parent* children in safe and healthy environments.”⁸⁸ For those who are pregnant, reproductive justice means bodily autonomy, to not use the demand for adoption to force pregnancy and

childbirth for those who would choose abortion. Reproductive justice means colonialism, racism, patriarchy, and capitalism should not determine the “reproductive destinies” of marginalized communities.⁸⁹ American studies scholar Sandra Patton-Imani explains how “all families are shaped by power,” but that stratified reproduction—the inequality that exists prior to, during, and after reproduction—helps us understand how it affects poor, non-White, and LGBTQ individuals and families in contradictory ways.⁹⁰ This is to say that marginalized families, especially queer ones, are often the target of discrimination and exclusion in family-making processes, but they can also assert certain privileges when creating families through adoption and assisted reproduction. Queer couples have had to strike the balance of assimilation and resistance when it comes to family-making in a society that does not just privilege but is designed to reproduce heteronormative relationships and families. This could mean a woman claiming to be a prospective single mother, rather than a woman in a committed relationship with another woman, in order to adopt.⁹¹

Patton-Imani provides two examples that demonstrate this point. In one, she recounts how two women of color understood themselves to be less economically privileged than some gay couples (e.g., White women and men of color) but more privileged than others who did not have the same community support. “So even within adoption circles we’re, like, atypical because we didn’t have the funds readily available,” one of the mothers says. “We had to do fundraising. We had to have community parties. We had to, you know, wait and save for two years to get him. It’s just really different.”⁹² For so many adoptees the idea of fundraising to adopt further elucidates the way that children become commodities in the adoption exchange and industry. While it may be unfair to say that this couple should use their funds to keep the family together, oftentimes it is clear that there are money and resources available, but we do not prioritize supporting struggling families. Patton-Imani’s second example is of a queer Latina activist. “There’s three moms,” she says. “My wife and I are godmothers to our best friend’s child, who lives with us fifty percent of the time. And we are Salvadorian, Puerto Rican, Jewish, and Arab.” The two godmothers are not mothers to the boy in a legal sense. As the mother explains: “There is *no laws* in Maryland that will allow us to get custody of this child without diminishing the role of the mother, which we are not willing to do.” If something were to happen to the biological mother, they would not have legal protection to keep caring for the child. Although their family is “not socially recognized as legitimate,” Patton-Imani explains, their “performance of family is also a reclaiming of kinship history among families of color.”⁹³

Patton-Imani’s first example underscores the commodification, permanent transfer, and ownership characteristics that make up adoption, and her second example highlights the simultaneous maintenance of original *and* the construction of new kinship through alternative means and collaborative care. Signe Howell claims that following non-Western practices of kinship is “not likely to be fruitful” because Western notions of individualism lead couples to want to be

sole parents, not partial parents—“to have a child of one’s own.”⁹⁴ Yet in Patton-Imani’s second example, the two moms built feminist solidarity that was not based solely on individualism or the securing and privileging of one person’s right to adopt over another’s right to maintain a family. It involved a network of care, kinship, and mutual responsibility.

Reproductive justice also includes the ability to reinstate parental rights. The vast majority of parents in the United States who experience child removal want to parent their children, but mandatory timelines and barriers make this impossible for many of them, resulting in the termination of their parental rights. The enactment of TPR does not guarantee adoption, which leads to thousands of children becoming legal orphans every year. Many youths maintain strong relationships with biological family despite TPR. In trying to solve a problem that ASFA helped create, states have passed legislation allowing for reinstatement of parental rights, although some only allow it in limited circumstances—for example, voluntary relinquishment, a certain time has lapsed, and age requirements.⁹⁵ Advocates have suggested implementing *temporary* termination of parental rights to avoid this self-made crisis of legal orphanhood.⁹⁶

Others have suggested that states could follow the Native American legal practice of tribal customary adoptions (TCA) to achieve permanency, where adoptive parents attain legal authority and legal orphanhood is avoided by modifying (rather than terminating) parental rights. This is especially important for extended family who want to provide permanency but not at the cost of severing family ties.⁹⁷ Another example that exists is third-parent adoption. Susan Dusza Guerra Leksander, a transracial adoptee and birth mother, reunited with her daughter and was able to adopt her child through this process. As she shared on Facebook, it is “a process where parental rights can be ADDED without subtraction. Love is not a pie. . . . A slice for me does not mean less for anyone else. Love multiplies love and it is only fear that tells us love for others means less love for me. Love is addition not subtraction. Multiplication not division.”⁹⁸ Leksander articulates an expansive love that shows the different ways reproductive justice can look. Reproductive justice understands that “positive outcomes for some doesn’t equal justice for all.”⁹⁹ Thus it pushes us to think about other solutions to the orphan and foster care crises beyond institutionalization, transnational adoption, and adoption via TPR, such as local childcare or daycare services for parents in need, early childhood education, destigmatization of single motherhood, food security, covered medical care, direct financial assistance or universal basic income, job training, and housing assistance. If we care about children and the vulnerable in the ways that we say we do, the issue is not about availability of resources; it is about our collective political and social will to prioritize them.

Marginalized families have always had to operate at the periphery or outside the bounds of the normative. My hope is that we look toward these alternative forms of care to support children and families in need. The desire to create one’s

own family is a valid desire, and everyone should be able to build a family, especially queer folks. I dream of a feminist and queer future where heteronormativity is oxymoronic. How can we embrace building non-normative kinship and building families outside of violent norms and structures of harm in ways that do not depend on the separation of other families?

ABOLITION

*We can envision and build a world where tearing families apart to meet children's needs would be unimaginable.*¹⁰⁰

—DOROTHY ROBERTS

Love, care, and imagining otherwise means abolishing the family policing system. The child welfare system is inherently one that involves family policing. This was worsened after the passage of the ASFA in 1997 due to increased case reviews and a shortened timeline. A single diagnosis by an overworked or overzealous social worker, teacher, or medical care worker could lead to family separation. In a relationship that is already combative, parents can be easily labeled by their caseworker as noncompliant, uncooperative, or aggressive, which “take[s] on a life of [its] own without being further questioned or reconsidered.”¹⁰¹ Children and parents are processed with checklists and rubber stamps, erasing important circumstances, challenges, and needs.¹⁰² All of this causes trauma and harm.

As sociology and law professor Dorothy Roberts incisively illustrates in her recent book *Torn Apart*, you cannot fix a system that is not broken and that has historically neglected and destroyed families of color, especially Black and Native ones. Part of the worry that people have with the idea of abolition of the child welfare/family policing system is that children would not be protected from abusive parents. Roberts explains how overloading the system with hypersurveillance has made children less safe because real abuse incidents get lost in cases that should have never been reported in the first place.¹⁰³ She, along with sociologist Kelly Fong, in the new book *Investigating Families*, highlights how the COVID pandemic created an accidental experimentation with abolition. They both look to New York City as an example, where the family regulation system temporarily shrank (shrinking systems of policing is a key strategy toward the horizon of abolition), including mandatory reporters, intrusive caseworker investigations, and family courts, which led to a decrease in reports, court-filed cases, and families separated. Reported physical and sexual abuse also dropped. Once agencies began operating again at pre-pandemic capacity, there was no bump or “rebound” in the numbers from “hidden” abuse cases, as was highly expected.¹⁰⁴

What happened instead was the proliferation of more than 800 mutual aid groups by May 2020, involving thousands of members.¹⁰⁵ Such groups have a long history in BIPOC communities. The federal government provided unrestricted

direct financial assistance to families through the CARES Act of March 2020 and the American Rescue Plan of March 2021. The former supplemented and extended unemployment insurance. The Families First Coronavirus Response Act of March 2020 established pandemic EBT payments that assisted families with children who would have normally received free or reduced school meals and children who attended eligible schools.¹⁰⁶ In this way we understand how abolition is as much, if not more so, about creating as it is about destroying.

What else would happen if we understood abuse and harm in a wider context rather than approaching child safety and care from an individualistic perspective that defines abuse solely in relation to parents? Back in 1973, when child abuse exploded as a national concern, sociologist David Gil testified before Congress that child abuse should be defined as “any act of commission or omission by individuals, institutions or society as a whole, and any conditions resulting from such acts or inaction, which deprive children of equal rights and liberties, and/or interfere with their optimal development, constitute, by definition, abusive or neglectful acts or conditions.”¹⁰⁷ This could include police and the criminal “justice” system; schools that focus on discipline rather than education; and polluting corporations and neglectful landlords.¹⁰⁸ I would extend Gil’s broad definition of abuse to think about how parents are subjected to abuse as well. In thinking about how to care, society is quick to state that certain people should not be parents. While there are certainly extreme instances of abuse, for the vast majority of the cases where parents are believed to be abusive or neglectful, we do not stop to think about how our systems of supposed protection, such as child welfare, schools, health care, and criminal justice are in fact abusive to children *and* parents.

To help reframe our thinking, we need to abolish the family regulation/policing system that does more to harm families and children than it does to protect them. We must abolish adoption as the epitome of care—as an event symbolizing rescue, cure, or solution—and instead hold adoption as *a* type of relationship under the umbrella of care. We need to reject the institution of adoption that invests in adoption as the opposite and better future over investments in other forms of care and kinship. In other words, we must eradicate not just the family policing system and adoption industry but the structural conditions and ideologies that enable them to exist. As an example of thinking beyond adoption, more practitioners are expanding how we understand relational permanence, which can be defined as “a mutually committed, life-long family connection to an adult parent-figure” and “an enduring source of love, care, support, dependability, belonging and mutual trust.”¹⁰⁹ Relational permanence is not automatically gained through permanent legal or genetic ties. Instead, it involves nonbiological parent figures in combination with biological parents to offer tangible, financial, *and* relational support of “belonging, emotional security, and care.”¹¹⁰

One example of this is SOUL Family in Kansas, which creates opportunities for foster youth to select up to three adults who would constitute a circle of care.

When a youth turns 18, they maintain access to services, which typically ends in other permanency options, while keeping relationally permanent legal ties to adults.¹¹¹ In another example the University of Houston's Graduate College of Social Work and the Center for the Study of Social Policy have collaborated in the creation of the upEND movement. Through research, storytelling, and supporting and collaborating with grassroots advocacy, it aims to "abolish the existing child welfare system" while also "imagining and recreating the ways in which society supports children, families, and communities in being safe and thriving."¹¹² The movement has hosted numerous events, created video resources, started a new academic journal (*Abolitionist Perspectives in Social Work*), and hosts a podcast. This example is especially important because of the ways that social workers and social work have contributed to family policing. It shows how institutions imbricated in the history of harm might reflect and "upEND" themselves.

I hope this book has illuminated the ways that love, violence, and race inform the complexity of adoption and family in the United States. How do we hold this complexity and the conditions that create the need for adoption? What would it mean not to predefine certain spaces and specific people or communities as unable to care for their children, such that they must be wholly removed? How can we rethink theories of kinship, relationality, and care—through adoptee, ghostly, and Indigenous forms of kinship as well as reproductive justice and abolition—not as a means to solve violence but to acknowledge, confront, reduce, and learn from it? How do we draw on radical love to care for the most vulnerable—not in isolation but together? What would we do if we allocated the resources and were unafraid? Answering these questions might allow us to understand that the aspects of care that we have sometimes (mistakenly) attached solely to adoption can be found in other types of care. As I wrote in the introduction, if we did this, the answer can be finding new ways to support current love. Not pathologize struggling love. Not criminalize imperfect love. It also means enabling kinship love, even if that love emanates from an older, smaller house that is in a poorer neighborhood next to a failing school, because there are social and historical reasons for why those things exist that have nothing to do with how much a person might love and care for a child.