Review Essay

Redefining the Ethics of Adoption, Race, Gender, and Class

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Hawley Fogg-Davis, *The Ethics of Transracial Adoption*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002. ix + 154 pp. $25.00 cloth.

Rickie Solinger, *Beggars and Choosers: How the Politics of Choice Shapes Adoption, Abortion, and Welfare in the United States*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2001. ix + 290 pp. $25.00 cloth.

Whilst I was a child, I had a book called *The Chosen Baby*. Originally written in 1939 by Valentina Wasson, the edition I was given had been revised and updated in 1950 (Wasson 1939). It is the book I, as an adoptee, was given to understand adoption—my origins. It is the story of Mr. and Mrs. Brown, who had everything they could ask for, except one thing—they needed a baby to make their happiness complete (Patton 2000).

So they went down to the friendly government agency where they met the nice caseworker, who began searching for just the right baby for them. After an anxious wait (probably about nine months), Mrs. White finally called with wonderful news. She had a beautiful baby boy for them to come and see. They went to the adoption agency the next day, and of course, the Browns fell in love with him instantly and took him home the very next day. Their family and friends were so happy for them (Patton 2000).

The Chosen Baby was one of the two best-known versions of the dominant adoption story published between 1945 and 1965. It was often recommended by social workers as a way of explaining adoption to children. In fact, in the foreword, Sophie Van S. Theis, secretary of the Committee on Child Placing and Adoption, declares it "the story of every adopted child" and suggests

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that it "be used by parents to supplement their own explanation to their children of the fact of adoption" (Wasson 1950:6).

Through this story we can read some of the ideological assumptions structuring the social reproduction of families through adoption in the post–World War II United States. First of all, Mr. and Mrs. Brown are a nondisabled, white, middle-class, heterosexual married couple, and it is no accident that their caseworker's name is Mrs. White. In fact, everyone in the story is white and middle-class. The presence of a social worker is significant in adoption stories—she approves the adoptive parents and "finds" the baby. She is the mediator for the state's definition of good parents. This narrative tells a culturally and historically specific story. Yet perhaps even more revealing are the absences—the stories that this narrative doesn't tell (Patton 2000).

Can we imagine this story with a black family? How about a working-class or poor family? Where are the birth parents in this story? What is made invisible by their exclusion? What assumptions about class are hidden? According to this story, Peter Brown was never "born"—he came from a government agency (Patton 2000).

I read the "chosen baby" narrative as an allegory about family, gender, race, class, patriarchy, choice, and commodification.[1] Structuring the surrender and adoption of children around *choice* reveals the consumer relations guiding the social reproduction of families in the United States in the last half of the twentieth century and beyond. This is also a cultural narrative about *illegitimacy* and *legitimacy*. The legitimate choice makers in this story are middle-class, heterosexual, married white couples. Not only are they granted the power to "choose" the baby, but their "choice could transform an 'unwanted' baby into one who was 'loved and cherished'" (Solinger 2001:100). Their "choice" has conferred the legitimacy granted through patriarchal marriage on an "illegitimate" baby born out of wedlock to a poor choice maker. In the United States, this legitimacy is codified through the creation of a new birth certificate that lists the adoptive parents as the child's parents; the existence of a birth mother and birth father is erased as if they never existed.[2]

Yet there are significant absences in this postwar middle-class allegory. Though the assumption is that the adoptive parents chose their child, it is actually the social worker who chose him for them. They chose to accept the child whom the state deemed appropriately matched to them. The story doesn't include such details as screening policies, economic requirements, and home studies. In this sense, the adoptive parents were also chosen by the state as appropriate parents.

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[1] See Gooding-Williams (1993) for a discussion of reading social narratives as "socio-political allegories."

[2] See Carp (1998) for an in-depth discussion of secrecy in U.S. adoption.

Adoptees cannot help but be aware that if one set of parents chose to parent us, another set of parents chose not to.[3] As Solinger writes:

> Most often in the United States, relinquishment is presented as the act of biological mothers who have altruistic reasons for making the choice to give up their babies (they know they are too young or too poor or too alone, for example, to be good mothers of their precious babies), or of bad women who have heartless, selfish reasons (they don't want to be tied down or they don't/can't feel any love for the infant). It has been very rare in this country to think about relinquishment as a coerced act, forced on a mother who wanted to keep her child (Solinger 2001:73–74).

The ideology of "choice" in adoption has been largely unexamined in public discourse. Indeed, the mythology of adoption as a benevolent institution that serves the "best interests of children" has become nearly sacrosanct in the realm of public narratives.

Several elements are frequently missing from public discussions of adoption. The first is a structural analysis—attention to the public policies and social institutions that define some women as mothers and some as not-mothers, that provide extensive services for some children and ignore the needs of others. The second important element is attention to the intersections of gender, race, and poverty. The third aspect of adoption that is crucial to public understanding, but too rarely present, is the language of those whose lives are touched by the issue. The story sounds different when we include attention to social structure; the intersections of race, gender, and class; and the voices of those whose lives are shaped by the regulatory practices of adoption—particularly those whose voices are too often left out of the public narrative: adoptees and birth parents.

When we consider the role of social institutions in regulating "legitimacy" as well as absence of birth parents—birth mothers, in particular—in origin narratives like *The Chosen Baby*, it becomes apparent that the state has a stake in how the story of adoption is narrated. When we explore adoption as the state-regulated transfer of a child from one set of parents to another, the question of where children come from matters.[4] What circumstances in the lives of pregnant women make it difficult or impossible to keep the children they give birth to? Asking such questions makes it clear that adoption is an issue of reproductive politics. One of the fundamental issues that adoption raises is: How does the state define and regulate motherhood? Who counts as a mother? While feminists have actively engaged in de-

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[3] See Modell (1994) for a discussion of adoptees' reactions to the "chosen baby" story.

[4] Even in private, lawyer-mediated adoptions, a state-licensed adoption agency must conduct the home study.

bates concerning the rights of women to choose abortion, much less attention has been paid to adoption.

"Choice" has largely structured feminist dialogues on reproductive rights, but framing these issues around choice relies on the assumption that all women have access to the same range of opportunities. It disregards the role of social structure in regulating which options are available to which women (Patton 2000). As critical legal scholar Dorothy Roberts argues, reproductive freedom, as it functions in the United States, "protects all citizens' choices from the most direct and egregious abuses of government power, but it does nothing to dismantle social arrangements that make it impossible for some people to make a choice in the first place" (Roberts 1997:294).

Tensions between personal agency and choice on the one hand, and the power of the state on the other, speak to scholarly concerns about the social construction of identity and family, race and ethnicity, and gender and poverty. Political considerations of poverty, for example, typically range from liberal emphasis on inequality as a feature of the overdetermined power relations of the state to conservative explanations focusing on the "bad choices" poor people make. In my view, a more useful framework includes attention to the ways in which state power shapes the range of options available to different people based on gender, race, poverty, and other features of social identity.

As the work of multiracial feminist scholars demonstrates, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class mediate women's relationships to the state and the social institutions regulating the dissemination of resources (Baca Zinn & Dill 1994). Systemic racism and exclusionary public policies regulating the labor market have, for example, led to different forms of family thriving and surviving among African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and Asian Americans. Different racial-ethnic groups have been supported and oppressed by the state in various ways, and thus, cultural responses to social inequality—survival skills—have varied as well (Dill 1994). Different relationships to social institutions such as the labor market, the social welfare system, and public education have, over time, led to different patterns of family formation among various racial-ethnic groups. The state has historically reinforced some family forms while discouraging others, and this has been manifested in public policies and social attitudes that treat women differently based on their race and the races of their children (Dill 1994; Dill, Baca Zinn, & Patton 1999). Baca Zinn explained the importance of viewing families as products of social structure, not only of culture:

> [W]hen it comes to thinking about family patterns, diversity is treated as if it were an intrinsic property of groups that are 'different,' rather than as being the product of forces that affect all

families, but affect them in different ways (Baca Zinn 1990:305).

The reproductive behavior of low-income women, particularly those of color, has historically been targeted for regulation by the state as a means of controlling poverty (Roberts 1997). Indeed, women who were sterilized involuntarily or who were coerced into using birth control have always had a problematic relationship to the politics of "choice." While many middle-class women have fought for the right to terminate unwanted pregnancies, poor women have, too often, had to engage in battles for the right to bear and keep their own children. As historian Rosalind Petchesky argues, "[t]he critical issue for feminists is not so much the content of women's choices, or even the 'right to choose,' as it is the social and material conditions under which choices are made. The 'right to choose' means little when women are powerless" (Petchesky 1990:11).

Two new books address adoption and choice from very different perspectives. Solinger's *Beggars and Choosers: How the Politics of Choice Shapes Adoption, Abortion, and Welfare in the United States* argues for the importance of exploring the complexities of "choice" in reproductive politics and suggests that alongside abortion, both adoption and welfare politics must be critically examined. Through her cogent analysis of these issues, Solinger makes clear that in the United States, the absence of financial resources makes "choice" inaccessible and largely meaningless for poor women. She recharts the map of public debate about reproductive "choice" through public policy regulating motherhood through adoption, abortion, and welfare, and in so doing makes a compelling case for a refocusing of political movement around "rights" rather than "choice"—a concept that has become associated with the exercise of financial resources. She distinguishes rights as "privileges or benefits" not contingent on the possession of financial resources.

Fogg-Davis's *The Ethics of Transracial Adoption* considers transracial adoption through the "ethics" of adoption policies prohibiting "racial matching" and the choices that adoptive parents make about the race of the child they wish to adopt. Fogg-Davis aims to chart new territory in this debate, navigating between the polarized perspectives characterized by "color blindness" and "black nationalism." Her discussion of color blindness is a useful contribution to the growing literature critiquing this approach to transracial adoption. Yet though she is critical of a complete embrace of color blindness, she ultimately reproduces the argument of proponents of this view—that attempting to "match" children of color with racially similar parents discriminates against black children. Thus, she argues in favor of transracial adoption and argues for an approach to parenting transracial adoptees she calls "racial navigation."

Both Fogg-Davis and Solinger map the contours of highly charged political dialogues. While their books address adoption in fundamentally different ways, there are some interesting intersections around notions of "choice" and "ethics." I begin with a discussion of Solinger's book, focusing on the ways the concept of choice has shaped public understandings of adoption, abortion, and welfare politics. Solinger's political and historical analysis of reproductive politics provides a fresh context for the analysis of Fogg-Davis's approach to adoption. Solinger's research and analysis reframes both academic and public understandings of adoption, abortion, welfare, and their intersections, and points toward a more ethical stance toward adoption and reproductive rights centered on the goal of social justice. I will then address Fogg-Davis's book, focusing on her mapping of the public debate on transracial adoption and her discussion of racial navigation.

Problematizing the Notion of "Choice"

Solinger's new book offers insight into the complex terrain of the politics of motherhood, race, and poverty. She reveals the public narrative of "choice" guiding these politics and lays bare the limitations of understanding motherhood through this lens. Indeed, she demonstrates that poverty is a fundamental factor shaping how "choice" plays out in the lives of unwed pregnant women. Solinger argues that in the context of contemporary public dialogues focusing on whether women are "good choice makers" or "bad" "it is crucial to consider the degree to which one woman's possession of reproductive choice may actually depend on or deepen another woman's reproductive vulnerability" (Solinger 2001:7). She continues:

> I am devoted here to making the argument that simple 'choice' actually underlies the very popular (though much denied) idea that motherhood should be a class privilege in the United States—a privilege appropriate only for women who can afford it. I am convinced that choice is a remarkably unstable foundation for guaranteeing women's control over their own bodies, their reproductive lives, their motherhood, and ultimately their status as full citizens (Solinger 2001:7).

Central to this argument is an analysis of the ways that race and class have historically shaped women's reproductive behavior by regulating their access to resources and to a full range of options. Though trained as a historian, Solinger synthesizes a broad range of disciplinary sources and approaches. She deftly connects historical events, movements for social change, public policy, political dialogue, ideology, and articulations of the lived experiences of women coerced into surrendering their children.

She locates herself as an "outsider" in relation to the lived experience of adoption, though many readers of her 1992 book

Wake Up Little Susie: Single Pregnancy and Race Before Roe v. Wade (1992) assumed otherwise. She explains:

> For months, starting in the spring of 1992, I got almost daily phone calls and letters from white women, most just about my own age, who had years before surrendered their babies for adoption. These communications came as a shock to me. I had responded sharply to archival evidence I had found of the dreadful circumstances that white, unmarried pregnant young women faced in the 1950s and 1960s (Solinger 2001:65).

In her mind, these young women had remained teenagers trapped in the records documenting the relinquishment of their infants for adoption.

> But the women who called me and wrote to me jolted me out of my historian's dream. They called to say that I had gotten the story right, as far as I'd gone with it. Most asked why on earth had I though to write a book about 'unwed mothers' and their lost babies. (Surely, many hinted gingerly, I must be one of them.) And they wanted to tell me about their lives since the surrender. How hard they had resisted. How much they had suffered, for twenty-five, thirty-five years. Many wanted to tell me about how the experience of having been defined as not-mothers of children they had borne eventually catalyzed them to embrace an energetic feminist politics in the mid-1970s. This collective activism, they said, together with searching for and often finding their lost children, helped them regain the self-hood and even the sanity they'd lost with their babies (Solinger 2001:66).

It was this flood of stories from "former Susies" that caused Solinger to delve more deeply into the politics of choice, adoption, abortion, and welfare.

Solinger's research demonstrates an understanding of the constellation of power relations, policy and ideology, and voice and resistance. Her analysis makes visible the power relations involved in the regulation of adoption in the United States and the ways in which adoption is intimately linked with both the politics of reproduction and the politics of poverty. This research explores this complex terrain on both the macro-level of politics and policy and the micro-level of people's lived experiences. Not only does Solinger address the various levels of meaning on which adoption, abortion, and welfare politics are enacted, but she also explores how these multiple levels of social meaning interact. She presents a nuanced approach to the complex relationships between social structure, power relations, and individual agency.

Solinger's book challenges the popular mythology of adoption. Media adoption narratives—in film, in television, in news reporting—shape public understanding of adoption through the assumption that *all birth mothers choose to relinquish their children.* The voices of birth mothers are rarely heard in such stories. In

addition to her historical and political analysis, Solinger draws on interviews she conducted with birth mothers to break the silence in public narratives about adoption and choice.[5] Many of these women were founders of Concerned United Birthparents (CUB), a support and advocacy organization that emerged in the 1970s concurrent with the women's movement as well as the movement among adoptees for open records. While the women she interviewed are not a representative sample of all birth mothers, this strategically chosen range of voices challenges the applicability of the choice narrative for describing all birth mothers' experiences. These interviews complicate the mythology of choice by revealing that "CUB members generally identified themselves as women who had been coerced into surrendering their babies" (Solinger 2001:70). These women's stories make clear that not all women *choose, unproblematically,* to give up their children. While some women would surely articulate their decisions as informed choices, the stories of women whose *choices did not feel like choices* should cause us to question the use of this concept to understand reproductive politics.

It isn't just in children's stories that the voices of birth mothers are silenced. Indeed, the adoption system that was institutionalized in the post–World War II United States served to hide the "sexual deviance" of young white women who became pregnant outside marriage, as well as the "sexual deviance" of infertility during the postwar baby boom. Secrecy in adoption was one of several developments in the adoption system that contributed to the silence of birth mothers' voices in public understandings of adoption. In the first half of the twentieth century, adoption records were considered confidential but were often available for those involved in the adoption. As Carp's research demonstrates, before World War II, adoptees and their adoptive parents were often provided with detailed information about birth families upon request. The seeds of secrecy were sown much earlier for birth parents. Even in the late nineteenth century, adoption policies often denied identifying information to birth mothers in fear that they might attempt to retrieve their children. Such policies were seen as protective of the adoption process in general, and adoptive families in particular. "After World War II secrecy became pervasive, preventing everyone directly involved in adoption from gaining access to family information about their lives" (Carp 1998:102). This shift in adoption policy was shaped by a number of social forces.

> The answer to the question of why secrecy was imposed on adoption case records in the second half of the twentieth century cannot be reduced to the altruism of child-welfare reformers or the self-interest of adoptive parents. In fact, the answer

[5]   See Modell (1994) for an anthropological study of birth parents, adoptive parents, and adoptees.

lies in a combination of factors, including the changing demographics of adoption agencies' clientele, adoption caseworkers' often uncritical embrace of psychoanalytic theory, and social workers' increasing professionalism (Carp 1998:109).

The changing demographics to which Carp refers were a significant increase in the number of young, never-married women whose children were relinquished for adoption. The increase in "illegitimacy" was met with profound social stigma for young unmarried women who became pregnant. The influence of psychoanalytic theory on the experiences of young, unmarried white women who became pregnant in the 1950s and 1960s cannot be underestimated. "During the war, social workers began to take their cues from psychoanalytic studies of unwed mothers, which depicted them as neurotic at best, psychotic at worst" (Carp 1998:114). Solinger's now classic 1992 study of single pregnancy and race before *Roe v. Wade* (1973) demonstrates that the racially segregated, predominantly white maternity homes that were created to address the increase in unwed pregnancy following World War II were heavily shaped by psychoanalytic views of neuroses as the cause of unwed pregnancy. These psychological perspectives were drawn on in counseling young white women in maternity homes that the only acceptable "choice" they had was to relinquish their babies for adoption; the desire to keep their children was interpreted as evidence of their psychological instability. This process constituted an elaborate system of social control for young white pregnant women that effectively coerced countless young women to relinquish their babies to the state (Solinger 1992).

In the postwar era, social resources for young pregnant women were largely determined by race and class, and these factors intertwined with those determining the life courses of their children. The social support services available for single pregnant women were completely different for white women and black women, largely based on the differing social meanings of white and black unwed pregnancy. Producing a white baby served to reproduce a white, middle-class, two parent "ideal" family, and thus, the evidence of young white women's sexual deviance—the child—disappeared. Conversely, the needs of black birth mothers and their children fell outside the purview of such social services; indeed, Dawn Day's research found that some adoption agencies actually had regulations *against* black adoptions. Because these institutions were not designed with the needs of black children in mind and there was virtually no "market" for them, unmarried pregnant black women were frequently turned away from adoption agencies and pushed toward welfare agencies (Day 1979).

Mythologies of adoption like *The Chosen Baby* have largely been shaped by the perspectives, desires, and needs of adoptive

parents, social workers, and psychologists. As Joyce Ladner's classic sociological study of transracial adoption demonstrates, the social practice of adoption was largely institutionalized in the United States following World War II in response to an unprecedented increase in adoption requests for healthy white infants from infertile white, middle-class, heterosexual, married couples, and "adoption policies and practices were formulated and functioned in behalf of this small clientele" (Ladner 1977:56). One consequence of this focus on the desires of white middle-class couples was the development of an adoption system that systematically ignored the needs of African American children for adoption. Black children were typically labeled "unadoptable" and left in foster care (Ladner 1977; Cole & Donley 1990). The policies developed for screening prospective adoptive parents required middle-class income levels, a separate bedroom for the child, and a mother who did not work outside the home, among other things. These requirements were often prohibitive for African American families (Day 1979). It was not until the 1970s that such restrictive requirements were lifted on a large scale.

A network of adoption agencies and maternity homes, infused with a growing post–World War II "pronatalist" ideology (May 1988), developed into an elaborate system for the regulation of family, gender, race, class, and sexuality. The closed adoption system that operated in this era served the social function of making the twin stigmas of infertility and unwed pregnancy basically invisible. The policies and practices that developed served a larger social function as well; the adoption system served to reproduce "legitimate" white middle-class families according to state definitions of "normal" gender, race, sexuality, and class identities.

The ideology of "choice," in its focus on individual agency, diverts attention from the needs of the state to regulate family reproduction. While individuals certainly make personal choices, such decisions should be considered in relation to the range of options available in particular social circumstances. The voices of the women Solinger interviewed challenge the notion that all birth mothers made conscious informed decisions, emphasizing instead that many of them felt they *had no choice* but to surrender their children. Indeed, their stories argue that many of them were effectively coerced to relinquish their babies by parents, social workers, social stigma, and extreme lack of resources. They testify to the limits of understanding relinquishment as "choice."[6] As one woman explained:

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[6] The stories that Solinger's interviewees tell are consistent with the perspectives of the birth mothers whom Modell interviewed (Modell 1994).

> I was from a right-wing military family. Getting pregnant was the last straw for my father. Either I gave up the baby for adoption or my father walked out, deserted the family and divorced my mother. My father totally supported our family financially (Solinger 2001:72).

The perspective on the pregnancies and relinquishment experiences articulated by the women Solinger interviewed is tied in a particular way to the shifting politics of gender and reproduction in the early 1970s. Solinger makes clear that the *Roe v. Wade* ruling in 1973 was truly a watershed moment. Not only did it make abortion legal in every state in the United States, but it also fundamentally reshaped the ways that women thought about reproductive decisions, as well as the way reproduction was discussed in public dialogues. Before the early 1970s, abortion politics were primarily argued through the language of rights.[7] The language employed by Justice Blackmun in the *Roe v. Wade* decision emphasized "choice" rather than rights.

> And the determination of abortion rights advocates to develop a respectable, nonconfrontational movement after Roe encouraged many proponents to adopt the term 'choice.' In a country weary of rights claims, choice became the way liberal and mainstream feminists could talk about abortion without mentioning the 'A-word.' Many people believed that 'choice'—a term that evoked women shoppers selecting among options in the marketplace—would be an easier sell; it offered 'rights lite,' a package less threatening or disturbing than unadulterated rights (Solinger 2002:5).

What was not immediately apparent to feminists adopting this language was that race and class have always been factors shaping reproductive decisions for women in the United States, and thus not all women have had access to the same range of choices. As reproductive politics have taken shape in the United States, the range of "choices" available is largely dependent on financial resources; thus, this emphasis has served to further entrench social inequalities. Indeed, as the post-*Roe* era of bitter political battles over access to and funding for abortion have made clear, the legality of abortion is not necessarily synonymous with access to the service for all women. In the contemporary political moment, abortion is legal, but not available in every state. State laws vary regarding restrictions such as waiting periods and parental permission for minors. In the mid-1970s, access to abortion for poor women was severely curtailed through a series of Supreme Court cases upholding the right of states to deny Medicaid funding for elective abortions, along with the passage of the Hyde Amendment, a federal law prohibiting the use of Medicaid funds for abortion. Though all women in the United

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[7] For discussion of the history and politics of abortion in the United States, see Luker (1984), Ginsberg (1989), Petchesky (1990), Gordon (1990), and Solinger (1998).

States have the "right to choose," many poor women do not have the financial resources available to allow them to make such a "choice."

> When Americans began to refer to reproductive liberty by the simple name 'choice,' they obscured the fact that millions of women in the United States—and abroad—lived in conditions of poverty and oppression that precluded many of the kinds of choices that middle-class American women thought of as a matter of personal decision making (Solinger 2001:21).

The *Roe v. Wade* ruling, along with the women's movement and shifting views of female sexuality, reshaped the ways that women thought about single parenthood. Solinger makes the important connection that *Roe v. Wade* not only gave women permission to "choose" abortion, but it also empowered women to choose to be single mothers. These two developments had an enormous effect on the availability of healthy white infants for adoption. The advent of the birth control pill in the 1960s had already caused a significant decline in the number of infants surrendered for adoption in the United States. The counterculture movement of the 1960s redefined the boundaries of sexuality for young women. And the women's movement empowered women to question marriage as the only appropriate life path. Many young white women who became pregnant outside of marriage and who, a decade earlier, might have been pressured to make adoption plans, felt newly empowered in the 1970s to keep their children. The rising divorce rate and the growth in employment rates, particularly for white women, also contributed to many women's beliefs that they could make it as single mothers.

These factors fundamentally shaped the ways that many birth mothers understood their experiences as well. A number of women who had surrendered children for adoption in the 1950s and 1960s began reinterpreting these experiences in light of the increase in the number of women parenting children alone. In fact, many of these birth mothers found themselves single mothers as the result of divorce. The women Solinger interviewed began redefining their experiences in the context of the women's movement as coercion and injustice, rather than shameful mistakes. It was in this context that CUB was created.

While "open adoption" has grown in popularity in recent decades, none of the women Solinger interviewed had been presented with that option. In fact, it was the advocacy of birth mothers such as those Solinger interviewed that was instrumental in publicly arguing for the importance of facilitating and maintaining connections between birth and adoptive families. Carp explains:

> By the late 1970s and through the 1980s open adoption emerged from within the adoption rights movement (ARM) and moved to center stage. It was spearheaded by a small group

of birthmothers who, grieving for the children they had relinquished, organized themselves into self-help groups and advocated open adoption as an alternative to traditional adoption proceedings (Carp 1998:196).

Open adoption is more frequently an option in the contemporary United States, yet a great many adoptions still involve the permanent sealing of adoption records.[8]

Solinger's interviews with birth mothers give voice to an aspect of women's history that has, until now, been hidden—partly by the politics of adoption and partly by a sort of denial on the part of the women's movement. Indeed, the emergence of reproductive "choice" as the rallying point for feminist political mobilization post-*Roe* further obscured the newly articulated rights claims of birth mothers.

After 1980, the political context became "increasingly hostile" for CUB's assertions of injustice.

> This was so in part because in the Reagan era, mainstream feminists, NARAL, Planned Parenthood, and others focused on the need to safeguard women's choice, while conservatives claimed that the polity was being poisoned by the bad reproductive choices of many females. "Choice" defined the rhetoric on both sides, and the notion of reproductive rights faded in the public and political arenas (Solinger 2001:124).

Regulating Poor Women's "Choices"

Conservative rhetoric about the "bad choices" of some women turned on the politics of race and class, which were often conflated. Reagan-era conservatives were particularly successful at demonizing unmarried women who had children without the financial resources to properly raise them. Indeed, Reagan himself popularized the myth of the Welfare Queen, living large off the taxpayers. In the 1980s and 1990s, this became a widely recognized symbol of "illegitimate mothers," who were considered, in fact, "illegitimate consumers" for living off the government dole. Solinger discusses how the ideology of choice functioned both as a way of blaming poor women for their own poverty and as a means of deflecting attention from economic and racial inequality in the U.S. social structure.

> The Welfare Queen has absorbed and reflected a bitter clutch of ideas about who poor women are—and how they got poor. And most of these ideas, of course, have to do with a belief that poor women are poor because of their own bad choices, their own weak-minded and weak-willed behavior. The Welfare Queen has been such a powerfully convincing symbol that in-

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[8] Yngvesson states that open adoptions are still rare. In her research with an agency and a lawyer in California, the estimate of open adoptive placements ranged from five to ten percent of placements annually (Yngvesson 1997).

voking it has effectively blotted out alternative claims about wo-
men in trouble. Most important, when the Welfare Queen is in
focus, we cannot see past this symbol. The Welfare Queen
blocks our ability to imagine the social and economic forces
that have created hardship, especially intractable poverty, for
millions of women and children in the United States (Solinger
2001:170).

In the Reagan era, poor women were targeted for their sup-
posedly negative influence on the future of American society be-
cause of their "illegitimacy" and "bad mothering." Political rheto-
ric invigorated the spurious claim that poor women had more
babies in order to receive more welfare benefits. Such women
were castigated for making the "bad choices" to have children
without fathers present. They were further targeted as incapable
of properly socializing their children. These representations of
poor women as bad mothers fueled politicians' efforts to use the
welfare system as a way of regulating the reproductive behavior of
poor women. A two-tiered approach emerged. The rate of child
removal by the social welfare system accelerated in the 1980s,
while conservatives simultaneously encouraged single women to
relinquish their children for adoption.

> The Adolescent Family Life program aggressively promoted
> adoption, and the Office of Population Affairs in the Depart-
> ment of Health and Human Services produced an "adoption
> resource directory" and an "adoption information guidebook"
> to facilitate the process. Throughout the Reagan-Bush era,
> adoption was promoted as a cure for child poverty and a way to
> reduce welfare costs (Solinger 2001:198).

In the "welfare reform" era of the 1990s, in particular, public
policies linking adoption with the prevention of "illegitimacy" be-
came central in policy discussions. In the 1990s, adoption be-
came part of a public policy dialogue concerning how to curtail
the birthrate of poor women. The conservative narrative that be-
came widely accepted among centrist and right-wing politicians
argued that poor women having "illegitimate" children were the
cause of poverty and the social problems associated with it. The
assumptions behind this belief were that without a father in the
home children could not be socialized into "productive citizens."
The result, conservatives argued, was a population of gang
bangers, drug addicts, and pregnant teenagers (C. Murray 1993;
Bennett 1995; Will 1993; Cohen 1994; D. Murray 1994). Cohen's
editorial makes the connections clear:

> About 1.2 million children are being born annually in single-
> parent homes. Without mature males as role models (not to
> mention disciplinarians), they are growing up unsocialized—
> prone to violence, unsuitable for employment and thus without
> prospects or hope (Cohen 1993).

The construction of "legitimate" nuclear families was discussed as necessary for the good of the nation. Indeed, out-of-wedlock births were represented as a threat to the nation (Herrnstein & Murray 1994). As Will explained, "Democracy depends on virtues that depend on socialization of children in the matrix of care and resources fostered by marriage" (Will 1993:editorial page). Adoption was promoted as the only way to "save" poor children and America from downfall. It emerged as part of the same discussions of welfare reform as "family caps," Norplant, and "illegitimacy." As Solinger makes clear, the Personal Responsibility Act—welfare reform—along with "pro-adoption" legislation (U.S. Public Law 104-193 1996), marked "ever more sharply the separation and difference between middle-class mothers and poor mothers in American society" (2001:216).

Thus far, I have focused on the "voluntary"—with all the qualifications that accompany that term—relinquishment of children for adoption. In the 1950s through the 1970s, most of the children made available for adoption were *relinquished* by their birth mothers. Relinquishments declined dramatically in the 1970s, and by the 1980s only about seven percent of single mothers relinquished their children for adoption. The limitations of the ideology of "choice" in adoption are countered even more directly by exploring another population of women whose children are made available for adoption—poor women whose children are removed by the child welfare system. In the 1980s there was a marked increase in the number of children removed from their birth mothers by the social welfare system, swelling the ranks of children in foster care to unprecedented levels (Patton 2000; Roberts 2002). This change was accompanied by a fundamental shift in the way adoption was practiced.

Private adoption became big business as lawyers began handling the majority of voluntary relinquishments and international adoptions. The public adoption system has, since the 1980s, become primarily responsible for the adoptive placement of children in the foster care system. Healthy infants of any race rarely enter the public adoption system; the children in the public system are there primarily because they have been removed from their parents, many who are young, poor, single women of color (Roberts 2002; Golden 1997). Indeed, Golden reports that, according to a 1991 U.S. Committee on Ways and Means report, "[t]he majority of children in foster care are from families receiving aid to families with dependent children (AFDC)" (Golden 1997:2). Social welfare scholar Esther Wattenberg explains:

> Contrary to common perceptions, neglect and abandonment, not physical abuse, are the major problems that bring children to the attention of county social services. Of more than eleven thousand children with substantiated cases of maltreatment in 1999, more than 77 percent were victims of neglect or aban-

donment. While physical, sexual, and emotional abuse are still significant factors in the pathways to child welfare (25 percent, 7 percent, and 10 percent, respectively, the total reflecting a slight overlap in categories reported), it should still be emphasized that the major factor that brings children to the attention of county social services is neglect and abandonment (Wattenberg & Furrnea 2002:7).

In the case of women whose children are removed for "neglect," a fungible category the definition of which typically reflects the conditions of poverty, women literally have *no choice* (Roberts 2002). Most of the children in the contemporary U.S. foster care system are there because they have been removed from their poor, single mothers. The primary factors in removal rates concern poverty and being unmarried. In a statistical analysis of interviews conducted with 20,000 U.S. women for the Survey of Income and Program Participation (1991–1993), Swingle found that "never married mothers are 35% more likely than married mothers to have a child living with other relatives (either in informal arrangements or child welfare-sanctioned kinship care) *and 226% more likely to have a child living with nonrelatives rather than with themselves* [emphasis added]" (Swingle 1999:20). Swingle explains that "separated children of never married mothers are more likely than the children of ever married mothers to live with neither parent" (1999:20). He makes clear that "[M]ore education, more family income, being married and being white reduce the risk that a mother is separated from a child" (1999:14). Poor single mothers are so stigmatized and blamed for their own "dependency" that salvation narratives of white middle-class families—particularly mothers—"saving" children from their own poor mothers have become widely accepted in relation to adoption.

While poor women were marked in the public sphere as "bad mothers" making "bad choices," the choices and desires of middle-class women to be mothers were being heralded and supported by public policies facilitating adoption. When the supply of healthy white infants declined precipitously in the early 1970s, demand dictated the growth of new baby "markets." It was then that international adoptions increased dramatically. Indeed, Solinger notes a thirty-three percent increase in foreign adoptions in 1973. Her astute analysis linking public rhetoric and policy regarding abortion, adoption, and welfare is an important contribution to both academic and popular understandings of these issues. But she takes another important analytical step. She argues that the increasing range of choices available to middle-class women must be understood in direct relation to the diminishing rights of poor women to bear and raise their children throughout the world. "In fact, the way the 'adoption market' took form after Roe v. Wade is a case study of how some women's choices

depend on exploiting the relative choicelessness of other wo-
men" (Solinger 2001:22).

Historical distinctions between women of color and white wo-
men, between poor and middle-class women, have been repro-
duced and institutionalized in the "era of choice," in part by de-
fining some groups of women as good choice makers and some
as bad. During a time when babies—and pregnancy itself—be-
came ever more commodified, some women were defined as hav-
ing a legitimate relationship to babies and motherhood status,
while others were defined as being illegitimate consumers (Sol-
inger 2001:7).

> That is the problem with choice. In theory, choice refers to in-
> dividual preference and wants to protect all women from repro-
> ductive coercion. In practice, though, choice has two faces. The
> contemporary language of choice promises dignity and repro-
> ductive autonomy to women with resources. For women with-
> out, the language of choice is a taunt and threat (Solinger
> 2002:223).

As I will discuss in more depth in my discussion of transracial
adoption, the passage of "welfare reform" was accompanied by
the passage of legislation that promoted adoption by providing
tax credits to families that adopted and by prohibiting the use of
race in adoptive placement decisions. The Personal Responsibil-
ity Act (U.S. Public Law 104-193 1996) revoked poor women's
entitlement to benefits through the implementation of restric-
tions on eligibility and a five-year lifetime limit on the receipt of
benefits. In 1997, the year following the passage of welfare re-
form, the ASFA was passed (U.S. Public Law 105-189 1997),
which facilitated the adoption of children in foster care by mak-
ing it easier to terminate the parental rights of birth parents.
This cluster of legislation serves to undermine the legitimacy of
poor mothers and to bolster the "choices" available to middle-
class women. As Solinger's research demonstrates, when "unfit-
ness" is determined by poverty, when reproductive choice is de-
termined by financial means, all women do not have the right to
make their own reproductive decisions.

Problematizing Transracial Adoption

The following is an excerpt from an interview I conducted in
1994 with an African American man who had been adopted and
raised by white parents. Brian was 25 years old when I inter-
viewed him.

> Brian: When you're given up for adoption there's automatically
> a 'I was left by my parents. And who am I? Who am I?' I have no
> blood. I have a family with no blood. I'm more [screwed]
> 'cause like my great grandpa hated me because I was Black. So,
> I have to deal with also the color line as well as, 'I was left . . .

for what? What did I do wrong? Why'd you leave me?' It's hard to rationally—I'll be talking to somebody. . . . I was talking to somebody today about it and what did they say? 'Well maybe they financially couldn't afford it.' Or, 'Maybe, you know. . .' A lot of . . . I don't wanna hear that technical bull. I was left. You know. For whatever reason they left me. And I get angry at that. 'Well, how can you be angry about that?' I'm like, 'Well you grew up with your family. So you don't even know what you're talking about'. . . And there's plenty of families that look good on the outside and you'd be getting [screwed] up inside the house. So, who's to say they're going somewhere better?. . . A lot of the time it's a money thing. The secret . . . a lot of that to me, what I see is that it's more a money thing. People who are broke, everybody knows they're getting whooped. You can hear it. The whole apartment building knows. That ain't no secret. Rich people, though . . . nobody know. The kids who get messed up in the house . . . you know, maybe they have a learning disability but pop doesn't wanna hear it. 'Where are the As?' Smack! You know? So, who's to say they go to. . .? I couldn't see myself giving my kid up for adoption. Like I said, I went to clinics a couple of times, you know, when we were getting abortions. And if the baby came, I'd deal with it. I'd bring my kid up. And I'm pissed that they didn't do it (Patton 2000:121–22).

"I was left." Brian's sense of abandonment reflects the emotional fallout of popular public narratives about adoption—that birth parents, and more specifically, birth mothers, choose to relinquish their children for adoption. Indeed, as I've discussed, choice is a central concept through which adoption is narrated and understood in the contemporary United States. Birth mothers choose to give up their children. Adoptive parents choose their adoptive children. Adoptees are chosen babies. And as I've discussed, the reproductive politics of "choice" shape adoption just as surely as they shape abortion. Indeed, Brian makes the connections between adoption and abortion explicit in his vehement refusal to relinquish a baby for adoption. What he doesn't make clear is that he was born in 1971, before *Roe v. Wade.* Brian's birth mother likely did not have the choice to have a legal abortion. Brian, like many adoptees, does not know the circumstances of his birth and thus does not know whether the "choice" his birth mother made was the only choice she felt she had. He does not know whether he was relinquished or removed from her care. Is "choice" really choice when there are no other options?

This excerpt from my interview with Brian also addresses two other issues central to adoption: race and class. As an African American man adopted and raised by white parents, his sense of self has been shaped by the racial differences between himself and his family. Though this is not the case for all transracial adoptees, for Brian this sense of difference has been difficult and

painful. Brian's sense of the "secret" narrative of adoption is class. He explains, "People who are broke, everybody knows they're getting whooped." He alludes to the fact that poor people are under more scrutiny by the social welfare system than are middle- and upper-class families and are thus more likely to have their children removed by the child welfare system. "Rich people though . . . nobody know." Popular narratives about adoption typically assume that adoptive placement in a middle- or upper-class home is in the "best interests of the child." As Brian points out, this is a class bias. "So, who's to say they're going somewhere better?. . . A lot of the time it's a money thing. The secret . . . a lot of that to me, what I see is that it's more a money thing."

This interview with Brian was part of a larger interdisciplinary ethnographic study I conducted in which I interviewed adult transracial adoptees, many of their adoptive parents, and social workers in public and private adoption agencies whose work focused on placing for adoption "special needs" children. I also explored the ways transracial adoption was discussed and represented in public policy discussions and popular media. I would like to make clear that rather than choosing a "side" in the decades-long public debate about transracial adoption, I argue for a reframing of the issues. Indeed, I argue that the problematic way this issue has been discussed in public narratives and political rhetoric reflects the power relations in the United States that are shaping the politics of race, gender, and class (Patton 2000). It is from this perspective that I consider Fogg-Davis's work.

The Ethics of Transracial Adoption begins with a discussion of the similarities between Cabbage Patch Kids—popular dolls Mattel began manufacturing in the 1980s that come with a birth certificate and adoption papers—and the adoption of children in the contemporary United States. While Fogg-Davis admits that "real adoption is of course different from doll collecting," as an adoptee myself, I found the very use of this analogy somewhat problematic (2002:2). Granted, Fogg-Davis is only responding to the approach to babies as commodities that exist in our society, but her critique does not go far enough. It sparked me to question, for the first of many times while reading this book, who is the author? What are her connections to transracial adoption? The only identity Fogg-Davis is forthcoming with is that of political theorist. As an ethnographer, drawing on the disciplines of feminism, anthropology, cultural studies, and sociology (among others), I consider the identity of the author and her relationship to the subject matter to be profoundly important. This is particularly true in this case because Fogg-Davis is theorizing about identity without drawing on the voices of the people whose lives she writes about. She writes in a seemingly "objective" authorial style that is problematic in relation to the fact that she writes

about identity without sociological or anthropological evidence to support her claims.

Fogg-Davis notes two "disturbing" commonalities between the commodification of Cabbage Patch Kids and adopted children. She argues that both the dolls and children are treated as if "their original families and racial histories should not affect their adoptive placement," and that in neither case is adoption "future-oriented" enough (2002:2). She states:

> This book aims to expand the scope of moral inquiry to include both children's personal pre-adoption histories and the futures of adopted individuals as they build their self-concepts in a race-conscious world (Fogg-Davis 2002:2).

I assumed that "pre-adoption histories" meant attention to birth parents and the circumstances of adoptees' births. Yet very little attention is directed there. In fact, the lack of attention to the circumstances that cause adopted children to be relinquished or removed from their birth mothers might provoke one to think that they do come from a cabbage patch. Fogg-Davis constructs the moral and ethical dilemmas associated with transracial adoption through the central questions in the public debate: Should white people be allowed to adopt black children? I'd like to suggest that this is ultimately a limited approach. What is the social function of a narrative about adoption that focuses solely on whether or not the most privileged people in our society should be able to "choose" to adopt whatever child they want in the marketplace of adoption, so long as they have the money to do so? Indeed, is this an "ethical" question to explore, or does it reinforce the transfer of children from the least privileged in society to the most privileged? The first step in answering such a question is to consider what is left out of the story.

The most fundamental limitation of this book is that it constructs the relevant ethical issues solely through the issue of race. Our understanding of the ethical issues is very different if we include attention to gender and class as they intersect with race. Asking whether or not whites should be allowed to adopt black children does not address the most salient issues concerning the adoption of children of color in the contemporary foster care system. We need to step outside the box and ask: *Why are there so many children of color in foster care in the first place? What circumstances in the lives of their birth mothers (and fathers) make it difficult or impossible for their birth parents to raise them?* Gender and class, as they intersect with race, need to be central in this public argument. An exploration of the "pre-adoption histories" of children being considered for adoption requires attention to the social and structural circumstances that lead to their placement in foster care. The question of why so many children of color living in poverty are removed from their birth mothers is the basic ethical question.

Fogg-Davis aims to chart new territory in the transracial adoption debate, navigating between the polarized perspectives characterized by "color blindness" and "black nationalism." I agree that these two perspectives embody fundamentally different definitions of race, but I'd like to complicate the map of this political terrain. The author's goal is laudable. The public debate about transracial adoption has been characterized by bitterly unproductive arguments in which neither side seems to hear what the other is saying. However, her argument is undermined by several problematic issues. The first issue is that her argument in favor of transracial adoption is based on a limited reading of available research and a casual dismissal of black nationalist perspectives. I contend that the popular public view of transracial adoption is politically skewed in favor of a "colorblind" perspective that denies the validity of critiques of transracial adoption. While Fogg-Davis effectively critiques "colorblind" approaches, her uncritical acceptance of the popular narrative leads to some basic problems in her theories.

The misrepresentation of black nationalist perspectives leads to a straw man argument that lays the groundwork for her theory of racial navigation—a coping mechanism to deal with race—as the ethical solution to the problem of transracial adoption. She does not properly explore the critiques of transracial adoption articulated by black nationalists concerning the development of African American identity and consciousness among transracial adoptees. By failing to consider these concerns, she perpetuates the polarized argument about transracial adoption by falsely representing black nationalist views and dismissing the legitimacy of their critiques. Second, her failure to question the mainstream media representation of transracial adoption, along with her lack of attention to the policy context of the 1990s in which transracial adoption reemerged, lead her to perpetuate the ideological narrative that posits transracial adoption as both a solution to the "crisis" in foster care and a means to reduce "illegitimacy" among low-income women.

Another fundamental problem is rooted in her method: the "thought experiment." Unfortunately, this method of theorizing precludes attention to the voices of people whose lives have been shaped by these issues. Had she spoken with transracial adoptees or drawn on the research of people who did, her theory of racial navigation might have been clearer and more realistically grounded in the lived experiences of African Americans raised by white parents. I appreciate Fogg-Davis's aim to promote agency among transracial adoptees. However, her goal would have been better served by drawing on their voices to articulate her theory of racial navigation. In fact, a common complaint among adoptees I have spoken with is that social workers and parents have too often *spoken for* adoptees of all races and ethnici-

ties. Adoptees are perpetually seen as adopted *children*. We grow up. We become adults who can speak for ourselves.[9] This is a particularly charged issue for transracial adoptees, whose racial identities have been the contested terrain in public debates about the issues for the past few decades.

The research on transracial adoption has not paid enough attention to the voices of adult transracial adoptees. Much of the early research was conducted when the largest generation of transracial adoptees was children, so their parents' perspectives figured prominently in researchers' conclusions. Most of the existing literature on transracial adoption has relied on quantitative methods or survey questionnaires to study the adjustment of black children adopted into white families (Grow & Shapiro 1974; McRoy & Zurcher 1983; Simon & Altstein 1977, 1981, 1987, 1992; Simon, Altstein, & Melli 1995).

The questions at the heart of transracial adoption concern the development of racial identity, the acquisition of survival skills for dealing with racism, and the development of personal understandings of the highly contested social category of race. The situation of transracial adoption, in which children of color are adopted by white parents, challenges contemporary assumptions about how racial identity and meaning are conveyed; it challenges the frameworks through which people in the contemporary United States understand family, race, and identity.[10] Such understandings cannot be captured by methods that do not allow adoptees to speak for themselves. While valid as far as they go, these studies are limited by methodological practices that approach race as a fixed category and limit the scope of inquiry to the individual and familial levels. Virtually no attention is given to the institutional, cultural, social, economic, and political contexts within which such families and identities are constructed and maintained.

(Mis)Representing History

In recounting the history of transracial adoption, Fogg-Davis states, "In 1972, the National Association of Black Social Workers [NABSW] issued a public statement denouncing TRA as a form

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[9] The adoptees Modell (1994) interviewed expressed this sentiment as well.

[10] Most transracial adoptions involve the adoption of children of color by whites. There are isolated cases of people of color adopting white children, but because white infants and toddlers are in such demand in the marketplace of adoption, they are generally adopted by whites. "Racial matching" is rarely challenged when white is the race being matched. One exception I am aware of involves a public adoption agency in a southern state with a high number of African American foster families. Social workers there report placing older white children with disabilities in black foster homes where some are eventually adopted (personal communication 2001). While adoption statistics are currently being gathered on a national level (through the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System), the way that information is gathered makes it nearly impossible to accurately discern the number of transracial adoptions taking place.

of racial and cultural genocide" (Fogg-Davis 2002:3). Fogg-Davis cites Simon, Altstein, and Melli's citation (1995) of the Position Statement on Transracial Adoption issued by the NABSW. Unfortunately, this is not an accurate representation. It is true that in 1972 the NABSW issued a position statement opposing transracial adoption. However, contrary to popular mythology, its position statement did not include the phrase "racial and cultural genocide." Though the president of the association may have cast transracial adoption as "cultural genocide" in a conference speech, this phrase is not used at all in the actual position statement issued by the NABSW.

The NABSW has been demonized for this characterization in the public dialogue for the past thirty years. Unfortunately, the focus on this phrase has diverted attention from its concerns about black children and families. The NABSW position statement was fundamentally concerned with two basic issues. One was the preservation of black families. The other central focus was racial identity. The association's concerns were the development of a positive sense of racial identity and the acquisition of survival skills for black and multiracial children adopted by white parents.

The end result of relying on this inaccurate representation of the NABSW is that a sort of straw man argument is constructed. To counter this effect, the polarized public debate concerning the appropriateness of transracial adoption is best understood in historical context.

The dominant narrative about transracial adoption presented in mainstream news and political dialogues ignores the history of systematic disregard for children of color demonstrated by the child welfare system until pressure from several directions led to reforms in the 1960s and 1970s (Ladner 1977; Day 1979; Cole & Donley 1990; Patton 2000). The Civil Rights movement and other movements for social change raised awareness about the need for adoptive homes for children of color, while at the same time, the decline in availability of white infants led many whites to consider adopting black infants.[11] Also largely ignored in the mainstream discourse is the history of discrimination—both overt and covert—experienced by African American families in the U.S. social welfare system (Day 1979; Ladner 1977; Patton 2000; Roberts 2002).

As part of my research for *BirthMarks: Transracial Adoption in Contemporary America* (2000), I interviewed social workers in public and private adoption agencies on the East and West Coasts. Dr. Harriet Morrison,[12] founding director of one of the San Francisco Bay area's private agencies focusing on special needs

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[11] See Day (1977); Ladner (1977); Cole and Donley (1990).

[12] All the names used for those I interviewed are pseudonyms.

adoptions and a member of the NABSW since its founding, emphasized the importance of considering the 1972 position statement in historical context. She explained that the position against transracial placements was an attempt to draw attention to the fact that black families have not been valued or protected in the United States. It was an attempt to convey that:

> Harriet: We are somebody. We have a responsibility to take care of our families, and to demand respect inside the communities and *especially* outside the community. And to do less than that is a kind of death for us. . . . I think it really was a message saying: *We are somebody. We can* take care of our families [emphasis in original]. We can be other than domestics and kind of be always the least accomplished in society. And I think it was a call to protect, expand. . . I'm searching for words here, Sandi.

> Sandi: Respect?

> Harriet: Respect, but take charge and elevate the family, offset the increasingly demeaning press that was being put out about our families (Patton 2000:153–54).

Fogg-Davis argues that critiques of transracial adoption based on efforts to preserve black communities are not appropriate in considerations of adoptive placement. However, she does not address the issue of preserving black families, an issue carrying particular weight in light of the high removal rate of African American children. As is true in the current moment, black families were the targets of a great deal of negative public attention in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the classic *Black Families in White America,* Billingsley commented on the treatment of black families in family studies scholarship in the then contemporary moment of 1968:

> Two tendencies, then, are current in studies of American families. The first, and most general, is to ignore Negro families altogether. The second is to consider them only insofar as they may be conceived as a social problem (Billingsley 1968:198).

Indeed, a great deal of negative press constructing black families as social problems had grown out of the 1965 Moynihan Report, which characterized African American families as a "tangle of pathology." Billingsley explained that "coming just at the time the nation was trying to find a single cause of the Watts riots, Moynihan's thesis struck a responsive chord in the collective American breast" (1968:199–200). The NABSW position paper exemplifies resistance to the view of African American families as "pathologically" deviant from white middle-class values (Patton 2000). It reads:

> Ethnicity is a way of life in these United States, and the world at large; a viable, sensitive, meaningful and legitimate societal construct. This is no less true, nor legitimate for Black people than for other ethnic groups. . . . Overt ethnic identification, especially for Blacks, was long suppressed by the social and po-

litical pressures speaking to total assimilation of all peoples in that great melting pot. . . . Black people are now developing an honest perception of this society; the myths of assimilation and of our inferiority stand bare under glaring light. We now proclaim our truth, substance, beauty and value as ourselves without apology or compromise. The affirmation of our ethnicity promotes our opposition to the trans-racial placements of Black children.

The family is the basic unit of society; one's first, most pervasive and only consistent culturing life experience. Humans develop their sense of values, identity, self concept, attitudes and basic perspective within the family group. Black children in white homes are cut off from the healthy development of themselves as Black people, which development is the normal expectation and only true humanistic goal (NABSW 1972:1).

The association of the 1972 position paper with the assertion that transracial adoption is "cultural genocide" has haunted the organization ever since; it is continually castigated for this view and cast as a villain in the popular narrative. While the NABSW is repeatedly cited as continuing to hold such a position, its stance regarding such placements has in fact changed since 1972. Its current position is one that emphasizes the preservation and support of black families. It stresses that more emphasis on family preservation can stem the tide of children in need of out-of-home care.[13] When adoptions are necessary, the NABSW stresses that every effort should be made to place children in homes of similar racial-ethnic backgrounds whenever possible, but in certain circumstances transracial placements are appropriate. The current position states quite explicitly that children should not languish in foster care unnecessarily (Patton 2000).

The central question of the 1970s controversy concerned whether or not whites should adopt African American children. Fogg-Davis's analysis of the issue in the 1990s proceeds as if the political and policy context had not changed in the intervening twenty years, as explained below. In the 1990s, the policy discussions about transracial adoption emerged as part of two overlapping streams of policy discourse: foster care and welfare reform. This linkage makes evident the importance of considering poverty and gender alongside race in exploring transracial adoption policy and practice. Transracial adoption was promoted by people from various points on the political spectrum as a solution to the dramatic and continuing escalation of the number of children entering the foster care system. Transracial adoption policy also emerged in the context of welfare reform, and was linked explicitly to conservative efforts to curb and regulate "illegiti-

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[13] See Roberts (2002) for a discussion of the history of family preservation policies versus pro-adoption policies.

macy" (Bennett 1995; C. Murray 1993, 1994).[14] I focus first on the passage of welfare reform and transracial adoption policy, and then discuss the public narrative linking transracial adoption and foster care.

Adoption and Welfare Reform

Fogg-Davis does not consider the political context in which transracial adoption became a public issue in the 1990s. Examining the policy context makes it evident that adoption is enmeshed in a much larger debate about state regulation of poor women's reproductive capacities. Charles Murray, one of two primary Republican congressional advisors during the legislative discussions of welfare reform in the 1990s, argued that "illegitimacy," not lack of jobs or job skills, was the central problem that must be addressed by congressional reforms. In fact, he argued forcefully that too many children being born to single mothers was the *cause* of the "chaos" of inner cities—that "incompetent" mothers and "missing" fathers were the cause of gangs, drugs, crime, and poverty (Murray 1994:1).[15]

Murray is given credit for first introducing the argument that the simple remedy for these social problems would be to abolish AFDC, arguing that this would force unwed mothers to find jobs or rely on family for support, removing the incentive for and increasing the stigma of out-of-wedlock births (Patton 2000).

Murray explicated the connection he made between welfare reform, "unfit" mothers, and adoption as follows:

> What about women who can find no support but keep the baby anyway? There are laws already on the books about the right of the state to take a child from a neglectful parent (Murray 1993 editorial page).

Murray argued that the only social policy initiative radical enough to alter the "inevitable" fate of children born into a "culture of poverty" would be to remove all restrictions to transracial adoption and to make all adoptions irrevocable and as easy as possible for two-parent families (Murray 1993, 1994; Herrnstein & Murray 1994). Though he was not successful in convincing Congress to completely abolish "welfare as we know it," the U.S. social welfare system was fundamentally overhauled.[16]

While adoption was not a conspicuous part of the public debate about welfare reform in the 1990s, it was central in policy discussions about how to curtail "illegitimacy" and poverty. William Bennett's congressional testimony articulated the conserva-

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[14] See Dill, Baca Zinn, and Patton 1999 and Patton 2000 for a discussion of conservative arguments that "illegitimacy" is the cause of poverty.

[15] For a discussion of the history of such eugenic arguments, see Roberts (1997).

[16] For discussions of the changes in the U.S. social welfare system see Mink (1999); Patton (2000); and Dill, Baca Zinn, and Patton (1999).

tive vision of abolishing the welfare system and encouraging adoption.

> It is morally right because many more people would live better if we scrapped the current system, which subsidizes out-of-wedlock births. I believe that making adoption easier is an essential and compassionate part of welfare reform. Adoption is the best alternative we have to protect a child's interest in a postwelfare world (Bennett 1995:4).

Bennett, like Murray, advocated the removal of children from women whom they saw as incompetent agents of socialization because they were poor.[17]

As I discuss in my own research, up until the final version of the welfare reform bill, the legislation removing all restrictions to transracial adoption was part of the Personal Responsibility Act (welfare reform), located in the section called "Reducing Illegitimacy" (Title I, March 22, 1995 version of U.S. Public Law 104-193 1996). This bill, up through its penultimate version, paired adoption with welfare reform as a means to relocate "illegitimate" children into "legitimate"—two-parent, heterosexual—families (Patton 2000).

The section of the welfare reform bill regarding adoption and race was removed just before the bill's passage and amended to the Small Business Job Protection Act of 1996, better known as the minimum wage bill (U.S. Public Law 104-188 1996). This provision was paired with a section of the bill that provides a $5,000-$6,000 tax credit to families that adopt. The minimum wage bill, including these adoption provisions (newly titled the Inter-Ethnic Placement Act, or IEPA), and the Personal Responsibility Act were signed into law by President Clinton during the week of August 19, 1996 (U.S. Public Law 104-193 1996). These two pieces of legislation work together to truncate the social safety net for low-income mothers, prohibit social workers from considering race in adoptive placements, and provide a financial incentive for adoption. In effect, the legislation makes it more difficult for poor women to keep their families together, while making it easier for middle-class people to adopt the children removed from their mothers. The explicit attention to removing racial barriers to adoption makes evident policy makers' concerns with regulating the reproductive behavior of women of color and white women who "cross the color line" and give birth to multiracial children (Patton 2000). A year after the passage of welfare reform legislation, ASFA was passed (U.S. Public Law 105-189 1997), which shortened the time period necessary for the state to wait before the parental rights of children in foster care could be terminated; it was designed with the specific intention of promoting the adoption of children in foster care.

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[17] See Herrnstein and Murray (1994) for a detailed explanation of this discussion.

Foster Care, Adoption, and Race

Conservative arguments about promoting adoption—particularly transracial adoption—as a means to curtail high rates of "illegitimacy" were primarily confined to congressional testimony and policy reports. In the public media, the discussion of the IEPA was promoted as a way to solve the "crisis" in foster care as well as to end discrimination against black children in the foster care system.

When transracial adoption reemerged in the 1990s as a contentious public issue, racial matching policies were cited as the reason African American children "languished" in foster care. The NABSW was misrepresented as being more concerned with its political commitments to black nationalism—often referred to as "separatist" or "neo-racist" (Goodman 1993)—than with the welfare of black children. The association was cast as a villain whose view of transracial adoption as "cultural genocide" supposedly kept black children in foster care through the enforcement of racial matching policies.[18] Indeed, vocal proponents of "colorblind" adoptions, such as Bartholet and Kennedy, argued that racial matching policies held children of color in "foster limbo" rather than placing them in white adoptive homes (Bartholet 1991, 1992a, 1992b, 1993, 1999; Kennedy 1993, 1994). They argued that the increasing demand among whites for children to adopt made transracial adoption the solution to this "crisis." This was one aspect of the dominant narrative used to justify the passage of the 1996 federal adoption legislation (Patton 2000). This public narrative was constructed and fostered through the writings of a small handful of social scientists and lawyers, particularly Simon and Altstein, and Bartholet, whose voices have been very influential in public policy discussions of transracial adoption.

This narrative depends on a faulty set of assumptions about foster care, adoption, and the demand for "adoptable" children. I will focus here on the two most basic beliefs underlying the

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[18]   Racial matching policies developed on a county-by-county and state-by-state basis after the NABSW issued its public critique of placing black children with white parents. Most policies took the form of mandatory waiting periods before a black child could be placed with white parents. During the waiting period, social workers were expected to attempt to place the child in an African American family. While formal policies were passed in some areas of the country, informal practices shaped placement decisions in other states. The effect of these policies on the number of placements of African American children is unknown because the federal government ceased collecting adoption statistics in the 1970s, when many of these policies were put into place. In popular rhetoric, these policies are often cited as the cause of the large numbers of children of color in foster care, but the social workers I interviewed stressed that, in fact, transracial adoptions have continued to take place in both public and private agencies. Various theories have been put forward to explain the increase, including the passage of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1974, which greatly increased the number of child neglect and abuse cases reported and concomitantly increased the number of children removed from their families (Roberts 2002).

popular view of transracial adoption: first, that *it is race that keeps a child in foster care,* and second, that the concerns raised by the NABSW about racial identity and survival skills are not valid.

In media discussions of foster care, race is discussed as the primary factor that keeps children from being adopted (Bartholet 1993b, 1993c; Kennedy 1993; Goodman 1993; Evans 1993; Hunt 1995; Jeffery 1994; Tisdale 1991; Turner 1992). Fogg-Davis accepts the erroneous assumption presented by the media that because so many children in foster care are African American (she cites 52.3 percent in 1994), racial matching policies are the primary barrier to adoptive placement. Fogg-Davis takes the analysis further by critiquing white adopters' choices not to adopt black children as racist.

Fogg-Davis basically reproduces the ideological narrative, focusing solely on race as the determinant of a foster child's future. She makes an explicit argument in favor of transracial adoption based on her view that it is racial discrimination on the part of white adopters who choose white children that keeps children in foster care. The most basic inaccuracy in the public story told about transracial adoption is that it is race that keeps children in foster care. I want to be very clear that race is a factor. However, it is the intersection of race with disability, being a member of a sibling group, and/or being older than three years old that makes it more difficult for a child to be adopted. Rarely do social workers have difficulty placing a healthy black or multiracial infant. White couples metaphorically standing in line to adopt children of color are typically looking for a healthy infant of any race (Patton 2000).

The argument that it is race and racial matching policies that keep children from being adopted co-ops the language of racial equality and in the process serves to deny the salience of disability, age, and status as a member of a sibling group. When race alone is seen as the determinant of a child's fate in the child welfare system, the simple and logical policy solution is to remove the supposedly "racist" barriers to transracial placements. However, this solution is too simple. The understanding of the social workers I interviewed is that those publicly arguing for the numbers of transracial adoptions to increase are primarily interested in gaining "access" for whites to black *infants,* without stating that explicitly (Patton 2000). Margaret Danielson, who is both a transracially adoptive parent and a social worker in a private agency on the East Coast, discussed the 1996 legislation:

> The government has passed a law that you must place, you know [without regard to race]. Of course, that doesn't mean that everyone is going to, nor did it mean that anybody wouldn't have before. Where the problem is is that that law came as a response to parents who wanted babies. I mean nobody was going to—If somebody came in and wanted a twelve-

year-old Black girl with c.p. [cerebral palsy], you know, anybody
would have done—They would have told the people you best
move your butt—you know, they're not going to lose a place-
ment for that kid. It's the people out there baby-grabbing. And
so, it's not going to really change anybody's policies (Patton
2000:157).

The public argument uses the lives of foster children to argue for
the "right" of whites to adopt the prized "commodities" of the
adoption market—healthy, nondisabled infants. The fulcrum of
this argument is race.

The social workers I interviewed do not deny that children of
color are affected differently than white children in the adop-
tion/foster care system, but they identify the sources of the ine-
quality of the system in other ways. Most important, all of them
made it painfully clear that the popular narrative regarding
adoption and race does not respond to the needs of most African
American children. Furthermore, it obscures the lives and needs
of children of all racial-ethnic groups with a broad range of phys-
ical, developmental, emotional, and behavioral disabilities, as
well as older children and members of sibling groups. Race does
affect the chances a child has for permanent adoptive placement,
but typically, it is race as it intersects disability, age, and/or status
as a member of a sibling group that makes adoptive placement
more difficult and prolongs a child's stay in foster care.

Fogg-Davis accepts the mainstream narrative of adoption,
race, and foster care. Writing after the passage of IEPA, which
removed any previously existing barriers to transracial place-
ments, she turns her attention to the *choices* adoptive parents
make in order to question "the widespread assumption that we
are morally justified in configuring our families based on racial
choice" (Fogg-Davis 2002:75). She presents a "thought experi-
ment" that asks readers to "[I]magine an adoption system con-
sisting solely of centralized public adoption agencies within indi-
vidual states" (2002:78). The experiment she proposes is racial
randomization in adoption placement.

In the randomization process, some white applicants will be
matched with black children, and some black applicants will be
matched with white children, while some from both groups will
end up adopting children of the same racial classification as
their own. Whites are statistically likely to be matched with a
black child through a system of racial randomization. And it is
probable that a small number of white children will be placed
with black parents (Fogg-Davis 2002:78).

She offers this "thought experiment" as a means of making clear
the biological and race-based assumptions guiding the construc-
tion of adoptive families in the United States.

However, by focusing her analysis on the choices made by
prospective adopters, she reinforces the inaccurate ideas that

adoption will solve the problem of the overrepresentation of black children in foster care and that white families need to "save" African American children. "[W]hen whites avoid adopting a black child, opting to wait for a white child or pursue independent adoption, they effectively deprive a black child of an adoptive home" (Fogg-Davis 2002:80). Fogg-Davis does not directly address the issue of foster care but makes it clear that she is discussing the adoption of children from foster care by engaging the argument that African American children are in *need* of adoptive homes. Infants relinquished "voluntarily" do not end up in foster care; women who relinquish their children generally do so through private agencies or adoption lawyers. Healthy infants of any race do not wait to be adopted. Dorothy Roberts explains the faulty logic of assuming that increasing the number of African American children being adopted would solve the problems of the foster care system:

> Congress has misidentified the foster care problem. The injustice of the American foster care system does not stem from too few children being adopted. It stems from too many children being removed from their homes. Even if all of the thousands of Black children in foster care were adopted tomorrow, the problem would not be solved. Acquiring new homes for all these children would do nothing to stem the tide of family destruction. And it would not cure the racism in the child welfare system. Relying on adoption to fix the foster care system not only ignores the racial disparity in child removals but also makes the disruption of Black families permanent (Roberts 2002:163–64).

A look at the most recently available statistics on foster care demonstrates the enormity of this issue. Of the 251,000 children who exited foster care during FY 1999, 59% were reunified with parents or primary caretakers; only 16% were adopted. Of those children who were adopted from foster care in 1999, 45% were black non-Hispanic, while 38% were white non-Hispanic. However, while 251,000 children left the system, 297,000 children entered foster care in FY 1999 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2001). As Roberts makes clear, the root of the problem is the removal of children from their families—primarily low-income single mothers.

Fogg-Davis focuses on the choices white adoptive parents make for white children as the source of discrimination against black children in foster care. She does not question the racism, classism, and sexism of the social welfare system that places children in foster care in the first place. Her consideration of racism is basically confined to a discussion of whether or not it is racist for white prospective adoptive parents to *choose* a white rather than a black child. She concludes that it is. In fact, as Banks has argued, there may be legitimate, nonracist reasons for making

such a choice, such as not wanting to make the adoption of their child apparent to strangers (Banks 2002). Focusing on the choices of adopters diverts her attention from the institutional racism of the social welfare system.

Framing the ethical issues around the *choices adoptive parents make*, rather than the social policies, institutions, and political structures of the United States, misplaces the onus of responsibility on individual "choice makers" rather than the cultural, political, and societal circumstances that shape the range of options available to families situated in different class locations in society. In other words, while Fogg-Davis focuses on questions such as whether or not it is racist for white adoptive parents to choose to adopt white children rather than black children, she ignores larger questions of social inequality. The most fundamental ethical issues are much larger than the choices individual people make about how to construct and define their families. Indeed, the author's focus on "choices" made by adoptive parents reinforces public understandings of adoptive children as commodities—that consumer "choice" is determined by financial resources.

One of the few times that Fogg-Davis does considers birth mothers, she argues for denying them any measure of "choice" in the matter of which families are selected as adoptive families for their children.

> Original mothers are often excluded from discussion about adoption policy and practice. Women surrender their children for a variety of reasons, many of which can be traced to sincere care. But I am wary of according original parents formal influence over placement decisions even in the case of American Indians. Granting original parents formal power over placement decisions opens the door for them to discriminate against prospective adopters on the basis of race, religion, geographical location, socioeconomic status, and so on (Fogg-Davis 2002:72).

Though she does not make it clear, Fogg-Davis seems to be alluding to open adoptions, in which birth parents are accorded some measure of choice regarding where their children are placed. She seems to be operating on the assumption that children in the foster care system—on whose life circumstances she has thus far focused—are relinquished "voluntarily." However, the discussion is unclear. This brief mention of birth mothers continues her focus on discrimination enacted by individual people through choices they make. What she ignores is that public policies and social circumstances already regulate which groups are accorded the choices they have.

As I discussed earlier, the adoption system in the United States has historically been focused on serving the needs of adoptive parents (Ladner 1977). Roberts explains, "Adoption policy

has historically tracked the market for children, serving the interests of adults seeking to adopt more than the interests of children needing stable homes" (Roberts 2002:166). In my view, it is not the individual "choices" of birth or adoptive parents that constitute the greatest threat of discrimination against children in the child welfare system. It is that system itself that has historically discriminated on the basis of race, poverty, and gender. The legislation passed in 1996 prohibiting the consideration of race in adoptive placements provides that prospective adoptive parents are allowed to sue the state if they feel they have been discriminated against on the basis of race. There are no provisions in the policy for poor birth mothers to sue the state if they feel their rights have been denied on the basis of race. The 1996 legislation was passed based on a faulty set of assumptions regarding race and the driving interests of white adoptive parents. As Roberts explains:

> Policy changes rarely reflect careful deliberation about the best way to reduce the numbers of children in foster care or to promote the welfare of children in America. Typically legislators scramble to revise the law because of a story embraced by the media. When a dramatic case involving child welfare makes it to the papers, there is a large rush to change the system in order to prevent this case from happening again. Too often the change is based on the interests of a privileged group of adults and not on the best interests of the children in foster care (Roberts 1999:2).

This dynamic is evident in ASFA as well (U.S. Public Law 105-189 1997). It was created in response to concern over a number of dramatic cases of foster children who were killed or severely harmed after being returned to their birth parents. While it does not directly address issues of transracial adoption, it profoundly shapes the experiences of children in the foster care system, the majority of whom are of color, by decreasing the length of time the state must wait before terminating parental rights (U.S. Public Law 105-189 1997). The intent of the law is to make it easier for children in foster care to be adopted, but the rights of birth parents are not protected. Roberts explains:

> While ASFA scrutinizes decisions to return children to potentially dangerous homes, it does not emphasize the need to scrutinize the removal of children from their parents. Unnecessarily taking children from their families is comparably as harmful to children as returning them to dangerous homes. It is, of course, beneficial for a child to be removed from a dangerous home, but it is also extremely detrimental to a child to be separated from loving parents who are temporarily unable to take care of their child (Roberts 1999:5).

When we broaden our view of adoption to include attention to where "available" children come from and how they enter the child welfare system, it becomes clear that the ethical questions

raised by transracial adoption go far beyond the issue of who is allowed to adopt them. Indeed, as Roberts explains, "Poverty—not the type or severity of maltreatment—is the single most important predictor of placement in foster care and the amount of time spent there" (Roberts 2002:27). Brown and Bailey-Etta explain:

> The number of children in out-of-home care is closely linked to the conditions under which families function and the societal supports available to assist them. African American families are disproportionately affected by negative social, political, and economic forces that undoubtedly contribute to their overrepresentation in the out-of-home care system (Brown & Bailey-Etta 1997:66).

The intersection of poverty, gender, and race is a fundamental factor shaping how children enter the foster care system and become available for adoption.

Adoption, Race, and Identity

In a 1972 article, Edmund D. Jones, assistant director of Family and Children's Services in the city of Baltimore, stated:

> My basic premise, in opposing placement of black children in white homes, is that being black in the United States is a special state of being. At a time of intense racial polarity, recognition of this fact is crucial to survival. I question the ability of white parents—no matter how deeply imbued with good will—to grasp the totality of the problem of being black in this society. I question their ability to create what I believe is crucial in these youngsters—a black identity. I suggest that creation of a black identity is a problem for many black parents also; the difference, perhaps, is one of degree (Jones 1972:157).

At issue here are questions of identity and survival; indeed, Jones defines "black identity" as a state of being *in relation to racism in society,* that, by definition, white parents cannot have experienced, and thus, cannot convey to their children. His suggestion that fostering survival skills and a positive sense of black identity may be difficult for many black parents as well clarifies that his analysis is not based on essentialist racial categories but rather is grounded in experience and education.

In 1972, it was certainly more difficult to imagine—and research demonstrates the legitimacy of this concern—that white adoptive parents could "grasp the totality of being black in this society" than in 2002. While this is a "cultural" difference, it is also fundamentally a result of the racial segregation and the white-centered education that that generation of adoptive parents likely experienced. It is a structural issue in the sense that white Americans growing up in the 1940s and 1950s were unlikely to have had any education about race, racism, and racial

difference. Indeed, Ladner's 1977 sociological study of trans-racially adoptive families indicated that in attempting to teach the values of a society where people are judged on "merit" rather than skin color, white adoptive parents' interaction with their children often translated to language and behaviors that down-played the importance of race (Ladner 1977). McRoy and Zurcher found that 60% of their sample of transracially adoptive parents approached the issue of race from a "color-blind" per-spective (1983:130). My own research demonstrates that a "color-blind" approach to racial identity is problematic for transracial adoptees (Patton 2000). Fogg-Davis too is critical of the denial of race that characterizes "color-blind" understandings of race.

Jones's perspective on survival skills and the development of racial identity is characteristic of black nationalist objections to transracial adoption in the sense that these issues are typically problematized in relation to living in a racist society. While Fogg-Davis characterizes such critiques of transracial adoption as im-posing a static, inflexible view of black identity on African Ameri-can children, this is not evidenced in the NABSW statement or other black nationalist critiques.

By contrast, those in favor of increasing the numbers of "col-orblind" or transracial placements have relied on the legal tradi-tion of "colorblindness" as well as on Simon and Altstein's (1987) longitudinal study of transracially adopted families to argue that *race does not and should not matter.* Simon and Altstein's research has been the primary research cited as empirical proof that trans-racial adoption is beneficial for black children, by those in favor of transracial adoption. Fogg-Davis relies on their study to dismiss the validity of the NABSW's argument that racial identity and sur-vival skills are important issues to consider in adoptive place-ments. Fogg-Davis's argument promoting transracial adoption and encouraging racial navigation relies on the dismissal of these concerns.

Simon and Altstein's study approached race as a fixed cate-gory that was bounded at the individual and familial levels; there was no attention to how the racial makeup of the community and schools or how the social climate of race relations might have shaped adoptees' views of themselves (Simon & Altstein 1987). Indeed, the researchers' lack of attention to the nuances of how racial identity is constructed and maintained in interaction with the meanings of race made available to adoptees is evidenced by the way in which they organized their research subjects and find-ings. They conducted surveys with transracial adoptees of several different racial-ethnic groups and with the adoptees' white sib-lings (some adopted, some not), but failed to distinguish be-tween the various racial-ethnic groups in their consideration of racial identity development. An approach that was sensitive to the sociocultural forces shaping racial meaning would recognize

the importance of distinguishing between the racial understand-
ings of African American, Indian, and Korean adoptees. The fol-
lowing example from Simon and Altstein's *Transracial Adoptees
and Their Families* (1987) demonstrates the limited approach they
took in studying the racial identities of transracial adoptees.

> Which of the following statements fit how you really feel:
>
> 1. I am proud to be (select one): black, brown Indian, Korean,
>   white, other. Or,
>
> 2. I do not mind what color I am. Or,
>
> 3. I would prefer to be _____ (Simon & Altstein 1987:68).

There are several problems here. The formulation of this
question does not allow for adoptees to express in their own
words, from their own perspectives, who they are and how they
define their racial identities. By providing the language through
which respondents may express their views, the researchers im-
pose static racial categories and deny any space for the redefini-
tion of racial identity. The specific language is highly problem-
atic as well. Transracial adoptees confound the categories of
racial identity through which contemporary society defines peo-
ple, yet here the researchers enforce social categories of identity
that deny the legitimacy of multiply defined selves. Indeed, by
instructing respondents to "select one" of the categories
presented, Simon and Altstein compel adoptees who do not fit
neatly within the "black, brown Indian, Korean, or white" bound-
aries to define themselves as "other." A study sensitive to the is-
sues of racial identity and survival skills would be designed to ex-
plore how African American children (as well those of other
racial-ethnic groups) raised by white parents define a sense of
racial meaning for themselves.

While Fogg-Davis critiques black nationalists as imposing a
static view of race on transracial adoptees, she does not question
or problematize the inflexible definition of racial categories in
Simon and Altstein's study. She accepts the questionable findings
of their research and does not consider the more complex and
nuanced comparative research conducted by McRoy and
Zurcher (1983). Their study took seriously the issues raised by
the NABSW and incorporated questions of racial identity and
survival skills into their research design. Though their study did
not draw on open-ended interviews that would allow transracial
adoptees to define their own sense of identity, it is notable for
their comparative approach. Comparing the experiences of black
adolescents adopted into white American families with the exper-
iences of those adopted into African American families allowed
them to explore the effects of adoption as separate from the ef-
fects of racial difference within the family.

McRoy and Zurcher concluded that the "major distinction"
between the two populations of adolescent adoptees "stemmed

from their socialization concerning ethnicity" (1983:140). The transracial adoptees tended to be more white-identified. The differences were attributed to the "social psychological contexts" in which their racial identities developed (1983:140). Most of the transracial adoptees (87%) studied were raised in predominantly white communities and subsequently had limited social contact with other African Americans. The researchers found that while these adoptees acknowledged "their racial group memberships," they tended to develop "negative or indifferent" attitudes regarding their classification as African Americans, a preference for white friends and dates, and a "problematic ambiguity about racial identity" (McRoy & Zurcher 1983:140). Yet McRoy and Zurcher found differences in a sense of African American identity between those transracial adoptees raised in predominantly white communities and those raised in integrated areas.

> Adolescent adoptees who had the opportunity to relate to blacks and whites tended to internalize the duality of character, or functional cultural paranoia that so often is necessary for survival in a racist society (McRoy & Zurcher 1983:140).

Despite many white adoptive parents' professed beliefs in an integrated future, McRoy and Zurcher found that ". . .only a few of the white adoptive families behaviorally responded to the necessity of equipping the child to become bicultural and to realistically perceive the historical and current black-white relations in American society" (1983:140).

Fogg-Davis critiques the black nationalist perspective on "culture" as presenting "black culture as fixed, 'natural,' and necessary for developing the right kind of racial self-understanding" (2002:54). She argues that this cuts "off the possibility that they (black children) could be active navigators of a wide assortment of cultural forms and styles of being that include but surpass the parameters of those practices that are culturally coded as 'black'" (Fogg-Davis 2002:54). She critiques nationalist perspectives on racial identity but gives no convincing examples to support her contention.

She quotes legal scholar Ruth-Arlene Howe's argument that transracial adoption "place(s) these children at risk of alienation from their natural reference group" (Howe 1997:471, as quoted in Fogg-Davis 2002:58). Fogg-Davis focuses her critique on Howe's use of the term *natural*, arguing that it "connotes a presocial or prepolitical reality" (Fogg-Davis 2002:58). She basically argues that Howe's view of African American identity is essentialist. Fogg-Davis misrepresents the thrust of Howe's article. Nothing else in the article suggests an essentialist perspective on identity development. In fact, Howe states quite clearly:

> Thus, while I do not assert that white adoptive parents can never successfully rear an African-American child, I do maintain that they should strive to ensure that the child's reference

> groups such as the extended family and those created by inter-
> actions in school, the neighborhood, and at work, include posi-
> tive relationships with African-Americans (Howe 1997:414).

Howe expresses concern that much of the research available on transracially adoptive families demonstrates that the majority live in predominantly white neighborhoods and do not develop significant connections with African Americans. My research demonstrates that Howe's concern is valid. Racial identity was a profound "issue" for all of the transracial adoptees I interviewed, but the degree of struggle associated with this aspect of their lives varied depending on the racial attitudes of their parents, the racial makeup of their communities and schools, and the presence or absence of African American adults in their lives. Adoptees fared better in families that lived in racially integrated communities with parents whose advice and understanding regarding racism was systemic—it moved the issue to a larger plane than that of individual behavior and attitudes. Race and identity were still issues to be dealt with, but the level of struggle seemed more akin to the identity struggles many adoptees in same-race families experience. Transracial adoptees' struggles were more profound in families that lived in segregated white enclaves in which parents either avoided the subjects of race and racism or explained them away as individuals' ignorance (Patton 2000).

Fogg-Davis suggests that "Howe's critique of institutional racism is overshadowed by her description of black parents as a 'natural reference group for black children'" (2002:58). Howe's essay actually presents a thorough and incisive historical overview of institutional racism against African American children in the child welfare system, including attention to the linkage of transracial adoption with welfare reform and efforts to improve the foster care system. Howe argues that transracial adoption developed, in part, because the child welfare system used a "micro" direct-service response—adoption and foster care—to respond to the "macro" systemic problems of poverty and racism. This perspective is shared by social work scholars Brown and Bailey-Etta, who state that "The child welfare system has been used by society as a substitute for unavailable multiservice systems designed to serve poor families" (Brown & Bailey-Etta 1997:72). In other words, transracial adoption functions as a sort of Band-Aid approach to the gaping wounds of systemic racism and poverty. It has been well documented that African American children are more likely to be removed from their families and placed in foster care, while white children are more likely to "be treated with counseling and with in-home services" (Ladner 2001:1; Brown & Bailey-Etta 1997; Roberts 2002). This contributes to the overrepresentation of black children in the child welfare system. Fogg-Davis does not address this important contribution, perhaps because it challenges her narrow characterization of black national-

ist objections to transracial adoption or perhaps because her focus on individualistic solutions to larger social problems has blinded her to such arguments.

Fogg-Davis's answer to her perceived inflexibility of black nationalist views is to promote "Black culture as choice" (2002:54). It is interesting and significant that she focuses on "choice." In the configuration of power relations that characterizes the contemporary U.S. adoption system, adoptees are the figures accorded no choice in the circumstances that transfer them from one family to another. Fogg-Davis never interrogates the notions of "choice" guiding our understandings of adoption, and thus her strategy for justice focuses on maximizing "choice" for adoptees in identity formation. While many of us who were adopted into our families would appreciate this attempt to maximize our agency in the social configurations resulting from adoption, this is ultimately a strategy limited by its focus on individual solutions to broad systemic problems.

Fogg-Davis's consideration of "choice" in racial navigation seems to be an attempt to mediate between the imposition of social definitions of race—and the limitations they impose—and a "sort of creative self-fashioning" (2002:31). I find it curious that she does not consider the identity issues stemming from adoption that the Adoption Rights Movement has been raising since the early 1970s. This social movement has fought for the *rights* of adoptees to knowledge about their family origins, arguing that such information is vital to many adoptees in the construction of a coherent sense of self. Solinger's discussion of choice versus social justice is useful here for considering the complex relationships between individual agency and social structure. Individual *choices* are regulated by laws and public policies, as well as by sociocultural assumptions about legitimate social identities. Fogg-Davis focuses solely on the individual aspect of this configuration but fails to consider the larger systemic issues.

The question of access to birth records for adoptees in closed adoptions provides a clear example of the ways that personal choice in identity construction is regulated by larger social forces. While individuals may engage in searches for birth parents or register with the numerous voluntary adoption registries, they are still not provided with access to sealed birth records. The choices adoptees make to search may be a way of exercising personal agency in the context of discriminatory laws, but such individual choices will not change the fact that in the United States, adoptees whose records are sealed are not accorded the *right* to knowledge about the circumstances of their births. Fogg-Davis's promotion of "choice" in identity construction may be useful to individual adoptees in thinking about their relationships to social definitions of race, but it does not go far enough in advocating for an ethical approach to transracial adoption.

The limitations of political theory for addressing identity and culture are evident here. Fogg-Davis's assertion of the importance of agency and choice seems to me a direct response to a body of political and legal literature that focuses solely on the realms of law and policy, ignoring the realm of subjectivity. In such a context, her theory of racial navigation may seem like a radically fresh idea. From an interdisciplinary perspective, it is not new. A consideration of relevant feminist theory and research could contribute a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between individual agency and choice on the one hand, and social structure and power relations on the other. Multiracial feminists might have contributed to Fogg-Davis's understanding of racial-ethnic culture as a tool for survival of oppression.[19]

Fogg-Davis presents a theory of transracial adoptee identity that she calls "racial navigation." She defines racial navigation as "a coping device for living in a race-conscious society and a tool for eradicating racial barriers in family life and interpersonal behavior" (Fogg-Davis 2002:50). As I read it, Fogg-Davis is essentially promoting a flexible approach to racial identity that provides both a set of coping mechanisms to deal with racism and a perspective that is resistant to static social categories of race. While I agree with her theory, it raises a number of questions for me. First, how is this notion of racial navigation different from the concept of racial survival skills that has been raised in critiques of transracial adoption? In my view, her theory could only be strengthened by taking seriously the critiques of transracial adoption focusing on survival skills for dealing with racism. Fogg-Davis has erected a straw man argument in her representation of opposition to transracial adoption. She represents black nationalist opposition as (1) *only* concerned with the *group preservation* of African American culture, and (2) defining racial identity through a static, essentialist group identity that individuals should conform to. Neither representation bears out upon scrutiny of the literature.

The next question I feel compelled to raise, as both a researcher in the field of transracial adoption and as an adoptee, is this: Where are the voices of transracial adoptees? The absence of adoptees' voices in discussing racial identity makes it difficult for Fogg-Davis to clearly communicate her theory in a way that makes sense in relation to the lived experiences of adoptees. By not drawing on transracial adoptees' voices, she essentially *speaks for them*. This undermines her argument for increasing the agency of transracial adoptees by denying them the "choice" to articulate their own definitions of racial identity.

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[19] See, for example, the work of Baca Zinn and Dill (1994).

Racial navigation is part of Fogg-Davis's argument for an ethics of transracial adoption. She constructs this approach to identity in reaction to not only the sort of "static" racial categorizations people encounter regularly in the contemporary United States, but also, quite specifically, to her view of black nationalist perspectives on identity as inflexible and oppressive to transracial adoptees and other multiracial people. She dismisses the issue of survival skills first that "survival, however, is not the major worry in adoption" (2002:59), and second that white parents are just as capable as black parents of teaching their children survival skills.

> Racial navigation is a tool for coping with racism that can be imparted by white adoptive parents as well as by members of an extended family and the broader community. The ability to be a creative problem-solver in a race-conscious society does not depend on the racial composition of one's family. There is no one prescription for a healthy racial self-concept. Assuming that black children raised by white adoptive parents are necessarily deficient in racial coping skills effectively pathologizes these individuals. It prejudges them and their families as incompetent navigators of race (Fogg-Davis 2002:59).

Fogg-Davis cites the research of Simon and Altstein to "assuage this worry" that transracial adoptees do not learn how to deal with racism from their white parents. As I discussed earlier, Simon and Altstein's research does not adequately address the issues concerning race and racial identity.

Fogg-Davis is correct in stating that white parents are capable of teaching their children survival skills for dealing with racism. However, it is important to recognize that being able to deny the salience of race and racism is one of the privileges associated with being white in the United States (Rothenberg 2002; McIntosh 1988). Whites can and do learn about racism and how their children might deal with it best; whites can learn how to deconstruct and delegitimate racist messages that their children may encounter through the media or social interactions. But let us be clear that such understandings must be learned, and white privilege and racism must be unlearned. The question is whether or not white parents of African American children *do* question their own assumptions about race and teach their children how to deal with racism effectively.

In the following interview excerpt, one of the women I interviewed discussed racism. Elisa Jacob, a twenty-six-year-old transracial adoptee who was raised in a nearly all-white community in Northern California, discussed the pain and difficulty of facing racist incidents without the survival skills to respond:

> Elisa: You know, I hated high school. And the memories that I have are just . . . I mean I was in art class and these two "rednecks" were—They drew pictures of Black people in nooses and they pinned them up around the classroom. And the

> teacher, I remember, you know, she took them down, but she
> didn't say anything. But I was always taught by my parents—it
> pisses me off now—I was always supposed to ignore stuff, be-
> cause if you ignore stuff they'll see it doesn't bother you and
> they'll stop. So when things like that happened I didn't—I
> would—I saw them drawing it, and I saw them put it up and
> stuff. But I didn't want to call attention to myself and make a
> big deal about it. And when the teacher was looking at me to
> see my reaction I would just look away. You know when people
> would say things. . . . You know my best friend in high school
> was White and you know, she would stick up for me sometimes,
> but I wouldn't do it myself. I think one, because of what my
> parents always taught me, and two, I had no sense of identity,
> so I really didn't know what to say. I think high school is when
> it all came to [a] head (Patton 2000:12).

While such an encounter would be difficult for many people, the
pain and confusion were magnified for Elisa by the fact that she
had no coping mechanisms through which to explain or deal
with this situation, beyond her parents' suggestions to ignore
such behavior (Patton 2000).

One of the adult transracial adoptees I interviewed was a so-
cial worker who conducted training sessions for prospective
adoptive parents. His perspective echoed that of the majority of
transracial adoptees I interviewed. He explained what he told
parents:

> Joseph: There are some positive things about being trans-
> racially adopted. I love my family dearly. But there are some
> other things that don't get talked about a lot of times, specifi-
> cally in the public eye. So I talk about the identity needs of
> children who are transracially adopted. I talk about the impor-
> tance of seeing your child as a member of that child's racial
> group. And a lot of times they may say 'Well, isn't that divisive?
> Aren't we all just humans? Isn't love just enough?' You know?
> And I say that love is definitely important. It's *necessary*, but not
> *sufficient*. You need to help your child to develop survival skills.

The survival skills that transracial adoptees need, like most peo-
ple of color living in the United States, are coping mechanisms
for dealing with and working through racism. The importance of
racial identity issues was stressed by all the transracial adoptees I
interviewed. Indeed, the lives of the adult transracial adoptees I
spoke with demonstrate unequivocally that race matters pro-
foundly.

Child welfare expert Joseph Crumbley emphasized the im-
portance of survival skills and explained that "colorblind" ideol-
ogy is based on a model of identity and human development that
defines whiteness as the norm and ideal and denies the salience
of racial difference in a racially stratified society. In other words,
it is ostensibly based on an understanding of racial identity as
irrelevant for *all children,* when in fact, this model is based in the

experiences of *white children*. In the racially stratified contemporary United States, children of color require a different set of survival skills for coping with the stresses of everyday life than do white children. The different needs stem from prejudicial and discriminatory social interactions that children of color will likely experience, as well as the negative social messages about African Americans and other racial-ethnic groups that children receive through the media, the educational system, and other social institutions. Crumbley explains:

> Because racial/cultural identity development is significantly influenced by social circumstances and encounters that may or may not occur at any time during the lifespan, it is essential that adoptive and foster parents understand how they, the extended family (including the birth family) can help a child develop a *positive* racial or cultural identity. Much of that understanding centers on the concept of power (Crumbley 1999:4–5).

What Crumbley made clear is that it is a different, and indeed more difficult, process for children of color to develop a positive sense of self in the context of social messages that devalue the racial group to which they belong. No matter how strongly they may identify with whites, they are still seen by other people as black. The term *survival skills* refers to a set of psychological tools and coping mechanisms that people of color draw on to deal with the racist treatment and negative social messages they receive.

Fogg-Davis's theory of racial navigation raises important issues concerning the construction of race at the level of individual identity. However, her analysis of racial identity and survival skills would be enriched by a more nuanced understanding of *culture as a system of meaning*. Her interpretation of "culture" seems to focus on "products," "artifacts," and "practices," such as hip hop music (Fogg-Davis 2002:54). A consideration of cultural anthropology would have enriched her understanding of culture in the process of navigating racial meaning. Cultural anthropology is rich with research exploring cultural meaning systems as "maps" or "recipes" that individuals draw on to make sense of their identities, their social interactions, and their travels through life.

> People are not just map-readers; they are map-makers. People are cast out into imperfectly charted, continually shifting seas of everyday life. Mapping them out is a constant process resulting not in an individual cognitive map, but in a whole chart case of rough, improvised, continually revised sketch maps. Culture does not provide a cognitive map, but rather a set of principles for map making and navigation. *Different cultures are like different schools of navigation designed to cope with different terrains and seas* [emphasis added] (Frake 1977:6–7).

Frake made clear that rather than providing a static "map" of the world, cultural meaning systems that have developed among particular racial-ethnic groups provide individuals with the cognitive skills to *construct their own maps.* In this view, "culture" is not an inflexible definition of what members of particular racial-ethnic groups should conform to, but rather, a set of tools and skills that individuals draw on to make sense of their lives and experiences.

Indeed, in my own research on transracial adoption, the notion of culture as a means of navigating race is the starting point for exploring how transracial adoptees make sense of their multiply defined identities. I draw on a life history approach that focuses on the insider's view—the ways in which people experience themselves in relation to family, community, culture, and society. This perspective provides a useful framework for considering the multiplicity of individual identities through an exploration of the various systems of cultural meaning they draw on in navigating through their lives (Patton 2000). A number of cultural anthropologists have engaged this "person-centered" approach to ethnography, in which, as Caughey explains:

> [W]e see that we need to attend to the fact that it is not only modern communities but modern individuals that are multicultural. That is, contemporary Americans are likely to think about themselves and their worlds in terms of several different cultural models and also to play multiple social roles which are associated with and require operating with diverse and often contradictory systems of meanings (Caughey 1994:129).

This approach is particularly relevant in considering the identities of transracial adoptees, whose lives have been structured in ways that invite the engagement of multiple systems of cultural meaning.

Defining culture as a system of meaning allows us to recognize that all humans draw on multiple systems of cultural meaning to navigate through their lives. This understanding facilitates an exploration of "black culture" as a system of meaning that provides a set of tools or survival skills for individuals to draw on when dealing with racism. It also recognizes the flexibility inherent in the construction of racial identities, particularly for people who grow up in racially mixed families. One of the necessary survival skills discussed by the transracial adoptees I interviewed was an understanding of racism as *systemic rather than individual.* Those who learned critical perspectives for dealing with racial representations and racism as a systemic issue developed critical skills that both allowed them to question and criticize racist images and narratives *and* to define positive, healthy views of themselves as African American and/or biracial people. The adoptees whose parents discussed racism as individual ignorance had a difficult time recognizing that such "ignorance" was not about them personally, but rather was something that affected all

black people in the United States. The experiences of the few adoptees I interviewed whose parents had been able to teach their children an effective approach to race and racism and to instill in them a positive sense of self as African Americans demonstrated the complexities of such a task. On the one hand, white parents are capable, as Fogg-Davis insists, of teaching their children survival skills. On the other hand, the rarity of this among those I interviewed demonstrates the barriers that keep white Americans from understanding racism as systemic and learning to approach race through a critical lens.

In the contemporary United States, the meaning of race is highly contested. The life stories of the transracial adoptees I interviewed demonstrated the flexible and hybrid nature of racial categories of identity, as well as the profound importance of raising children of color with the coping mechanisms or survival skills for dealing with racism when they encounter it. This does not, of course, mean that black folks are the only people capable of raising healthy African American children. But we should be clear that it takes a great deal of humility, education, and openness for whites to critically consider racism, privilege, and power relations in a way that allows them to constructively teach their children about race.

An ethical approach to transracial adoption must move beyond the question of individual choice to consider the ways that such choices are regulated through laws, public policies, and sociocultural definitions of race.

Conclusion

Solinger's work provides a provocative context for understanding Fogg-Davis's argument about the ethics of transracial adoption. Considering these two books side by side reveals how enmeshed Fogg-Davis's argument is in the ideological narrative celebrating "choice." Solinger's work argues powerfully for a radical departure from mainstream ways of thinking about choice, adoption, race, class, gender, and reproductive politics. For many people writing about adoption, including Fogg-Davis, the experiences of birth mothers are not part of the relevant story. Solinger has effectively and powerfully made "the case that the experience of postwar unwed mothers is not a side issue in the area of reproductive politics and history. Nor is adoption a special case. This story captures the heart of what it means to wrap reproductive issues in the language of consumerism" (Solinger 2001:68). Indeed, this important research fundamentally redefines how we might think about an ethics of adoption.

Solinger doesn't use the language of "ethics" in constructing her arguments, but ultimately, she provides us with an analysis of the politics of reproduction and motherhood that carves out a

more convincing ethical stance than does Fogg-Davis's work. By making clear the power relations involved in the regulation of child transfer at every level and arguing for social justice for all parties involved, Solinger makes clear that an ethical approach to adoption, abortion, and welfare must be grounded in a framework that focuses on rights rather than the unstable and ideologically charged notion of "choice." Considering these books together demonstrates the importance of a structural analysis of adoption; of including attention to the intersections of race, class, and gender; and of attending to the voices of those whose lives have been shaped by adoption.

We need public policies that are concerned with the rights of all members of the adoption triad, especially those whose rights have historically not been upheld. An "ethical" approach to adoption requires us to put the life experiences of poor pregnant women at the center of analysis. It compels us to recognize that all children start out belonging to someone, that none of us comes from the proverbial cabbage patch. It challenges us to interrogate the ideology of "choice" as it intersects with gender, class, and race and works to mystify our understandings of adoption and reproductive rights. It demands that we question deeply the complex ways that narratives of choice function in this consumer-based society to obscure power relations and enforce inequality and oppression.

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