Selling Transracial Adoption
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Raleigh, Elizabeth and Jesús Rosales.
Selling Transracial Adoption: Families, Markets, and the Color Line.

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Danielle got her start in social work right out of college in an entry-level position for Child Protective Services. Her caseload consisted of some pretty troubled families, and she quickly became immersed in issues surrounding child abuse and neglect, foster care, and the termination of parental rights. “It was some of the most intense social work I’ve ever done,” she reflects. Although the work was draining, she loved it and a few years later pursued a master of social work (MSW) degree. “Really it was an epiphany for me that I was supposed to be a social worker,” she recalls. Although Danielle knew her calling was in social work, she explains wryly, “I didn’t know I was . . . going to work in adoption.”

She goes on to describe how she left Child Protective Services when her partner relocated out of state for a different job. Danielle learned about an open position at an agency conducting home studies for parents going through the private adoption process. Many of the agency’s clients were White parents applying to adopt transracially, and given that Danielle grew up with a transracially adopted cousin, the job seemed like a good fit. Over the years, she has stayed with the same organization, and her role has evolved from conducting home studies and trainings for adoptive parents to more a supervisory position. Most recently, she has taken on the responsibility of working with parents seeking to adopt through her agency’s programs in Africa. All told, Danielle has been at the agency for fifteen years. Counting her previous work in Child Protective Services, she summarizes, “It turns out that adoption has been my career for twenty years.”
Near the end of the interview, Danielle gets quiet, reflecting about her career choices. She confides, “I have some ambivalence about this being my life’s work. Taking kids from poor countries and giving them to richer countries. Taking kids of color and placing them largely [in White families].” She goes on, stating that while not all the parents she works with are White, the majority are: “In [the] Africa [program], a portion of our parents are African American, but it is still small.”

Even though Danielle has helped facilitate hundreds of adoptions, she still worries about the larger implications of her actions, admitting, “It is not necessarily how I think the world should operate. I think that all kids should have a home, but I don’t think that poorer people in poor countries should have to give their children to people in richer countries. That is not corrective in any way.” Her misgivings are so strong that she repeats, “I think I have some ambivalence about this being my life’s work.”

Danielle was not alone in her ambivalence about the implications of adoption. Like Danielle, Abigail raised similar questions about adoption. I asked her what she would like to see different in adoption, and from her response, it was clear that she had given the question some thought:

You are probably not talking to the right person, because I have strong feelings. But all of the money that people are spending on adopting, [I wish] that they would just donate it to the country so that the children could stay there in foster homes, and then [the donors] would adopt domestically through foster care. The idea of international adoption is wonderful, and I support it. These kids need families, but it is putting a Band-Aid on a giant problem, which is poverty; lack of women’s rights; lack of access to health care, which is causing premature death; AIDS. These kids are in orphanages, and then they are being adopted by wealthy people from other countries. International adoption is not a sustainable solution.

Her response is telling for several reasons. First, even though Abigail is directly involved in facilitating the transfer of children from poor families to wealthy families, she is able to vocalize her misgivings about the macro-level implications of the practice. Second, she draws an important distinction between private international adoption and public foster care adoptions, elevating the latter as a more virtuous pathway to parenthood. Third, she brings up the issue of money, raising the question of whether the high fees associated with international adoption might be better spent in implementing programs to keep children in their countries of birth. Such a disclosure is noteworthy because if hopeful parents were no longer paying fees to private adoption agencies, Abigail would be out of a job.
Having concluded her appraisal, she immediately concedes the futility of these lofty goals, stating, “That’s not going to happen, obviously; there is no way.” Brought back down to Earth, she acknowledges that most of her clients do not want to adopt from foster care, and indeed they seek out private adoption to avoid using the publicly funded market segment. “These parents want to be parents, and they want to be parents in a way that feels comfortable to them,” Abigail states. “And these kids don’t have homes, and they are getting way less than adequate care. It makes sense for the two to meet and for us to put the supports in place so they can have a fabulous life together. International adoption is obviously filling a need.”

Abigail’s characterization of her work reminds us that the adoption marketplace is not a singular entity. Rather, the arena can be more aptly described as an umbrella term for three distinct segments of child placement—private domestic, transnational, and foster care. As described in the Introduction, this book is primarily focused on private domestic and intercountry adoptions. I exclude the publicly funded foster care system because, as one social worker describes it, foster care is “a whole ’nother ballgame.” Although private domestic and private international adoption use vastly different processes to connect parents and children, what they have in common is that prospective adoptive parents are willing to pay thousands of dollars to procure a child who “feels comfortable to them.” The role of the social worker is to “put the supports in place,” with the hope that these families will “have a fabulous life together.”

Despite their instrumental role, before this book there was very little research regarding how adoption professionals approach their work. Danielle’s and Abigail’s disclosures that they are ambivalent about their careers raises some tantalizing threads to be further pursued. These questions include: How do adoption professionals react to the use of the market metaphor? Do they see it as a justifiable framework? Understanding the range of responses is important, considering that as these interviews were being conducted, many workers were reeling from the market downturn that put their livelihoods in jeopardy. This raised new questions as adoption professionals reappraised their professional standards while struggling to keep their employers afloat.

**Historical Research on Adoption Practitioners**

Since there is relatively little current sociological research examining adoption practitioners, studies that elucidate the historical foundations of the adoption market provide much-needed contextualization for understanding these contemporary conundrums. From prior research, it is evident that concerns about the overlapping spheres of child welfare and child commodification have deeply shaped adoption from the start. In her historical analy-
sis of adoption in the United States between 1851 and 1950, Julie Berebitsky
details how adoption was not initially part of the canon of social workers’
expertise, arguing, “Social workers came slowly to adoption.”¹ Part of this
reticence could be attributed to the fact that up until the 1930s, the prevail-
ing wisdom was that unwed mothers should keep their infants. But as the
demand for adoption grew, social workers endeavored to pull adoption away
from the purview of well-to-do philanthropic women and bring it under
their jurisdiction.² As adoption workers began to professionalize, this raised
questions as to whether and how much to charge for their services.³

Even then, social workers feared that the exchange of cash would sully
adoption, turning it into a transaction that veered too much toward com-
modification. Thus, some workers argued for the separation of the opposing
spheres of child welfare and markets. Wanting to avoid any hint of being
tainted by the market, adoption agencies initially only accepted gratitude
donations from clients.⁴ Yet this practice evolved as social workers increas-
ingly exerted their roles as experts in the field. Berebitsky states that many
social workers argued that “they were providing a professional service like
any other; lawyers charged fees (even when they lost the case), so why
shouldn’t trained social workers?”⁵

With the exchange of money becoming standard practice, adoption
workers justified their salaries by emphasizing the competencies they
brought to child placement, matching families “so seamlessly that adoptive
families did not appear to be designed at all.”⁶ Fundamental to these plac-
ements was the reliance on the idea that the best adoptive families did not
reveal their adoptive status, since the “notion that resemblance expedited
love and difference spelled trouble was accepted by adopters and social work-
ners alike.”⁷ Ellen Herman calls this ultracurated approach “kinship by de-
sign,” detailing how adoption professionals pushed forward the idea that
“adoption could be governed and safeguarded through documentation, in-
vestigation, and oversight by trained professionals.”⁸

Standardization of these policies became known as sound adoption
practice as social workers endeavored to thoroughly vet all members of the
adoption triad before signing off on the match. This entailed an investigation
into the potential genetic and moral deficiencies of the birth parents and a
forensic probe of prospective adoptive parents’ medical and financial histo-
ries. To maximize the likelihood of a well-designed placement, children were
also scrutinized. Writing a history of the transnational adoption of infants
between the United States and Canada, Karen Balcom details how “newborn
children were also investigated before they were judged ‘adoptable’ and
placed with new families. These children were carefully observed, given
thorough medical exams, and tested against ‘normal’ physical and mental
development in hope of identifying obvious physiological or neurological
defects.”⁹ This practice could routinely take months to complete, meaning
that despite the demand for newborns, it was rare for children to be placed before four months of age, since that threshold was seen “as the minimum age below which it was impossible to determine whether or not the child showed signs of normal mental development.”

Yet the development and enactment of sound adoption practice had to be tempered by the market realities and the increased demand for even younger infants. Adoption social workers not only had to contend with matching children and parents but also had to determine whom to deny. Berebitsky writes, “Throughout the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, the demand for children greatly exceeded the supply of adoptable infants. And, without a doubt, social workers felt immense pressure to meet the desires of desperate, young childless couples.” These gatekeepers enacted policies that gave preference to those they believed were the most deserving parents—married, heterosexual couples suffering from infertility. In aggregate such practices “privileged the model of the as if begotten nuclear family” by excluding older couples and those with biological children.

These historical studies are most notable for demonstrating that adoption as consumption and the professionalization of adoption practice were highly intertwined. From the 1940s onward, there was concern among adoption practitioners as to how to balance the needs of paying clients and the needs of children. As Berebitsky presciently details, “A couple paying a fee acquired the power of the consumer, which enabled them to demand better service from the agency.” In other words, although adoption social workers may have embraced the quixotic idea of adoption uncontaminated by market realities, this utopia never existed. Herman argues, “Practices associated with the commercial, consumption-oriented culture of a modern market society suggested that adopters had the right to shop for exactly the sort of children they most desired.” Moreover, there was competition between brokers and agencies, and between agencies themselves, and professionals realized that to “compete effectively, agencies had to deliver more of what adopters wanted—healthy white infants.”

As this market summary indicates, not all children were considered adoptable. Racial minority children and those who did not pass these rigid inspections because of mental and developmental delays were often turned away. This was standard practice, writes Herman, detailing, “Until the 1950s these children were more likely to be institutionalized than treated as candidates for family placement.” But things changed with what Herman calls “the special-needs revolution,” which “expanded the terms of adoptability and posited belonging as a vital resource for all children in need of parents, including children of color.” However, these early placements were still founded on the edict of curated kinship and race matching.

Social workers’ initial forays into placing Black, and mixed-race Black and White children followed the edict of the as-if-begotten model, meaning
that these children were usually placed in Black families. However, Berebitsky contends that the shortage of White babies, coupled with the difficulty of recruiting Black families, paved the way for domestic transracial adoption: “Efforts in the 1950s and 1960s to recruit African Americans as adoptive parents had some success but still fell short of meeting the needs of black children. As the shortage of white babies continued, agencies began to place black children with white families.”17

The implications of these transracial placements and how they help reconfigure the color line are further discussed later in this book. But for now, the main takeaways include three ideas that inform the book’s discussion. First, a historical examination of adoption underscores the instrumental role social workers play. As the purveyors of adoption, these workers professionalized the standards of what was considered sound practice, determining the eligibility criteria that made parents and children suitable. Second, the private adoption of infants was never divorced from child commodification and always occupied a liminal space between social service and customer service. Although social workers embraced the mandate to work toward a child-centered approach to adoption, there was always concern about losing market share, especially to the lawyers facilitating private placements.18 And third, race remains an integral variable in private adoption. Whereas transracial adoption was an almost unheard-of violation of the dictates of kinship by design, as times changed and the market evolved, these placements gained traction.

While there is more latitude to explore the circulation of children from a historical standpoint, framing contemporary adoption as a market practice engenders great discomfort because any critical analyses of the effects of the marketplace can be interpreted as an assault on the adoptive family. The stakes are even higher in transracial adoption, in which the family’s adoptive status is rendered visible by racial difference, making these families easily identifiable and at times targeted. Thus, the dominant narrative tends to veer toward celebrating adoption and emphasizing the stories of adoptive parents who welcome children into their homes.19 While this story is important to communicate, it tends to ignore the inequities embedded in adoption in favor of framing it as a mutually beneficial policy that leads to happy endings for parents and children. On the basis of these messages, Kim Park Nelson argues that there is a widely held belief “that adoption is a ‘win-win-win’ situation in which adoptive parents get the children they want, unwanted children find families, and birth families are relieved of the burden of unwanted children.”20

Adapting to a Down Market

Throughout my interviews, it was clear that respondents were questioning whether adoption was truly a “win-win.” Danielle’s disclosure about her
ambivalence working in adoption cuts to the heart of the deficiencies of the win-win paradigm. She acknowledges that adoption—especially transnational and transracial adoption—is often portrayed as the panacea for child welfare ills and a beautiful exemplification of how familial bonds can defy boundaries of blood, race, and nation. Yet she takes issue with this oversimplified characterization, passionately stating, “It is not a way to change the world, international adoption. In fact, it is a testament to how terrible the world is in some ways.”

She goes on to discuss how in Ethiopia most of the women relinquishing children face the terrible decision of sending them away or letting them starve. She considers facing this dire predicament, imagining “that I was in Ethiopia and had my children, and I was not able to feed them and had to give them to somebody else. That your choice is keeping your child and not being able to feed them or give them to somebody else. And that is a horrible choice.” From her perspective as a social worker, Danielle wants her clients to understand these broader contexts to recognize that international adoption involves losses as well as gains. “I try to be really clear about that with people,” Danielle asserts. “This is not just a beautiful, wonderful thing. This is a difficult thing, and I think that adoptive parents and adoption professionals should struggle with that.”

While Danielle hopes that her fellow adoption professionals will grapple with these issues and work to engage prospective adoptive parents in these macro-level discussions, in reality there is little allowance for these conversations. Instead, day-to-day issues take precedence, especially as it gets harder to keep a business going. Heather describes this trade-off between wanting to live up to her ideal of what an adoption social worker should do and just keeping up their operations: “Most licensed agencies are operating in ways that are aboveboard. . . . There is another reality where international adoption agencies are having a really hard time right now, and having a hard time staying in business.” Realizing that she has just crossed a moral line by likening adoption to a business venture, Heather quickly qualifies her statement, rushing to add, “And we don’t like to think of this as a business. And it is not a business, and we are certainly not for profit, any of these organizations. But lots of agencies have had to close their doors. So it is possible that people are resorting to tactics that they maybe wouldn’t have five to seven years ago. But it is different now.”

As Heather succinctly states, the downturn in the adoption marketplace catalyzed a paradigm shift in which workers had to “resort” to new tactics. To learn how international adoption providers were adjusting to the crisis, I had the opportunity to sit in on a webinar called “Updates on International Adoption” hosted by a large adoption agency offering professional development credits for adoption social workers throughout the country. This was a unique experience because it provided a rare window into how adoption
social workers talked with each other. The tone of the presentation was informative but foreboding, as the speaker characterized the state of the industry as filled with “bad news.” She began by providing a brief historical overview of trends in international adoption, describing how “when we moved into the eighties, we saw younger kids become eligible for international adoption—infants.” She went on to describe how they hit their zenith with record numbers of placements and since then how the market has slowly declined: “It basically grew. . . . We were peaking [with] large numbers of families adopting primarily infant-age children.” The speaker went on to say that recently there has been a decline, since “guidelines are more restrictive, [there are] fewer opportunities for singles, and the Hague process can be cumbersome.” The slowdown has forced workers to do more with less. She summarized by saying, “As agencies, we are providing services for a longer period of time. What used to take a year and a half as far as processing is taking two, three, or in the case of China, years and years to process. We have also seen countries that have closed—lots of bad news, I know.”

Tellingly, as the supply of infants made available through international adoption diminished, interest in domestic adoption seemed to expand. Intercountry providers got further squeezed as the market shifted toward domestic adoption and fewer applicants signed on to work with them. Many of these hopeful parents may have voted with their feet and made the switch to domestic adoption. During one information session hosted by Babytalk, Nina, a new adoptive mother, spoke of this calculus. She described how she and her husband had been “leaning toward international adoption” and had “looked into it for about eight months” before settling on domestic adoption. Although one or two defectors might not have made a difference, in aggregate the lack of new customers, coupled with a declining supply of eligible infants, made it harder for overseas adoption agencies to stay in business. Lindsay, a domestic adoption social worker I interviewed, reflects on this change, stating, “I think that it is inevitable that more people will do domestic as international becomes more complicated.”

As the number of prospective adoptive parents considering private domestic adoption grew, there is anecdotal evidence that the supply of children grew alongside it. Although there is not a central clearinghouse reporting the annual number of domestic adoptions, I heard several stories from domestic adoption providers about the uptick in interest among women considering making adoption plans. Many adoption workers attributed their increased caseload to the aftermath of the Great Recession, reporting that impoverished mothers struggling to feed their children were attempting to place their toddlers for private adoption, rather than have the state take them away and put them in foster care for neglect. Although these placements were still a minority of their caseload, many social workers mentioned the rising number of toddler placements. At a preadoption conference, one
attorney discussed this trend: “They [birth mothers] can’t afford to have fos-
ter care come in and take custody of their children. So they want to make a
plan for their children, because they think it is a better plan than to have
them in foster care. So it is happening more. I had done one such placement
in eight years. I have done four this year.” Similarly, at an adoption informa-
tion meeting, a social worker also reports an acceleration in these place-
ments: “I have had three cases this year. . . . One of my families was placing
siblings—while she was placing a one-year-old, she was also placing a two-
year-old son. It is happening more now because of the bad economy.”

As the international market retracted, some adoption providers were
prescient enough to develop their domestic programs and were thus able to
keep their agencies competitive. For example, I attended an information ses-
son sponsored by a domestic adoption agency. Early in her presentation, the
social worker, Tracy, offered some history of her agency, describing how they
“used to focus on international adoption, but the new director came in with
a focus on domestic adoption.” She characterized this decision as a strategic
business move, disclosing that they “needed something to keep the adoption
program up and going.”

Cognizant of how these market swings can affect one’s livelihood, Tracy
described how her agency was one of the lucky ones that ended up on the
right side of the business equation. She recounted, “When we first started the
agency, the focus was domestic. When the swing of adoption went interna-
tional, we obviously went with that swing.” Although her agency did offer
some international programs, it became harder for them to operate after the
ratification of the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption, which man-
dated that agencies go through additional steps to be Hague-accredited.
These regulations led them to give up their international programs and offer
only domestic adoptions. “So we just decided, let’s see where we go with just
domestic and see where it takes us,” Tracy recalled. This business strategy
paid off: “So far we have been really successful at it. If the trend starts to go
back international, I am sure we will follow it, but right now we are just do-
mestic.” While it may have seemed risky to specialize in only one adoption
segment, their timing was right as they stopped offering international pro-
grams ahead of the slowdown. “Those that closed, they were purely interna-
tional and didn’t do domestic at all,” Tracy commented wryly. “And they’ve
now closed and shut their doors.”

Whereas not going bankrupt was a persistent theme that emerged from
my interviews with transnational adoption professionals, none of the domes-
tic adoption employees or attorneys worried about losing their jobs or their
agencies going under. Although Alyssa, the executive director of a domestic
adoption agency profiled in the Introduction, worries about paying her util-
ity bills, there was not nearly the same sense of foreboding as was captured
in the interviews with those primarily doing international adoptions. Be-
cause there was a significant contrast in the tone of the interviews between domestic and international adoption workers, the bulk of the rest of this chapter focuses on how intercountry adoption social workers balanced the needs of children with the needs of their agencies.

A Perfect Storm

Christian World Adoptions (CWA), a long-standing international adoption agency founded in 1991, shut down operations in 2013. On the front page of its website, it announced the closure, attributing its insolvency to a perfect storm of events:

Today international adoption—adoption agencies in general and CWA in particular—face a “perfect storm” of circumstances that has made it difficult and in some cases impossible to continue. Many adoption agencies have closed their doors in recent years. Russia’s recent ban on adoptions to Americans, the U.S. State Department’s decision not to open adoptions from Cambodia, vastly longer adoption wait times in China, and longer adoption times and fewer referrals in Ethiopia have all had an adverse effect on CWA. UNICEF has waged an unrelenting campaign against international adoption for many years. Ongoing mandatory child care costs in Ethiopia despite slower adoptions has been a major drain on our finances. Children living in our partner orphanages have to be cared for, fed and kept healthy every day, even when adoption cases are not moving and the fees we collect do not entirely cover the cost of their care. Costs have been increasing all across the board, including the cost of accreditation and licensing to remain in compliance with U.S. and foreign legal requirements, as well as the number of staff hours devoted to that compliance.21

Although CWA does not describe their collapse in explicit market terms, their missive essentially blames their downfall on the shrinking supply of children available for adoption. They list the negative effects of Russia’s ban on American adoptions, the slowdown in China, the U.S. government’s decision not to allow adoptions from Cambodia, and the decline of placements in Ethiopia. While one of these setbacks may have been manageable on its own, taken together the resulting plummeting supply of children made it impossible to continue operations.

According to CWA, it was not just the decreased availability of young healthy children—the mainstay of international adoptions—that impeded business. In addition, adoptions were taking longer to process as legal requirements increased. They obliquely attribute some of these challenges to
the ratification of the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption, an international treaty that mandated a set of common practices for countries partaking in international adoptions. Because the paperwork often took longer, agencies had more costs associated with taking care of the children in their adoption pipeline. Since the bulk of agencies’ revenue comes from placement fees, and fewer adoptions were being processed, operating expenses kept going up without money coming in.

It is not surprising that CWA, among others, closed. If anything, it is notable that so many agencies hung on for so long considering that by 2015 there were only 5,674 children sent to the United States to be adopted. This sum pales in comparison to a decade before when, at its peak, almost 23,000 children were adopted by American families. Currently, not only are there fewer placements, but the profile of children vastly differs, since the majority of available children tend to be older. Whereas in 2004, 83 percent of children placed via intercountry adoption were younger than two at the time of placement, by 2015 this percentage had decreased to only 28 percent.

Irene, an adoption attorney who provides consultations for prospective clients deciding between domestic and international adoption, describes this era of plentiful adoptions as the good old days. She states, “God, it used to be so easy in the old days. The old days were before China changed, before Guatemala changed. When singles could adopt. The age requirements were always there, but now there are more restrictions in terms of finances, body weight mass, this other crazy stuff.”

Irene goes on to explain that during that time, overseas adoptions were seen as more predictable compared with the uncertainties of attorney-led domestic adoptions, where adoption situations often fell through and the timeline and costs could wildly vary. “If they needed to know how much it would cost, with certainty,” says Irene, “I would tell them, though it could be more international, you would have more of a budget. The time frame—there used to be certainty on the time frame. . . . Some people just needed that type of certainty. So I might advise them that international would be a better choice for them.”

Countries like China and Guatemala were particularly attractive choices because these countries were known for placing relatively healthy non-Black infants and toddlers. In fact, 90 percent of the thousands of children placed from these countries were under two years old at the time of adoption. The timeline was relatively quick in that most placements occurred within a year. But as Irene mentions, things began to change when Guatemala suspended its adoption program and China significantly cut the number of referrals of healthy baby girls they sent abroad. During this time, Korea passed new legislation promoting domestic adoption within Korea. As these policies changed, agencies quickly felt the pinch. Adoption providers began to migrate to other countries such as Ethiopia and Ukraine to open up new
programs. However, the number of children (especially young, healthy children) sent from these programs would never approach the same magnitude.

I spoke with Amanda, a social worker who has been working in adoption for more than a decade. She describes how her organization tried to adjust to the change, stating, “A few years, maybe even as recently as two years ago, it really felt we were facing a dilemma. And I am sure other agencies would share the same story.” Amanda discusses how the downturn in infant placements affected business, saying, “We were dealing with a high volume of families coming to us, but for an adoption process that existed five years ago . . . back in the time when there were several programs that placed a very high percentage of infants.” During this time, business was booming. “There were thousands of infants coming into this country through international adoption each year. China, Guatemala, Russia, Korea, all of these programs were thriving and placing many kids.”

But since 2004, the number of internationally adopted children has declined each year. It often fell to Jennifer, an adoption social worker who answered the intake phone lines, to relay these new realities to prospective clients. She describes how given the tremendous waiting times, stringent health and body mass index requirements, and new policies prohibiting single applicants, callers had to readjust their expectations. Jennifer states, “We are really kind of back to where we were when I first started back in the early eighties, and the age range and needs range of the children look a lot like we do now. The demographic of the child is extremely similar and the tight health requirements that prospective adopters need to meet.”

Absent blockbuster programs like China and Guatemala, Amanda describes this new era of intercountry adoption, predicting that there will be “fewer families in general. The trend is going to be a decreasing population of children available for international adoption, so [there will be] fewer families.” She continues that, on the bright side, the population of parents is becoming “a more diverse, more educated, more prepared, more flexible number of families,” but overall numbers are going down. Summarizing this trend, the speaker at the professional development webinar informed her colleagues, “As we look into the future, we are going to see smaller programs where we as an agency place ten to fifteen children a year. . . . The future—rather than a program placing several thousand kids, there are going to be a lot of those small programs.”

I had a long conversation with Nicole about the effects of this downturn. As a social worker in her early thirties, Nicole had already been working in adoption for several years. Unlike some of the more veteran social workers with a familial connection to adoption, Nicole was a member of a new generation of social workers who viewed international adoption work as intimately tied to public health and economic development. She describes how
a television story sparked her interest in the subject, detailing, “I was a psychology major as an undergrad. I had heard about an adoption story on Oprah or something, and I remember thinking, ‘That is so fascinating.’ There were so many different angles to the story... It was a really complex case, and I remember thinking it would be fascinating to work with these complex cases.”

Through some serendipitous connections, Nicole was put in touch with the director of an adoption agency and secured a position with them. “There was never a dull moment,” she recalls. “I liked working with the families and learning about different cultures and the political issues.” Continuing her work in this area, she transferred to a larger adoption agency known as a placement agency. These placement agencies had direct ties with orphanages in sending countries and used their established networks to work with smaller adoption agencies to place foreign-born children across the United States. While these regional affiliates were in charge of recruiting, certifying, and training prospective parents, the placement agency acted as the supplier of children, earning revenue from this service. Nicole’s role was to act as a liaison between her placement agency and the parents scattered throughout the country adopting through them.

As the official intermediary, Nicole started doing a lot of traveling for her organization to get the word out about the services they offered. Looking back, she states, “it was sort of like marketing, now that I think about it.” I followed up, asking to whom she was marketing, and Nicole clarifies: “Prospective adoptive parents mostly, and sometimes conferences. And [I did] a lot of networking with other agencies that were just other home study programs and didn’t have the international programs that we have.”

Paradoxically, even though the goal of Nicole’s job was to drum up business, she adamantly states that adoption agencies should focus on curtailing the need for adoption. She asserts, “I think that any good adoption agency, their goal is to put themselves out of business because the country doesn’t need us and they are closing the program down.” Likewise, Danielle is also a proponent of this goal, commenting, “One thing that I would like to see different, is that anyone who is doing international adoption should be pouring resources back into that country to help make international adoption unnecessary.” Note that this ideology is not a sustainable business strategy, since closing down programs puts the survival of their agencies—and thus, Nicole and Danielle’s jobs—in jeopardy.

Even though these social workers theoretically support the idea that going out of business would be a positive sign that adoption was no longer necessary, in practice the market downturn generated a crisis. Nicole describes the conundrum that her agency faced when countries stopped releasing babies, and subsequently money stopped coming in. Although prospective adoptive parents pay some fees up front during the initial ap-
lication and the home study process, the bulk of the payment is transferred when parents accept the referral of a child who will eventually become their son or daughter. “We had all of these waiting families, so we were really busy with the waiting families,” she remembers. But even though they had full caseloads, Nicole continues, “We weren’t making referrals. And basically we have cash coming in when we make referrals because that is when we charge for all of our program services. So it is not like we weren’t busy; we just didn’t have any children to refer. So it was like, we need babies so we can make money, which is a horrible way to look at it, but that’s the reality of how you keep your doors open in adoption.”

Nicole was willing to be blunt about the realities of cash flow in adoption, but others were quite uncomfortable talking about the financial aspects of the transaction, especially to prospective clients. I spoke with Erin, a social worker who still considered herself fairly new to adoption, having only worked for six years in the field. She says, “I always have a lot of discomfort talking about fees and feeling the need to really explain what they are used for. And maybe it is my own sensitivity and anxiety about that part of the work, or the commercial aspect of it.”

Of my interviewees, Erin was especially conflicted, and it seemed that the day-to-day job responsibilities did not live up to her aspirations working in international child adoption. She describes how adoption “was not a deliberate career choice for me,” but with her background in international relations, she had wanted “to take the international relations work in the nonprofit world” and “adoption [as a career choice] just kind of happened in that way.” Throughout her tenure as an adoption professional, she has worked at multiple agencies in different capacities, since “adoption programs kind of change, and they slow down, and they close, so I got shifted around.”

Erin goes on to recount how she started working with the program in Ethiopia, which was formative because she was “able to work more directly with the families and really get to know some of the kids.” She explains how these experiences “ultimately spurred my decision to become a social worker,” and after graduate school she “kind of ended up in adoption again.”

After earning her MSW, Erin took a job at a placement agency working with the China program. Her new job was challenging, since the country’s program had trickled to a halt, and children were no longer being referred for adoption. Had there been referrals, Erin would have been helping families arrange travel, answering questions about what to pack, and relaying happy news and cute photos. Instead, her job was to be the messenger of bad news—or more specifically, no news—to exasperated prospective parents. “That’s been probably the biggest challenge coming in as a newish staff person here and inheriting a pretty large caseload of families who are just waiting,” Erin discloses. She explains, “A lot of them [parents] initially applied to the agency at a time when the program in China was moving a lot quicker,
and it has been really hard for them to adjust their expectations around that. It has gone from eight months, [from beginning the process] to a referral of a child, to . . . four years.”

Erin grows visibly upset when she discusses how stressful the work can be at times, stating, “It is sometimes hard when you are getting that initial reaction to bad news. And it is hard because there is not always a lot of information. I have a lot of families, and sometimes there is nothing to update them on. They’ll call and say, ‘What’s happening?’ and there is nothing to tell them. Nothing is happening, or I don’t have any updates. I think it is hard because I want to be able to give them something, and there is nothing to say.”

Later in the interview, I asked Erin whether she often got together with other adoption professionals to blow off steam or share best practices, and she responded that few had time for such luxuries. “I don’t know,” she says. “Just because international adoption agencies are struggling so much because there are fewer placements, it is harder for smaller agencies to keep afloat. So the struggle of trying to keep good practices while trying to keep the agency sustainable is probably the biggest challenge. And how much that is talked about between agencies I don’t know, but it is hard to keep things going without maybe having the luxury of discussing bigger issues.”

Another reason why Erin is reluctant to talk to colleagues may be that she was feeling somewhat pessimistic about her career. She relates, “A lot of times when I end up talking about my job, I feel like I end up sounding so negative.” Whereas laypersons tend to have overwhelming positive associations with adoption, it was evident that Erin felt more cynical about the practice. She elaborates, “People are like, ‘That’s wonderful,’ and I am like, ‘It can be.’ But every time I engage in a serious conversation about it, I feel like my concerns definitely come up. I have a hard time stifling them, and there are things about adoption that I am definitely not comfortable with, and I have a hard time with them as a professional.”

Emerging Markets

As the formerly stalwart programs like Guatemala and China sent fewer children or shut down entirely, some agencies looked to emerging markets to try to stem their losses and generate more revenue. For example, the presenter at Cornerstone told her audience, “We explore new countries all of the time.” But few sending countries offered the right mix of healthy young children that could be adopted with minimal travel. The presenter went on to say that they “considered Kenya, but they have a six-month residency requirement,” making the country an unrealistic option.

When Nepal opened up, many hoped that this country could sustain the market. During a presentation offered by Harmony Services, the social
worker described how Vietnam has recently closed, but she glibly noted that prospective clients “will go to Nepal, and they will be fine.” However, this turned out not to be the case, since Nepal was allowing adoption only as a pilot program. At an information session hosted by Kid Connection, the presenter informed her audience that Nepal was not a realistic option, since the country was “only accepting a few families per agency.” The speaker at Coastal Adoptions reiterated this bad news, describing how the country was “full and not accepting new applications,” because it was “absolutely flooded with agencies wanting to work with [it].” However, she told her audience that they just opened up a program in Bulgaria. Realizing that parents may not be familiar with the country, she described it as “a small, picturesque country approximately the size of Tennessee” and encouraged prospective applicants by telling them that “it looks like a promising program.”

Likewise, other emerging markets did not seem to be panning out as potential substitutes. The social worker at Harmony went on to describe how they were opening up a new program in Nicaragua, but “the children are not as young as [we had] hoped they would be.” India was a similar disappointment because the pace of referrals was “going slowly,” since the country “prefers working with overseas Indian nationals.” Moreover, she lamented that the children did not fit the desired profile, since “most are older and waiting kids. No healthy children between zero and four.”

Despite the fact that agencies needed new programs with healthy infants, since “you need babies to make money,” many social workers were reluctant to think about their profession in such crass terms. For example, Heather responds, “My gut reaction to all that is very negative, the supply and demand.” She continues, “I don’t know a lot about the marketplace kind of approach, but you definitely hear the supply and demand language, usually in the periphery, and it is very uncomfortable.”

Later in the interview, I asked Heather what had changed in international adoption, and she jokingly answers, “Everything.” She then elaborates: “Practically speaking, it is so much more difficult.” She goes on to talk about her agency’s new program in Bulgaria. Whereas the presenter at Coastal Adoptions had no problem discussing the program in terms of its market promise, Heather was more reluctant to frame its newfound popularity in market terms. She states, “When I first started, we had a program in Bulgaria, and we had no interest in the Bulgaria program because the kids were older—about two, and the wait was longer—about a year, and you had to make two trips, and people were like, this is such an outrageous program.”

However, as China slowed down, the Bulgaria program gained favor. Although her agency’s decision to invest in the Bulgaria program would surely help its bottom line, Heather is quick to divorce the move to reopen the Bulgaria program from any sort of self-interest on the part of her
employer. She explains, “We recently reopened our program,” couching the decision as good timing, “because they had things on hold on their end for a while.” Heather describes how relative to other options, Bulgaria was back in the running, since, “now people are like, ‘Oh I can request a child as young as two; that is great.’”

While expanding into new markets offered a lifeline to agencies that needed to develop other revenue streams, this strategy raised concerns among some social workers. I spoke with Kiera, an adoption social worker who specializes in placing children from Eastern Europe. She shares her apprehension that agency representatives may just cut and run, so to speak, once adoption programs close. She avers, “I feel like agencies who are devoted to helping children in need should stay present in the country helping children in need. Not go to the country where they can have more adoptions in an easier way because that also helps the agency stay afloat.” Delineating these trends, she describes how she has “worked in adoption long enough to see that. Ethiopia was all the craze and then Kazakhstan.” Despite her reservations about this rapid expansion, Kiera rationalizes that the ends can justify the means: “I can see how we pride ourselves on doing good work. And in order to continue to do good work, we have to stay afloat.”

Although intercountry adoption agencies looked to Eastern Europe, Asia, and Latin America to fill the gap, Heather contends that “the biggest recent change has been the shift to Africa,” particularly Ethiopia. Around the mid-2000s, the number of children sent from Ethiopia began to skyrocket, increasing exponentially from a low of 42 children in 1999 to a peak of 2,511 in 2010. Although part of the interest in adopting from Ethiopia was fueled by an Evangelical Christian movement drawing attention to the global orphan crisis, Ethiopia gained in popularity because it was one of the few international programs that placed babies and toddlers.

The availability of adoptions from Ethiopia provided new opportunities for prospective adoptive parents, but many of the adoption workers I spoke with raised ethical concerns about the implications of the country’s rapid rise. Among my respondents, Beth was the most vocal. She runs her own adoption agency that has a long history of placing Ethiopian children. She was one of the first people working on the ground in Ethiopia during the early 2000s, back when Ethiopia was sending fewer than one hundred children a year to the United States. From our conversation, it was clear that she had a deep knowledge of the country and the needs of the children.

Beth was deliberate in her decision to place mostly older children for whom she believed international adoption would truly be their best option. She passionately discusses the early years of her work, stating, “When I first started in Ethiopia, my heart was in it. I went in knowing the people in the group.” Because she had long-standing connections with Ethiopians, she purposely did not set up programs in neighboring countries, and instead she
chose to focus her work in a single country. “Does it mean there aren’t other kids in other countries in need of help?” she rhetorically asks and then answers, “Of course there are. Could I have branched off to other countries? Yes.”

Beth adamantly defends her decision to stay small, arguing that continued expansion does not serve the best interests of children. “I needed to make a conscious decision that was not based on economics, not based on my agency staying afloat. It should not be based on that. I think we are not doing a service to children if we base our adoption programs on the survival of our agency.”

While specializing in one country may have been good child welfare practice, it was risky business-wise as other placement agencies started opening up shop and pushing her out. “Families have a need for a certain kind of children,” she laments. “It all starts out really well. We have orphans, and they are really in need of families. Their parents have died of AIDS,” she relates. Someone on the ground in Ethiopia would then approach Beth, asking, “Could you guys [help us]? We are looking for adoptive families.” Beth says, “People are really attracted [to helping], and we start to place those kids.” Yet those are not the kids who keep an adoption agency afloat. Beth elaborates: “We also know that economically what makes an agency run and keeps you going is not your older children adoption; it is the babies.”

Recall Amanda’s statement about how her agency needed babies to make money because the revenue they generated enabled organizations to keep their doors open. When I followed up with her to ask whether and how they managed to find babies to make the money, she told me her agency went through a big round of layoffs. However, once Ethiopia opened, the country provided a lucrative stream of revenue, and they were able to remain open. Amanda recounted, “We laid off staff. I think it was just everywhere slowed down. And then Ethiopia took off, and Ethiopia was keeping us open. The Ethiopia team was gold because they were the ones paying our salaries.”

Even though the expansion of international adoption undoubtedly provided homes for children in need, Beth worries that emphasizing solvency can supersede concerns about child welfare. She herself admits to being tempted to start programs in neighboring countries so she can stay in business, but she has resisted. “My biggest incentive was not to keep an agency going. My biggest incentive was to place children.” However, she wonders if other agencies have the wrong priorities, alleging, “I think for a lot of us, that has switched. When a country closes or a particular situation makes it impossible for a lot of us to make placements out of that country, then you start to look at other places.” With an ever-narrowing supply chain, Beth discloses that she has thought about branching out, stating, “I did not anticipate I would be playing that game. But I’ve had to look at it.” Yet Beth worries that this rationalization prioritizes the needs of the business over the needs of children, musing, “But the thinking probably starts there. And I know that
there are agencies that justify their actions based on the fact that they are doing good work.”

Reflecting on these trade-offs, Erin describes how the market downturn has added a new dynamic to child welfare by creating “this gross kind of competition between agencies to get the best referrals.” The competition for children puts an interesting spin on the ideology that adoption finds families for children instead of children for families. Although many of these workers may have started out with the best intentions, the incentive to find children who fit the desired profile for exasperated waiting parents sometimes took precedence. As the next section details, to alleviate strain and expand the supply of adoptable children, some adoption agencies resorted to new strategies to pitch the adoption of waiting children.

**Waiting Child Adoptions**

The term “waiting child” is a euphemism that covers a spectrum of medical needs, from healthy children with minor correctable conditions (such as a missing digit) to those with life-threatening illnesses. Undoubtedly, there are some parents who come forward to adopt children with serious chronic medical issues requiring significant treatment and care. But altruistic intentions alone cannot fully account for the rapid increase of these placements. Rather, promoting waiting child adoption offered an additional emerging market that adoption providers could suggest to would-be parents. Erin describes how some of her clients were amenable to this strategy, recounting that her clients were “visualizing the special needs program [as], ‘Well, maybe I can’t adopt a healthy infant, but I can adopt a child with a cleft lip and palate, and that seems manageable.’”

As the demand for children with cleft lips and palates rose, adoption agencies worked to try to locate more of these children to meet the needs of prospective parents. Erin contends, “Waiting kids are the only ones moving, and that is sadly how decisions are made within this agency, and I am sure within other agencies.” The interest in these children grew to such an extent that she acerbically characterizes the waiting child program as “the cleft lip and palate program because it is the only thing families come in thinking about and feeling comfortable with.”

Even in China, a country where there are thousands of waiting children identified in need of international adoption, there were not enough cleft lip and palate children to go around. To maximize their chance of getting these referrals, some agencies tried to leverage the system to find enough children for would-be parents. Whereas these days the China Center for Adoption Affairs (CCAA) informs placement agencies when they will be updating case files en masse, it used to be that waiting children were sporadically added to the list. With the time change between China and the United States, it often
meant that the most desirable children would get claimed by the most motivated providers willing to log on from the United States in the middle of the night. Cognizant of the advantage to be gained, Erin details how her supervisors approached her about it: “They were kind of proposing that I just look at any and all hours so I could look at the referrals.”

With her commitment to child welfare in mind, Erin scoffed at this suggestion, characterizing it as a ploy that positioned children as objects to be found and reserved, rather than as clients to be advocated for and served. She bitterly states, “And I kind of felt that this is absurd. I am not going to seek out kids. I felt like that the whole premise made it that we are looking for a kid for this family, whereas our mission is to find families for kids who need families. It feels kind of counterintuitive to be looking for a specific kid for a family. So I had a lot of resistance to it.”

The demand for the most desirable children was rendered even more visible when the CCAA changed the system so that “now every agency can access this at the same time.” Under these new procedures, Erin describes the rush to reserve children as akin to a land grab, testifying that she witnessed “this huge scramble to basically lock in the kids who are ‘easy to place.’” Or in other words, she says, “there is this big scramble for cleft lip and palate. As soon as those kids are posted [claps her hands for emphasis], you can see those agencies reserving those kids for their families.” She laments that in the rush to claim the so-called best children, “there are like 1,500 children—literally 1,500 children—on this website that aren’t even being looked at carefully because everyone is scrambling to place these kids that are thought to be easier to place.”

Two Clients

Although the adage that adoption finds families for children sits at the nucleus of adoption agencies’ reason for being, the challenge of staying afloat in a down market inevitably bestows additional consumer power on the prospective adoptive parents, the ones paying all the fees. In her ethnography of transnational adoption from China, Sara Dorow explores this tension, describing how the social workers she profiles are often pulled between wanting to advocate for the child, who they see as their “primary” client, and appeasing the prospective parents, whose needs are supposed to be secondary. While this prioritization sounds good on paper, in practice these ideals are difficult to follow since the child embodies “the ideal phantom client,” while the needs and demands of the paying client are front and center. Accordingly, Dorow argues, this puts adoption workers in an untenable position: “The (impossible) trick was to keep the child at the center of professional social work practice even as the parent, the ‘secondary client’ was the one directly paying for services.”
Because of the industry-wide standard of upholding the narrative of finding families for children, most of the women I spoke with tended to abide by this interpretation. Nora, the foster care social worker featured in the Introduction, was an interesting exception. She conveyed a no-nonsense way about her, bluntly describing herself as “a parent who learned” about adoption “on the job.” She got interested in adoption after having adopted once domestically and once internationally. Even though Nora pursued private adoption, her professional mission was to place American children out of the U.S. foster care system.

In addition to placing children from foster care, Nora’s agency serves as a local affiliate conducting home studies and post-placement reports for families adopting transnationally. At the time of the interview, there was still a demand for this type of service. Nora had few qualms discussing how the fees from international adoptions helped her cash flow. For example, when I asked her how many adoptions they did a year, she responds, “Maybe five to ten [domestic] babies. Twenty foster kids, and we have at least three hundred international. And that’s what pays our rent. We do the home studies and the post-placement reports.”

Perhaps one reason why Nora is so amenable to discussing intercountry adoption in market terms is her willingness to differentiate between private adoption as a consumer enterprise and public foster care adoption as a more altruistic endeavor. I asked Nora whether she noticed a difference in the demographics of parents who pursue international adoptions versus foster care adoptions. She emphatically answers, “Yes, I am going to say mean stuff. People with more money tend to go international. People who have money will look for younger, healthier toddlers.” Referring to the recent downturn in intercountry adoption, she continues her train of thought, “China is—was—Ethiopia now. People with means, people who are socially mobile, will do that more. People don’t go international for several reasons. They don’t go because they don’t have the money or because they really want to help an American kid.”

I highlight Nora’s testimony because it offers an interesting counternarrative to the voices of the other women I interviewed. Nora had no pangs about framing international adoption as a source of revenue. Perhaps because her focus was foster care, she was less interested in futilely trying to separate the hostile spheres where children and money overlap. She did not seem to mind giving the customers what they wanted.

For Erin, this rationalization was not as easy. She reports that she sought out social work to protect and advocate for children, and she resents how the demands of the parents can sometimes get in the way. Reflecting on this irony, she relates, “One of the biggest struggles for me as a professional is balancing the two clients, so to speak. Most people get into adoption—at least I got into this field—to focus on the child welfare piece and really focus-
ing on the kids. But you also have these other clients who are the parents.” Alluding to the fact that many of the parents look to private adoption only after a struggle with infertility, Erin says that she tries to keep “understanding where they are coming from. It’s for me easy to lose sight of the fact that they’ve had a long, however many years, [wait] that has led up to the fact of them getting here. And they want things to happen quickly.”

Pausing for a moment, Erin collects her thoughts on this issue. But as she resumes talking, her answer comes rushing out in a burst of pent-up testimony. She shares, “In some ways I feel like adoption takes on, versus other social service fields, almost a customer service component. These families who want to adopt, they come here, and they want a baby, and they want [trails off]. And they are paying fees for a variety of services. It almost becomes in a way an exchange, in a way that if you are just doing other kinds of social work, that doesn’t come up as much.”

Erin laments that private adoption was more transactional than other forms of social work. Instead of her hoped-for work as a child welfare professional, she is tasked with being a customer service representative. The prospective adoptive parents become consumers with a desire for a baby and the means to pay a fee to procure one. Contemplating these dilemmas, Erin continues, “I am sort of rambling, but it is hard because clients have said things like, ‘This is what I am paying you for. And why can’t you make this happen?’ And the system is constructed in a way that makes it feel more like customer service.”

Erin was not the only adoption social worker to cite the difficulties in balancing the needs of the paying client with the child client. Michele also describes this negotiation, stating, “We live in a very consumer-oriented society, and we have been dealing with the majority of families who are coming in based on infertility.” She conjectures that as fertility patients, prospective adoptive parents were accustomed to being courted by assisted reproductive technology providers and saw themselves as the patients and clients, elaborating: “They have [had] a certain type of treatment when they are walking in the door. With that experience behind them—and they are also facing big fees ahead. So they have an expectation of the ways they are supposed to be treated, the services that they’ll get.” Michele continues, “I think it is a fine balance between—I feel that I have to focus on the best interest of the child but also realize that the adoptive parents [are] being customers of a certain type of service.” Reiterating this potential conflict of interests, she repeats, “It is a fine balance.”

To summarize, the goals of this chapter are twofold. The first goal is to delineate why it is appropriate to use the market metaphor in private adoption. By highlighting the voices of adoption practitioners, my aim is to show the extent to which business decisions permeate adoption practice. Even though adoption providers are often attracted to the social work aspects of
adoption, the fiscal realities of running and maintaining a small business in a down market often take precedence. Second, this chapter demonstrates the futility of trying to separate the spheres of child welfare and child commodification. Although some respondents were clearly uncomfortable with (and occasionally disapproving of) the market metaphor, statements like “We need babies to make money” underscore how international adoption providers are simultaneously asked to be child protectors and child providers.

Nicole echoes this sentiment, explaining how even some of the much-touted humanitarian programs agencies sponsor are geared toward developing the adoption pipeline. She laments, “I think that adoptions should be about child welfare, but so often they are about child placement. So many agencies have these large humanitarian aid projects, but having the money tied to adoption, a lot of times it means that they are only doing projects in countries they are placing children from, and that is a way to keep the government in your favor.”

Despite her cynicism, it is important to emphasize that she remains a proponent of international adoption. When I asked her what she would like to see different in international adoption, she responds, “I guess just more awareness about adoptive families.” She mentions that she is wary of describing her work to critics who are quick to lambast intercountry adoption: “I guess sometimes I hesitate to tell people that I work in international adoption because they want to get on their soapbox and tell me that all international adoptions are corrupt.” While Nicole acknowledges, “I think that I am more cynical of international adoptions than most people who work in the field,” she defends the practice, continuing, “I don’t think that all international adoptions should be banned. And I think that people have a hard time understanding that.”

The Shadow of the Black Market

During my interviews, I purposely avoided bringing up the subject of black market adoptions since the focus of my inquiry was on the intersection between child welfare and child commodification when everything appears to be aboveboard. Although there have been several documented incidents of corrupt practices, I deliberately eschewed questions regarding child trafficking. Broaching the theme of adoption as a legitimate marketplace was controversial enough, and I did not want to turn off potential respondents by delving into the black market.

Again, it is useful to return to the historical literature on adoption to remind us that worries about corruption arose from the beginning of organized adoptions. Balcom traces what she calls “the traffic in babies” between the United States and Canada from the 1930s to the early 1970s, detailing how social workers on both sides of the border used high-profile stories of
baby smuggling to assert the need for their expertise in the first transnational placements. \(^{34}\) As with international adoptions today, Balcom asserts that the act of crossing the border, with two different governments, child welfare organizations, and sometimes cultures and languages, created chaotic conditions under which corruption could bloom. “As babies crossed borders,” she argues, “they slipped between legal jurisdictions, and arenas of governmental responsibility.” \(^{35}\) She meticulously details that these were not isolated incidents, but rather, such placements were orchestrated by organized baby rings.

This was the case of the 1950s Montreal baby market serving predominantly Jewish American parents who were searching for babies in Canada. These prospective parents looked to Canada since the prevailing wisdom of this era of “designed kinship” was to limit Jewish applicants to Jewish babies—and there were not enough of these U.S. babies to go around. She details how baby-ring organizers were able to take advantage of the Quebecois birth registration system that was solely under the jurisdiction of religious authorities. This aided the process of “laundering” a Catholic Canadian-born child into a Jewish American-born one: “Lawyers helped adoptive parents find rabbis who would register children presented to them as Jewish, or even ‘born to’ the adoptive parents.” By forging the birth certificate, this practice obliterated the existence of the birth mother, paving the way so “new parents could take their Jewish-American born-to-them infant home to the United States and show the false birth registration in the unlikely event they were stopped at the border.” \(^{36}\)

The adoption-social-workers-turned-reformers that Balcom chronicles saw it as advantageous to highlight unregulated and corruptible border crossings because it helped them reinforce their professional authority. In other words, the social workers viewed corruption as a consequence of a broken private market, and they viewed the development of regulated adoption practice as the cure. In contrast, for contemporary social workers, contending with the existence of corruption is more complicated since it would mean acknowledging that even with “sound” practice, the potential for unethical behavior exists.

Perhaps because of these stakes, throughout my interviews few women raised the issue of corruption. Kiera did voice her concern about the high fees her agency (among others) charged for their services, wondering if it fueled unethical behavior. “The one thing that really bothers me is the amount of money exchanged,” she testifies. “I know that it is a bureaucratic system, and I know the amount of work that goes into it, but I am afraid on some level, how much of those expenses cover real services, and how much does it feed an industry?”

She then brings up the Hague Convention and how the legislation was supposed to curb unscrupulous behavior, stating, “I think that with the
Hague there are precautions taking place, but you think of small countries like Guatemala and how many kids are being placed.” She acknowledges that part of this trend has to do with the lack of social services in Guatemala, but on the other hand, Kiera worries that part of this surge is based on market factors: “True, there is no abortion—but with some countries, it is like demand and supply. It makes me very uncomfortable. I hope that children find families because they really need families and not a way for their birth families to make a living.”

Kiera’s concern that the demand for babies creates an incentive for poor women to relinquish their children was echoed in Beth’s discussion of how some adoption facilitators take advantage of the system to make a profit by locating infants. “People are going out, not the agencies per se,” Beth relates, “but people who are realizing this is a lucrative business are going in the villages and offering money to birth mothers so a family can have a baby.”

Knowing this behavior is occurring, Beth describes the leap of faith she takes when “I take representatives and have them sign all of the documents that say they won’t traffic children or buy and sell. I think that everyone has been educated and whatever. [But] I don’t know that person.” And even though she is legally protected, she still struggles with knowing that “if they do something wrong, or even the next person they connect to does something unethical, that connects me to them. I am constantly struggling with that.”

Beth also worries that the potential for corruption can grow, especially as more agencies move in and begin placements. She cites an ethical quandary where a government official asks for $20, likening these types of payments to a form of bribery. She asserts that this type of behavior often takes place, even by “good agencies with good intentions,” but is overlooked as adoption workers justify their actions in the name of child welfare. Beth agonizes over these payments, concerned that they fuel corruption, stating, “The other component is we don’t understand the culture on the other side. We think that if we give $20 to this official to get gas for a car that is a government car, that we are not bribing, but we really are.”

In the context of the overall fees, $20 may seem like a small amount, but in poor countries like Ethiopia, where the per capita annual income is $590, this is not an insignificant sum. Moreover, Beth asserts that as more agencies set up shop, “the ante keeps going up,” and the costs of doing business keep growing. Similarly, Abigail corroborates Beth’s concerns, averring that bribes are so commonplace in international adoption that the cost of these payouts factors into whether agencies can afford to open up programs in new sending countries. She divulges, “There is so much corruption, and people get paid off for every other thing when families are adopting abroad.”

Whereas these women were quite frank in their acknowledgment of potential corruption, others were more hesitant, dismissing documented
cases of child trafficking as isolated incidents that are the inevitable and unfortunate fallout of intercountry adoptions. Heather described her work in the China adoption program, emphasizing its transparent process such that “people feel very confident that things are done aboveboard.” While she concedes that “there are always people who can abuse systems,” citing “stories where an orphanage director here [in China] took money,” Heather downplays such allegations while also confirming them, testifying, “That happens everywhere.”

She asserts that the potential for corruption in adoption is not limited to intercountry adoptions. Heather states matter-of-factly, “It happens in the United States,” continuing, “Unfortunately adoption is a system that can really bring corruption.” Even though she acknowledges the potential for bribery and corruption that can lead to child trafficking, she defends private international adoption, testifying, “I think that anyone would tell you that despite these anomalies, the Chinese really run a very efficient and trustworthy program.”

During the information sessions, only occasionally did the topic of corruption come up. When speakers mentioned it, it would usually be to dismiss its relevance to their field, framing it as a sporadic occurrence that had been blown out of proportion. In other words, corruption tended to be perceived as the unfortunate consequence of having a few bad apples that should not spoil the bunch. For example, at one conference I sat in on an update on international adoption sponsored by representatives from an adoption advocacy group. During the presentation, the director provided a rundown of different sending countries, noting that Nepal suspended their pilot program since finding irregularities “with fraud and child buying.” Despite these concerns, she hoped, “it will hopefully open again.” She detailed how Guatemala also faced “fraud and corruption,” but in response the country is trying out new DNA testing procedures. Although she warned us, “They are not trying to speculate about when it might reopen,” it is likely that it would never approach the same magnitude, since “if they reopen, they are using international adoption exclusively for children over age five and special needs.”

In spite of these documented cases of child trafficking, several presenters were quite vocal that adoption remained a human rights issue that gave children access to permanent families. The director went on concede that there has been “commercialization of the process and corruption” but countered that “the response should not be to shut the whole thing down.” She later reemphasized this point, attesting, “We don’t pretend that corruption doesn’t happen, but we think that the response is inappropriate.”

At a different preadoption conference, another woman gave an update on international adoption, decrying Guatemala’s decision to shut down their adoption program. She likened closing the Guatemalan program to
“throwing the baby out with the bathwater,” describing how the sending country ratified the Hague Convention without having systems in place to abide by it. Because the United States is also a signatory to the treaty, the United States had no choice but to halt processing adoption visas, lest it be seen as noncompliant. On the basis of these events, the presenter lamented that “Guatemala was available as an opportunity for children” and that the Hague Convention was “used as a Trojan horse to shut the system down.” She went on to underscore that “the vast majority of placements were highly ethical, but in any system that is private and individual, there is potential for activity to not be up to ethical standards.” While she admitted, “Some entities took advantage of the situation,” and she recognized that “we need to protect the rights of birth mothers and children,” she pointed out that closing the program puts children at risk.

The existence of a black market for children is the unfortunate corollary to a legal adoption marketplace. Although all the providers I spoke with insisted that these practices did not apply to their specific agencies, the fact that it exists at all was a source of deep unease for adoption social workers. Many of these women had devoted their lives to the welfare of children and families, choosing to work in careers where their salaries could hardly be the main draw. In spite of their commitment to the field, several had strong reservations about private international adoption, especially once taking into account the big-picture social issues relating to women’s rights and global poverty. These are smart and dedicated women who are trying their best to do good social work under conditions that keep getting harder. Given the market downturn, understandably, these workers were also worried about their jobs. By the time I spoke with them, it was clear that the international market was drying up; many had already survived a round of layoffs. As fiscal realities crept up on their aspirations as social workers, they faced new dilemmas as they came to terms with the inextricable mix of social service and customer service expected in private adoption.

From Backstage to Frontstage

In sum, the goal of this chapter is to establish that the market metaphor is an appropriate lens through which to view private adoption. Although social workers may want to situate child adoption solely within the domain of child welfare, I show that it is unrealistic to expect that the economics of keeping an adoption agency afloat do not matter. This is especially the case for transnational adoption, in which workers have had to contend with massive constrictions of supply, frustrated customers, and industry-wide layoffs.

While these conditions have been fairly widespread across international adoption agencies, it is a rarity to hear adoption workers speak so bluntly about their ambivalence. Given that adoption is solely supposed to be a “win-
win” that finds parents for children, any hint of the reverse can pose as a threat to the public narrative. Through my interviews, I was able to capture more of a backstage perspective where adoption professionals were free to go “off script.” Throughout the interviews, adoption workers detailed the drawbacks of working in private adoption where clients’ needs can supersede children’s needs, making the profession feel “more like customer service” than social service. Although these conversations yield new insights into how adoption professionals characterize their roles, it is important to emphasize that my backstage is limited to adoption workers’ self-reports.

Despite this caveat, my methodological approach does allow me to compare and contrast how adoption workers act in the frontstage versus how they talk about their profession when not trying to recruit paying customers. As Michele reports, “it is a fine balance” navigating between serving the needs of the child and parent clients. The next chapter further examines this tightrope, focusing on the frontstage of the adoption marketplace—that is, the arena where adoption workers market their services to prospective adoptive parents.