Latino, Hispanic, and Asian: they seem to be the more preferred minorities.

—Gretchen Bishop

Gretchen Bishop is a licensed adoption social worker in her early thirties who has worked in private adoption for the past five years. She got her start in social service as a college student interning at a not-for-profit organization dedicated to child welfare. There, she contributed to a project establishing after-school programs for foster care youth. “This led me to become more and more interested in adoption and second families,” she explains. “So whether this is a child being raised in a kinship situation by a grandparent or an aunt or uncle, or whether that be a foster care situation, or an adoptive placement. So I became really interested in what a first family versus second family relationship was like. . . . That is what led me to be very thrilled to accept my position at [my agency].”

Early in the interview Gretchen spontaneously mentioned her concerns about transracial adoption and how her clients tend to focus on the practicalities of the application process rather than the implications of raising a child of color. “You know, it’s interesting,” she begins, “sometimes parents, by the time they are getting to me, they can be in a variety of different places in terms of how they are feeling about adoption and their next steps.” Underscoring the strong link between infertility and adoption, Gretchen elaborates, “The vast majority of parents who are coming through are those who are unable to have a biological child or have decided to discontinue trying.” She discusses her clients’ state of mind at the start of the process: “Okay, so how does this work? How much does it cost? Am I required to travel and for how long? What is the overall time frame of the process?” In other words, these families are
concerned with what Gretchen calls “very practical things. Very few families are asking questions about, ‘Okay, how can I handle transracial adoption? Is it right for me?’” She laments that an unrealistic ethos of color blindness can saturate adoption, leading many of her families to downplay the role of race. Voicing her concerns, Gretchen states, “I have just heard far too many times families say things like, ‘Well, the most important thing is that we are going to love, honor, and cherish this child. That is the most important thing.’”

It is not surprising that many of Gretchen’s clients hold this quixotic color-blind view, since transracial adoption is often positioned as the personification of a postracial society. During national adoption month, memes like “Our skin may not match, but we match hearts,” and “You may not have my eyes or smile, but from the very first moment you had my heart” abound with the message that love sees no color. Given that transracial adoptive families are so conspicuous and at times still stigmatized, the allure of slogans that celebrate adoption’s irrevocable bond is understandable. While upbeat quotations have their place, these oversimplified messages can diminish the gravity of what transracial adoption entails.

Mainstream publications on adoption also uphold these color-blind sentiments. For example, in his book praising adoption, NPR reporter Scott Simon declares, “Race, blood, lineage, and nationality don’t matter; they’re just the ways that small minds keep score. All that matters about blood is that it’s warm and that it beats through a loving heart.” Granted, Simon published his book in 2010, the heyday of a post-racial wave of optimism heralded by the Obama presidency. During this color-blind era, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and David Dietrich argue, “A mythology that emerged in post–civil rights America has become accepted dogma among whites with the election of Barack Obama: the idea that race is no longer a central factor determining the life chances of Americans.” Given this wishful albeit erroneous context, Simon’s prediction that his Chinese daughters will grow up thinking “people come in different colors and it is no big deal,” can be read as an offshoot of this palpable desire to have transcended race.

Simon is not the only adoptive father to write about race and adoption in this manner. In Adoption Nation, Adam Pertman argues that adoption in the United States is undergoing a “revolution,” such that “after decades of incremental improvements and tinkering at the margins, adoption is reshaping itself to the core.” Part of this metamorphosis is due to the explosion of modern families so that “single women, multiracial families, and gay men and lesbians are flowing into the parenting mainstream.” He adds that another improvement is “middle-aged couples are bringing a rainbow of children from abroad into their predominately white communities.”

What is so striking about Simon’s and Pertman’s passages is the way that race is minimalized. These publications ignore what scholars of race have proven time and time again—that race serves as a master status that
powerfully shapes the opportunities and privileges bestowed on people. The authors’ approach diminishes racial difference, equivocating race to mere crayon hues such that children who come in “a rainbow” of colors will be seamlessly moved into predominately White communities, making racial difference “no big deal.”

But as this chapter shows, transracial adoption is not color-blind; rather, race and racial boundaries are indeed a big deal. To investigate the question of how racial boundaries are drawn in adoption, it is important to reiterate that a key focus of this book is to investigate the role of the racial color line in America. As several scholars have argued, the racial landscape of the United States is changing such that light-skinned, and racial minorities of high socioeconomic status, like some Asians and Latinos, may inhabit an “honorary white” status. But this boundary relegates Black Americans to the other side of the color line. While there may be room for some darker-skinned racial minorities to cross over into honorary White status, the color line is never fully dismantled. As Lawrence Bobo writes, “In America we remain immersed in a culture of contempt, derision, and, at bottom, profound dehumanization of African Americans, men and women, but especially of young black males.” Although this grim racial hierarchy gets played out in adoption, it is important to keep in mind that the Black side of the divide is not a monolithic category. Rather, I argue that the adoption color line can be narrowed to an even more specialized division between those who are “full” African American and those who are not. To support this claim, I offer two test cases illustrating how some Black children are seemingly bestowed a more privileged status compared to their monoracial African American counterparts.

Transracial and Transnational Adoption

Although foreign-born children of color adopted by White parents technically fall under the umbrella of transracial adoption, scholars have noted that these placements were symbolically and ideologically different from placing native-born minority (usually Black) children. As Barbara Melosh states, “At home, the reaction against transracial adoption signaled the limits of American pluralism and the constriction of adoption itself. Yet at the same time, the steady growth of international adoption—often transracial—suggested just the opposite response.”

This distinction between transracial and transnational adoption was magnified in the 1970s when community members came out strongly against the outplacement of Black and Native American children in White homes. These social movements resulted in the passage of the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) and the publication of the National Association of Black Social Workers’ statement in opposition to transracial adoption.
Although ICWA was not enacted until 1978, its roots extend back a decade to a 1968 press conference held by the American Association of Indian Affairs, which called attention to the long-standing discriminatory policies that removed American Indian children from their families.11 These concerns led to ICWA’s passage, a law that delineated a preference, in descending order, to keep Native American children with their biological families, within extended families, and within the tribe.12 Tracing the history of ICWA’s genesis, Laura Briggs reminds us that “ICWA was about sovereignty—about the self-government of tribes or Indian nations as such, distinct legally from the larger United States,” and as such, the law was “defined by the nature of their political and legal status, not ‘racial,’ status.”13

Briggs argues that ICWA’s campaign to bring attention to “the increasingly visible resistance of tribal peoples in the 1960s and 1970s to losing children to adoption by Anglo families” may have influenced the decision of the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) to issue its own statement.14 This powerful document decried the placement of Black children in White families, arguing that transracial adoption robbed children of their racial and cultural heritage. Moreover, providers argued that these cross-racial placements were unnecessary since there was an abundance of Black families eager to adopt Black children.15 The statement itself drew considerable public attention, but it is important to keep in mind that there was never any legislation passed outright banning these placements. Yet the controversy that ensued was effective, as it curtailed the pace of Black-White placements,16 pushing prospective adopters toward international transracial adoption.

The expansion of the Korea adoption program correlated with the decline of transracial adoption in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Historians of adoption estimate that the transracial adoption of American-born Black children reached a peak in the early 1970s, with 2,574 placements a year.17 As domestic transracial adoptions declined, international adoptions from Korea skyrocketed. As several scholars of Korean adoption have noted, the earliest cohorts of children adopted from Korea consisted of mixed-race children fathered by American GIs.18 But by the late 1970s, the demographics of children shifted as greater numbers of Korean babies were born to unwed mothers who faced intense stigma and lack of financial and social support, leading them to place their children for adoption. By the early 1980s more than 6,000 Korean children, predominantly infants, were arriving in the United States each year.19

Describing this push-pull phenomenon, Kim Park Nelson argues, “Ironically, it was criticism from African American and Native American communities that pushed the adoption industry to pursue sources of children outside the United States at a time when Asians were broadly understood in the American mindset to be largely exempt from racial subjugation that
affected other people of color.” Likewise, Arissa Oh asserts, “American preference for a foreign non-White child over a domestic Black child became firmly established during the 1970s. Unable to obtain a White child, and unwilling or unable to adopt a Black child, Americans turned to Korean children: a ‘racial middle ground’ that did not require white parents to cross the highly charged black-white divide.”

The extent to which the cross-race adoption of Asian children was seen as distinct from the cross-race adoption of Black children is also evident in the adoption terminology used to describe these placements. Reviewing the literature, Mia Tuan describes how “the term ‘transracial adoption’ is typically reserved for those adoptions involving the domestic placement of African-American children with White American parents, while ‘international adoption’ or ‘inter-country adoption’ refers to foreign-born Asian or Latin-American children adopted by White American parents.” By linguistically separating Black children from Asian and Hispanic children, adoption social workers implicitly reinforced the racial hierarchy and sent the message to their White clients that overseas placements provided a more palatable form of transracial adoption. Park Nelson describes this calculus: “Since the anti-transracial-adoption positions of the NABSW and in the ICWA emphasized histories of racial discrimination against African Americans and American Indians, the perceived absence of racial discrimination against Asian Americans made the transracial adoption of Asians into White homes appear safe in comparison to domestic transracial adoption.”

Although there is a general scholarly consensus that the greater willingness among White parents to adopt Asian and Hispanic children must be triangulated against the aversion to adopting Black children, studies suggest that few White parents are willing to frame their decisions in such calculated terms. Instead, Kathryn Sweeney describes how the White adoptive parents she interviewed “talked about race without directly doing so,” especially “when rationalizing the decision to not adopt a Black child.” Similarly, Khanna and Killian detail how White adoptive parents often rely on coded language, using terminology such as it would have been “too much” to adopt a Black child, explaining that this reasoning was likely a euphemism for it would have been too “undesirable.”

Because of the reticence that adoptive parents may feel when talking about the racialized decisions that ultimately led to the construction of their families, hearing from adoption workers provides an underutilized perspective. Using a frontstage and backstage approach, I examine how adoption agencies frame and publicize their racialized policies in their promotional materials during their information sessions. This analysis is complemented by my backstage approach where I interview adoption workers, asking their thoughts on racialized practices like charging discounted fees for darker-skinned children.
This chapter is divided into three broad sections. The first describes how the racial hierarchy in adoption places White children at the top, Asian and Hispanic children in the middle, and Black children at the bottom. However, my goal is not merely to corroborate what other scholars have found before. In the second section, I argue that these divisions are not just reflected in adoption workers’ insights, but they are actually *perpetuated* by their policies and practices. I show how racial pricing and the language used to describe Black children reproduces and widens the racial divide. Yet two important counternarratives suggest that the Black side of the Black–non-Black divide is not a monolithic category. By focusing on the discourses and policies surrounding the transracial placement of biracial Black and foreign-born Black children, I argue that there are exceptions to African American exceptionalism. This has troubling implications for the color line, moving it toward a monoracial-African-American–not-monoracial-African-American divide.

**Less of a Transracial Adoption: Asian and Hispanic Children**

In line with prior research, throughout my interviews, many adoption professionals spoke of how White parents seemed more willing to adopt Hispanic and Asian children than Black children. Sylvia references how the minority stereotype surrounding Asians made these children seem more desirable compared to the negative stereotypes surrounding brown and Black children. She attests, “As I am sure you know, there are lots of stereotypes around Asians. Asians are preferable to African American and Latino. They are sort of lower down. There is a pecking order.”

The acknowledgment of the racial “pecking order” was widespread. Gretchen elaborates on this spectrum, referencing almost verbatim Bonilla-Silva’s delineation of the tri-racial divide that situates Whites at the top, honorary Whites in the middle, and members of disenfranchised groups as part of the collective Black at the bottom:

There definitely seems to be a spectrum of race and culture as it relates to our society in terms of White being on one side and Black being on the other side. And then there’s a spectrum of all of the other races in between. I would say maybe it goes White, Hispanic, maybe a variety of Asian cultures. And maybe kind of a big jump to maybe a more browner skin and Middle Eastern and Indian. And maybe another big jump and you get to Black. I am not saying that’s okay, but it is a pretty reasonably understood spectrum.

The effect of the racial hierarchy is especially evident when taking into account White parents’ preferences, whether they are adopting domestically or transnationally. Alyssa, the director of a domestic adoption agency,
describes how these desires play out, stating, “We have twenty-five families. Say, probably about twelve are open to babies who are Hispanic or Asian, and probably only four are open to babies who are African American.” Following a similar ranking, Gretchen notes that among her clients adopting from overseas, “I think that many Caucasian families feel prepared to parent a child who is from Asia or maybe from Latin America more so than they might a child from Africa.” Reinforcing this delineation, Erin details, “By and large, we are working primarily with Caucasian families who are adopting Asian babies.” She continues, “For whatever reason, there is some kind of perception that adoptions from Asia are less—again, this is my feeling—that people perceive it as being less of a transracial adoption.”

Abigail offers her insight as to the popularity of adoptions from Asia, subtly equating Asian adoptees as the next-best market option given the shortage of White children. She explains, “A lot of families may want Caucasian kids. And a lot of people may feel more comfortable with Asian adoptees because people have been adopting from Asia for decades now, so it is something they are more familiar with—and their friends are more familiar with—so it doesn’t feel so foreign to them.”

It is interesting that Abigail uses the descriptor “foreign” to discuss the experience of adopting a Black child versus an Asian child. Although children born in Asia are undoubtedly from a foreign country, these adoptions are seen as familiar, comfortable, and relatively low risk. This characterization of Asians as familiar and non-foreign stands in direct contrast to contemporary racialization theory that positions Asians as “forever foreigners.”

But as Sara Dorow argues, Asian adoptees embody a flexible foreignness which marks them as exotic but worthy of rescue because of their ability to assimilate. She states, “Chinese children become flexibly rescuable, then, in contrast to a continuity of abject (black, older, special needs) and unattainable (white, young, healthy) children at home.” In other words, “healthy Chinese baby girls are ‘needy enough’ and ‘different enough,’ but not so needy or different that they are beyond desire and revaluation for white American families.”

In her research on Korean adoption, Kristi Brian details how adoption facilitators play up the allure of the Korean adoption program, describing how facilitators “often characterize it as one of the safest, easiest, and quickest routes to a young, healthy baby.” Danielle, one of the social workers I interviewed, echoes these sentiments, describing how many prospective parents self-select into various adoption programs and—within limits—are flexible on race. She states, “Korea was the most—and I am not trying to be offensive—Korea was the most white-bread program. People who felt that they didn’t have any other flexibility would adopt from Korea.”

It is worth unpacking Danielle’s statement that Korean adoption was the most “white-bread” program and what it means to refer to Whiteness in this
capacity. Ruth Frankenberg argues that descriptors like white bread and mayonnaise used to define Whiteness as a processed and bland food can signal the absence of culture: “The linking of white culture with white objects—the clichéd white bread and mayonnaise, for example . . . connote[s] several things—color itself, . . . lack of vitality (Wonder bread is highly processed), and homogeneity.” Frankenberg states that this rhetorical strategy effectively turns Whiteness into “an unmarked marker,” perpetuating the invisibility of White privilege. With this in mind, Danielle’s characterization of Korean adoption as white bread likens it to a raceless transracial placement in which difference is rendered absent and unmarked. She continues that another perceived benefit of adopting from Korea was that parents could have their child delivered to their regional airport. “They didn’t have to travel. The kids came with very good medicals. . . . It was largely closed. . . . it was very comfortable.”

Compared with so-called honorary White Asian children, the racialization of foreign-born Black children stands in stark contrast. Danielle juxtaposes Korea’s comfortable white-bread program with Africa’s unknowns: “Africa is the opposite of that. No medical information, not great family background information . . . and race [pauses for emphasis] a very full presence.” Thus, according to Danielle’s assessment, for White parents, Asian transracial adoption is configured as “very comfortable,” but African transracial adoption elevates the significance of race to “a very full presence.”

Although some adoption workers were uncomfortable with prospective adoptive parents’ characterizations that Korea offered the superior program, it is important to underscore that social workers bolstered this idea during information sessions. For example, at Baby Talk the presenter declared, “I think that South Korea is my favorite country because it is very Western. The medical care they get is very Western. The health information is very detailed and very good. It is probably the country where the kids are the healthiest.” Additionally, a social worker at Family Tree portrayed the Korea program as “one of the most appealing programs,” detailing, “The children are young. They tend to do really, really well.” She then added, “Last year one of our interns was a Korean adoptee. The kids just do remarkably well. The children are in foster care and receive high-quality medical attention.”

This statement deserves unpacking on several levels. First, notice how the Family Tree social worker puts forth the message that Korean adopted children have the potential to grow up to be productive young adults and they can follow a trajectory of success, presumably graduating college and acting as interns. Second, she offers an implicit reassurance that these children will grow up to be so comfortable with adoption that some will even pursue careers endorsing the practice. Third, this brief statement provides a window into attitudes toward foster care abroad compared with attitudes in the United States. The speaker frames the fact that the children are in Korean
foster care as an advantage, because they are cared for in small group settings rather than a large institutional orphanage. The fact that these children are valued because they are in foster care stands in contrast to the negative associations often characterizing racial minority foster-care children in the United States.

Pricing Priceless Children: The Dark-Skinned Discount

The idea of attaching a price tag to a child often elicits strong feelings of discomfort, since the act of commodifying a human life provides a painful analogy to the slave trade where children were brutally auctioned, bought, and sold. But as Viviana Zelizer argues, there is a key difference between a black market, “defined as a degrading economic arrangement,” and a “legitimate market,” which “exists for the exchange of children.” Charging a fee does not make adoption a pernicious baby trade. To sustain this legitimate marketplace, fees must be charged to cover the overhead and costs associated with legally transferring parental rights to a child from the birth parents to the adoptive parents. Although some social workers remain uncomfortable with the pecuniary aspects of the exchange, many are reconciled to the fact that, similar to other professionals who charge a fee for service, the revenue is critical to keeping them afloat. Beth, an adoption social worker, declares, “Fees have to be charged; there is no way [otherwise]. No lawyer will do any job unless they decide to do a pro bono case without charging a fee for their service. I think that it is unrealistic to think that adoption agencies shouldn’t charge.” Of course, it would be unrealistic not to charge since these monies cover the vital child welfare work of conducting the home study certifying that the adoptive family can provide a safe habitat for a child, legal background checks, birth parent options counseling, and the like. In other words, it is not the fact that adoption providers charge a fee for their services that is sociologically interesting—it is the variation in the fees they charge.

It makes sense that prices could vary from agency to agency to account for regional differences that affect staff salaries and state-imposed caps on how much financial aid birth mothers can receive in supporting the pregnancy. However, one would expect that types of children would be priced fairly equally within the same agency, especially for the same type of adoption. It is understandable that government-subsidized foster-care adoptions would incur fewer out-of-pocket costs and that fees for international adoptions may vary since the travel requirements vastly differ by country. However, the cost of a private domestic adoption should be rather stable at each agency.

The fact that there are different fees in private domestic adoption provides an interesting test case as to how race shapes the price of a child. Age
and nationality variables are somewhat controlled for, considering that—by
definition—domestic adoption agencies specialize in placing U.S.-born in-
fants. Since prospective adoptive parents can delineate what medical risks
they are open to in their profile key, the health variable is somewhat con-
trolled for as well. Thus, differences in price serve as an acute indicator of the
racial hierarchy and the color line. Under a truly color-blind system, the fees
would be the same for every domestic infant placed by an agency. But that is
often not the case, since many private agencies abide by a variegated pricing
structure that systematically discounts darker-skinned children.

Some adoption providers justify the existence of a two-tiered system
with the explanation that minority children are harder to place. Because they
are less in demand, especially among agencies’ predominately White clien-
tele, the fees for these children are lowered to align with their perceived
market value. Yet as scholars have pointed out, there is a flaw in the logic that
harder-to-place children should be priced lower. If agencies set their fees
commensurate with the amount of work it takes to place a child, then chil-
dren who are seen as harder to place should command more in fees, since it
presumably takes more man-hours and hence greater operating expenses to
match these children.37 However, when agencies implement tiered pricing
schemas, it is never the “easy-to-place” White children who cost less; instead,
they cost more—a lot more.

Family Tapestry is a private domestic adoption agency with a long his-
tory of placing U.S.-born infants with families across the country. Like many
other adoption agencies, they use a two-tiered fee structure. Although the
agency charges a flat fee for conducting the home study and obtaining fin-
gerprints and background checks, it lowers its program fees considerably for
Black children. Its promotional materials state that the program fee for
White children is $22,000, but in contrast, it discounts the fee for Black chil-
dren to $14,000.

Tracy’s employer also institutes a similar policy that I call the “dark-
skinned discount.” During the interview, she attests how supply and demand
shape her agency’s decision to lower its fees for Black children to move them
through the adoption pipeline. I asked her, “What do you think is the draw
of the biracial African American program?” and she hypothesized, “I am
going to say the majority of it is probably the fees. They’re drastically different;
it is almost cut in half. . . . And that is because we need families for the pro-
gram, so we subsidize programs, one for the other.” She conjectures that the
two-tiered pricing motivates clients to adopt transracially, especially if they
can get a (presumably lighter-skinned) biracial child at a discounted price. “I
think fees have a lot to do with it. So they are looking at the fee schedule and
say, ‘This [White baby] adoption could be anywhere from $35,000 to $40,000,
and this [biracial] one is going to be around $20,000 to $25,000. Sometimes,
I feel like that’s what it comes down to, and that is a sad fact, unfortunately.”
Adoption agencies like Tracy’s employer and Family Tapestry are not anomalies. The practice of charging less for Black children is an open secret in private adoption. Barbara Fedders argues, “The laws regulating private adoption grant agencies much discretion in how they set fees, and a significant number of agencies charge prospective adoptive parents a higher fee to adopt a White infant than to adopt a Black infant.” But it was not until NPR ran its Race Card Project broadcast that the general public became aware of the practice. Since that broadcast and the outrage that followed, racial pricing seems to have gone more underground. It still happens, but researchers now have to dig a little deeper to uncover this fee structure. For example, many of the agencies that I included in my study no longer post their fee schedules online. Luckily, I was conducting my fieldwork before the NPR story aired, at a time when adoption agencies were less reticent to publicize the practice, especially to potential clients at their information sessions.

What is so interesting about Family Tapestry’s pricing structure is how it treats “middleman” racial minorities (e.g., Hispanics and Asians) who are not White or Black. Notably, they are not included among the Black children and discounted accordingly, and the agency does not create a mid-tier pricing category reflecting their in-between status. Instead, Family Tapestry positions and prices these children on par with White children. As the promotional materials for its domestic program state, “Children in this program are of Caucasian, Latino, Asian, and East Indian heritage.” While Latino and Asian children are literally afforded an honorary White status, in contrast, Family Tapestry abides by a policy of hypodescent, effectively characterizing and pricing any child with one drop of Black blood as Black. For example, its information describes this discounted program this way: “Children in this program are of either full African American heritage or other races mixed with African American.”

The practice of pricing Asian and Hispanic children on par with White children may stem from adoption workers’ awareness that these children are perceived as a second-best option, given the shortage of White infants in the domestic market. Irene details how her clients are willing to adopt non-White children, but within a narrow scope: “I would say that most of our clients are White. And not all—we definitely have African American and Hispanic clients—but I would say that the vast majority of them are White. And most of them are hoping to adopt a White child or a White/Asian child or a White/Hispanic child.”

Although it is sociologically interesting to examine how U.S.-born Asian and Asian multiracial infants are priced as honorary White, in reality it is somewhat of a moot point considering that only half of one percent of domestically adopted children are Asian. In contrast, the pricing structure for Latino children has important implications because 17 percent of domestically adopted children are Hispanic. So the fact that they are categorized
and priced on par with White children can greatly shape the revenue stream of some agencies. However, not all Hispanics are afforded an honorary White status. In a marked departure from the practice of classifying Hispanics of any race as Hispanic, Family Tapestry would categorize and price Black Hispanic children as Black.

Family Tapestry is not the only adoption agency I came across that follows these practices. Baby Bunting is another private domestic adoption agency that separates out its Black adoptions via what it calls its Marshall Program. Located in an urban area, Baby Bunting places an array of children from different racial backgrounds. The presenter explained to her audience, “Like I said, [our city] is very diverse. About 30 to 40 percent of our placements are through the Marshall Center, 40 percent roughly are Caucasian, and about 20 percent are Hispanic with room for other ethnicities. But in the [urban] area, the main three [races] are Caucasian, Hispanic, and African American.”

Similar to Family Tapestry, Baby Bunting charges an identical flat fee for its home study services regardless of the race of the child being adopted. Yet the corresponding program and placement fees associated with adopting a White versus Black child greatly differ. For White children, the program and placement fee outlay totals $35,000, while the fees amount to $15,500 for Black children. Baby Bunting opts to charge the full fare for Hispanic and Asian children, but following the one-drop rule, it relegates “multiracial African American” children to the lower-tier program.

During Baby Bunting’s information session, some audience members were curious and slightly taken aback by the racialized pricing. The presenter explained the origins and rationale behind the program: “[Marshall] is a program where you know your child is going to be at least part African American. The program is focused on placing infants who are really more difficult to place, which are the African American infants. So you know if you do Marshall, your child will be at least part African American.”

Later during the session, the speaker circled back to the segregated Marshall program and struggled to justify its existence. Notice that the presenter did the emotion work of couching this practice as child welfare, assuring prospective customers that the fee structure is about taking care of, rather than discounting, children. She began by framing the program as a child welfare strategy initially created to find homes for children traditionally seen as harder to place: “Just a little bit more about our Marshall Center. Each year we receive many more phone calls from birth parents interested in placing an African American child than we do from parents interested in adopting an African American child.” However, the speaker then paused and backtracked as she thought out loud, stating, “Although I think that has changed a little bit now.” She let slip that it is erroneous to say there is a shortage of adoptive families for healthy Black infants, articulating, “Well, in both
programs, we have more parents than we do children.” Perhaps recognizing that she had gone off-message by admitting that healthy Black infants may not be so hard to place after all, she sort of stumbled and paused. Taking a breath, she continued, “But the African American children need to be adopted just as much as the White children need to be adopted, so it is a great program.” She concluded her explanation by firmly couching two-tiered pricing as child welfare, pronouncing that, “The Marshall Center is our special effort to make sure we have homes for all kids entrusted in our care.”

Although racially segregated programs are well established, other adoption social workers were adamantly opposed to what they considered to be a demeaning practice. For example, I asked Patricia whether her agency had separate fees for White versus non-White children. She forcefully responds, “We do not. And intentionally we do not.” She goes on to elaborate how this practice not only demeans Black children but also reeks of baby buying:

We really feel that, since adoption is not about buying a baby, there should not be different pricing dependent upon what race child families are open to. Families are paying for a service, and all of our families receive the same service, so we feel that our fee schedule should reflect that. To our thinking, it feels a little demeaning to have different pricing for different babies.

While she opposes two-tiered pricing in principle, Patricia admits that she and her colleagues have considered implementing these policies in hope of recruiting more families of color to private adoption. She continues, “But it is something we have talked about because we probably don’t have a large number of families of color in our program because of that. So we have to figure out how to be able to balance that to have families of color in our program while not sort of doing what we think is not appropriate.”

Patricia’s logic is interesting in that she assumes that it is socioeconomic status that prevents families of color from pursuing private adoption. There is some sociological support to this deduction given that demographic data have long showed that the Black middle class tends to occupy the lower end of the income spectrum. However, there is a growing proportion of Black upper middle class as well. If agencies truly wanted to be affordable, they could enact a sliding scale based on income. But even this measure might not work in terms of recruiting families of color. Adoption scholars and child welfare advocates have reported that non-White prospective adoptive parents often feel marginalized when working with agencies that are predominately White. Perhaps feeling unwelcome, these would-be adoptive parents may decide to sign on with one of the few agencies dedicated to serving racial minority adoptive parents, rely on informal adoption, or eschew adoption all together.
The exclusion of Black adoptive parents is nothing new. Tracing a history of adoption, Herman argues that White social workers “rarely treated African American applicants as equal partners in family making, defensively guarding their own prerogatives instead.”

She describes a report from the 1960s blaming White social workers for failing “to understand that blackness was not only a matter of skin color and hair texture but also a cultural and sociological identity.” The report asserted, “These social workers were confused by the spectrum of color—white to black and everything in between—that existed within many Puerto Rican families. They worried too much about ‘lowering’ standards for black adopters when they really needed to accept ‘the socio-economic realities in which people must live, and where we find them.’”

Responding to these criticisms, social workers of that era argued for the implementation of a two-tiered pricing schema so that the adoptions of Black children were more affordable for Black parents. Herman describes how this practice took shape:

Social workers knew that rigid adherence to the material standards of White middle-class families amounted to a policy of racial exclusiveness. This became an increasingly pressing policy issue during the civil rights era. Some argued for standards that were more culturally sensitive and realistic about African Americans’ socioeconomic standing, such as accepting maternal employment or relaxing requirements about income and age. To be flexible in these ways was not to lower standards or sacrifice the emotional welfare of minority children, they hastened to add.

To recruit greater numbers of Black adoptive parents, Beth describes how, years ago when she worked in domestic adoption, her agency followed a similar practice of lowering the fees for Black adoptive parents, using an informal sliding scale based on ability to pay. She states, “The agency I was working for [pauses]—to help African American families adopt, so money wasn’t an issue, they waived the fee for [them].” She continues, “And if the White families were also not able to afford it, their fee was waved.” But this rarely happened, since White clients tended to pursue intercountry adoption, and in those cases they did not have the same discretion. She remarks, “In general, most of the White families were adopting foreign, so the fees couldn’t be waived as easily. But for families adopting African American [children] going into African American homes, there were no fees charged.”

However, this practice raised the ire of some of the workers at peer institutions who may have been concerned that they were losing market share to agencies with more generous policies. She recalls, “I remember another
agency in the area was outraged by that. [They would say], ‘Hey, if Whites have to pay for their adoption, so should Blacks.’ And there was a huge discussion if Black Americans aren’t motivated to pay the money, then they shouldn’t be allowed to adopt.” But rather than couch the race-based payment system as unfair to White customers, the naysayers framed their critique as a concern for the children’s welfare. Beth continues on how opponents raised the argument: “If they do not have the money to pay for the adoption, they don’t have the money to raise a child.” She interjects that this “wasn’t a very good argument, but that was an argument that was raised. . . . There was no money exchanged, but the other agencies didn’t appreciate that fact.”

Even though two-tiered pricing policies were initially created to recruit greater numbers of Black families who would otherwise not be able to afford it, the population-based data reminds us that White parents remain over-represented in private adoption.51 Compared with foster care, where 64 percent of parents are White, almost 80 percent of private domestic and almost 90 percent of international adoptive parents identify as White.52 During one of my interviews, Tracy confirms that her clientele is homogenously White: “I would say that the majority of couples are Caucasian couples and we have a few biracial couples in the book and maybe one full African American couple.” Similarly, Jennifer attests that her organization serves a predominately White clientele. For example, when I ask, “Are the majority of parents White Caucasian?”53 she answers, “It is safe to say 90 percent.”

Considering that private adoption agencies tend to have a customer base that is disproportionately White, it seems that the two-tiered pricing strategy failed to accomplish the original goal of recruiting more adoptive parents of color into the private marketplace. Sylvia characterizes this racial segregation, stating, “Most families doing private adoption—domestic intercountry, [domestic] agency, [domestic] lawyer—are White. They’re White. It is very different if you look at foster care.” Noting this imbalance, Patricia discusses how she wishes there was a greater push to attract Black clients and the frustration she feels about “the lack of outreach to African American families.” She describes how there is “the assumption that African American . . . or Hispanic families don’t want to adopt, or only want to adopt from foster care because it is free or no cost.” Poignantly, Patricia states that she wishes people would realize “that race is still an issue in this society. . . . I think those are probably the most frustrating things.”

Several other women I interviewed were also opposed to the practice of racialized pricing, especially if it meant discounting Black children. They cited how it was insulting to pregnant women and to the adoptees themselves who would grow up knowing they were “worth” less on the open market. For example, Nora responds:
Personally, I feel that it plays into devaluing the placement of African American children, which essentially it is. . . . I can't imagine being an expectant parent [with] a child who has been placed through domestic adoption and knowing that was something that had happened. It doesn’t personally sit right for me, but I haven’t given it tremendous thought in terms of whether other agencies shouldn’t be doing it.

In her answer, Nora does allow some latitude for other agencies to formulate their policies as they see fit, despite her personal convictions that racialized pricing devalues African American children. She expresses a great deal of confidence in the judgment of her peers, believing, “They are advocating for the children that they need to place.” Confident that her contemporaries are acting in the best interests of the children they represent, she excuses their segregated approach, arguing, “For whatever reason, they have come to the conclusion that [this] is one way to do it to help them find the permanency of a family in a reasonable amount of time. We haven’t just faced that dilemma.”

Alyssa also comes out strongly against charging less for Black babies, testifying:

I know why agencies do that, because we have a harder time finding families open to adopting African American babies. Because we want these adoptions to happen, because we want to provide this service for a birth mom, to have options for her. You lower your fees, and then you’ll attract more people. . . . But for us, we just see it as the exact same amount of work for us to provide services to birth parents. We, of course, don’t like the way it looks that you are paying less money to an agency to adopt a child of color. That bothers us, and we don’t get it. . . . I think mostly it just feels icky to make a child worth less.

I followed up with Alyssa, asking her if she wished that other agencies would stop the practice, thinking it would reduce the risk of losing business to competitors if everyone had to follow the same guidelines. However, she defends her colleagues. “I know where it came from, and it comes from a good place: to find and make homes readily available.” But she does interject, “It [the pricing] has gotten so insane, so distorted, that this is okay.” Alyssa continues that she sees her work as being “a part of the movement—not the movement but a part of the team—that says we provide just as many services, and sometimes even greater, to an African American woman. And since we charge for our services, why would we charge less?” Firmly
grounding the money her agency charges as a fee for service, not a fee for a child, she proclaims, “We don’t charge to buy babies. We charge for services. Our services are the same no matter what race the baby is.”

Whereas Patricia, Nora, and Alyssa were vocal about their opposition to discounting Black children, other women I interviewed had reconciled themselves to the practice, stating that the result justified the means. Lindsay describes how her agency instituted a three-tiered pricing schema, with White children commanding the highest price, and Black children the lowest. “They used to have three different fee schedules: one for the Caucasian children, one for the biracial, and one for the Black,” she states, continuing, “I was never opposed to that because what it did was—the assumption was it encouraged White people to adopt across racial lines.” This economic motivator was important, Lindsay explains, because it provided an additional incentive, ultimately placing more Black children in permanent families. She attests:

That was one thing that they were doing [to encourage placement], and if the families were comfortable, I didn’t have a problem with it, because Black children are harder to place. The reality was, if it was the same [price] for everyone, White people were only adopting White people and stretching their budget as much as they could, just to adopt. If they were happy adopting a Black child, and the money thing worked for them, and there were more families for Black children, I thought it was a good thing.

In line with previous generations of social workers, Lindsay justifies this differential pricing as a strategy to attract Black clients: “The other thing it did [was] it opened up—because you don’t have as big of a Black middle class, because of lower socioeconomic circumstances—it also opened the door to Black families. You had more Black families to adopt, and it was creating parity with the White families.” While these workers theorized that the racialized pricing would incentivize Black parents to use the predominantly White agency, in practice this fell short of their professed goal. When I asked her whether the majority of her clients were White, Lindsay concedes, “Yes, the majority. Some are interracial, but mostly White.”

Immediately after couching the two-tiered fee structure as an incentive to recruit Black families, Lindsay pivots back to transracial adoption, passionately defending the pricing schema as a well-intentioned social welfare strategy. She acknowledges that it may not be a politically correct (PC) approach but insists that her colleagues’ motives are pure:

So I never had a problem with that program, and it was never a reflection on the children. It was a social issue, and it was a financial
issue, and it was a practical issue. If they were placing with White families who didn’t want them, then I would have a problem with that. But it was just to encourage them to think about it. I never had a problem with it. It wasn’t a political issue. It was made into a political issue—was it PC or un-PC? I saw it more as a hurdle to be overcome financially. If it is less practical to adopt across racial lines—and it is always less practical to adopt across racial lines—and if you get people to think about it because it met their pocketbook more [trails off]. This world is guided by money, and it is a consideration in any darn thing, so it is a consideration in adoption.

Other agencies I came across did not run their own two-tiered programs; instead they subcontracted with placement programs that routinely discounted Black children. For example, I attended an information session about one agency’s African American Infant Program. It is worth emphasizing that this agency did not have a “regular” domestic infant program, so the African American Infant Program was the only venue for adopting a newborn. Notice how the very title of the “infant” adoption program supports the argument that transracial adoption can serve as a market calculation, as the program signals that parents will be able to leverage their market priorities by being flexible on race to adopt a baby.

During the agency’s information session, the presenter stated that working with the African American Infant Program could offer a benefit to prospective adoptive parents because they would be able to network with multiple placement agencies without individually contacting and applying to each one. “Families can work with many of our network agencies without paying multiple application and processing fees,” she stated. “Families are encouraged to work with as many agencies as possible to maximize their opportunities.”

Unlike Family Tapestry and Baby Bunting, who charge a set price by race, fees at placement agencies tend to vary. The presenter explained, “These fees typically fall between $15,000 and $23,000.” Notably, the price not only varies among placement organizations but oscillates depending on the racial composition of the individual child. These race-based fees are likely similar to the ones profiled on NPR’s Race Card Project, which featured a screenshot from a placement agency website listing the fee for a Caucasian baby as $29,000, the fee for a biracial White and African American baby girl as $25,000, and the fee for an African American baby girl as $17,000.54

Later in my research I had a chance to speak with a social worker from the agency with the African American Infant Program about the variations in fees. She recalls how she was shocked when she first learned that “the race of the father makes the price go up or down.” Under these parameters, children with a greater proportion of Black heritage cost less than White
children. Thus, children who are “full” African American garner the lowest fees. As children move up the hierarchy in terms of having more White ancestry and presumably a lighter skin tone, they command a higher price. “It is more expensive if you are Hispanic,” she notes. The difference in cost for an African American child compared with a Hispanic child was significant. She attests, “I was blown away. It was a lot of money.” It was evident that the social worker was uncomfortable with the hierarchical pricing. She goes on to describe how she asked the placement agency about the policy but was unimpressed by the answer: “We asked them, ‘What do you tell people?’ They gave us back some stupid thing that they say and tell families. That is supposed to make them feel better?”

Despite her personal misgivings about the practice, the agency itself went along with this racialized pricing. By agreeing to these terms, this agency implicitly endorses that lighter-skinned children embody a greater social and economic value. Notably, even though some workers disagree with the idea that Black children should cost less, the overarching message still gets structurally embedded when workers go along with racialized pricing by discounting darker-skinned children.

Nowadays, few placement agencies make their individual fees publicly available, lest they end up featured on NPR or a similar media outlet. However, several adoption agencies continue to actively publicize their available adoption situations with information that includes the specific racial composition of available children. These racial designations also serve as a powerful reflection of the racial color line. For example, Born in My Heart Adoption Agency (BiMH) routinely updates a list of its current adoption situations. Children who are Black are routinely referred to as “full African American.” The website lists one situation this way: “Birth mother from New Jersey working with licensed [state] agency will consider home study–approved families from the Eastern Region of the United States to adopt her full African American baby boy.” Notably, the label Caucasian is reserved for “full” White children, but these children do not suffer the indignity of having the crude prefix attached to their racial composition. For example, one situation states, “Birth mom, N.D., has contacted BiMH adoptions to assist her in making an adoption plan for her Caucasian baby girl.”

Following the legacy of hypodescent, a child with “one drop” of non-White blood is no longer considered White. Yet there is a hierarchy of mixed-race children as well, depending on the child’s composition. Notice how the adoption agency endeavors to be as explicit as possible about the child’s heritage, specifying whether the child is part White or part Black. For example, one listing states, “BiMH is assisting birth parent W with selecting adoptive parents for her baby boy. . . . Birthmom’s ethnicity is Native American and African American and she reports the birth father as Hispanic.” Another details that “BiMH is helping terrific birthparents, M&P, with an
open adoption plan. M&P have signed irrevocable relinquishments and are looking for an open adoption for their Hispanic/Caucasian/Native American baby girl.” If the child is part Black, the wording makes sure to signify this fact: “BiMH has been contacted to help find a family for a Caucasian/African American baby boy that is due in June.” These explicit racial descriptions stand in sharp contrast to the message that “love sees no color.”

**Biracial Babies: A Lighter-Skinned Alternative**

Although the one-drop rule historically allocated a person with “one drop” of Black blood as Black,\(^56\) in adoption there are finely graded distinctions between monoracial and biracial Black children. It is important to note that in the context of adoption, “biracial” usually connotes that the child shares Black and White heritage. Of course, one could argue that most African Americans are multiracial since scholars estimate that between 75 to 90 percent of African Americans have some sort of multiracial White heritage.\(^57\)

But biracial in adoption means something very specific—that one of the child’s birth parents is assumed to be “fully” White. Even though sociologists of race and ethnicity would classify a child born to a Black mother and a Black Hispanic father as a biracial or multiracial child,\(^58\) in adoption this child would not be counted as biracial because he is not part White.

In private adoption, it is the child’s part-White heritage that elevates his or her status and desirability. In the following exchange, Patricia explains her agency’s internal debate as to whether to cede to clients’ exact racial specifications by allowing White parents to insist on a White mixed-race child.

**Me:** What issues do you discuss?

**Patricia:** Whether a family should be able to say that they just want to adopt a child who is biracial Black. Do they need to be open to a child who is fully Hispanic, or can they be open to a child who is biracial Hispanic?

**Me:** Meaning part White?

**Patricia:** Yes.

Notably, while Black—and to a lesser extent Hispanic—children are relegated to what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva calls the “collective Black” side of the color line, for those who are mixed race, their White ancestry elevates them above their monoracial counterparts.\(^59\) Drawing on interviews with transracial adoptive parents, Sweeney shows how White parents differentiate among biracial and “full” Black children because they assume “that the experiences of a multiracial person are less raced than a Black person in the United States and they were therefore comfortable enough to adopt a multiracial child but not a child perceived as Black.”\(^60\) Although White parents
may endorse this market calculus, prior studies have shown that biracial transracial adoptees face nuanced challenges associated with their mixed-race status.\textsuperscript{61} Calling attention to implications for child well-being, Sweeney argues, “Agency practices of distinguishing multiracial children may also perpetuate the idea that multiracial children are ‘near-White,’ and will not face racism in society.”\textsuperscript{62}

In spite of these warnings, from my research it was evident that many adoption agencies were active colluders in perpetuating the idea that biracial Black children were distinct from monoracial African Americans. Purveyors of adoption pushed forth this message in two key ways. First, many agencies kept separate placement statistics on the number of monoracial African American children and biracial children they place to assure White potential adoptive parents that biracial children are available. For example, one agency lists its yearly statistics, reporting that it placed forty-eight Caucasian, twenty African American, and twelve biracial babies. While keeping separate statistics on biracial Black children is telling, the mid-tier status of biracial infants is even more evident when taking into account that some agencies permit White parents to request a biracial child as opposed to a monoracial African American child. This request means that the family’s profile would be shown only if one birth parent was White and the other Black.

Like the decision to adopt transracially, the willingness to adopt a biracial child but not a fully Black child must also be analyzed within the context of the racial hierarchy and colorism.\textsuperscript{63} Given the shortage of White babies, Lindsay details why a biracial placement may be seen as an acceptable compromise to White parents: “Those families who thought they’d have a birth-child and that child would be White will sometimes say, ‘We will do a biracial child as opposed to a full African American child.’” When I asked Lindsay to elaborate on this trend, she replies, “I do think it is an issue of color, and there is the assumption that those children are going to be lighter skinned, and lighter skinned is more desirable. So there is that social value and that’s a piece of it.”

In some respects, given the body of research on skin tone stratification within the Black community,\textsuperscript{64} the preference for a lighter-skinned Black child is not surprising. Lighter-skinned Blacks are often perceived more positively compared with their darker-skinned counterparts.\textsuperscript{65} However, it is surprising that some adoption agencies will acquiesce to colorism and allow White parents to stipulate they want a lighter-skinned baby. Over the course of the interviews I asked adoption professionals working in domestic adoption their thoughts on the practice. Interestingly, both proponents and detractors of the practice couched their decisions within the amorphous conception of what would serve in the best interests of children.

During to my conversation with Lindsay, I ask her, “What are your thoughts on policies that say it is okay to for parents to be open to adopting
a biracial Black child but not a full-Black African American baby?” Like in her discussion of racialized pricing, Lindsay situates this practice as a child welfare strategy, rationalizing that allowing White parents to be that specific ultimately serves in the best interests of children:

To me, you are always going to be the best parent to the child that you want to raise. I always tell parents that this is not the time to be politically correct. If you want a White child, you adopt a White child. People agonize. A lot of time they are aware of their prejudices, and things they didn’t give much thought to come up during the adoption process. They say, “I should be able to adopt a Black child.” I say, “Unless you have a few years to work through whatever it is and you can get to the other side and feel comfortable, adopt the child you are comfortable with, because you are not doing anyone a favor to adopt a child that you don’t have an affinity for.” I don’t want that for a child.

While mandating parents to adopt across race is certainly not sound adoption policy, it is not clear whether allowing White parents to pinpoint a child’s racial composition to such a degree serves in the best interest of a child. Notice how Lindsay begins the process with prospective adoptive parents’ racial preferences and assumes that child welfare will naturally flow out of these affinities. Rather than questioning whether a White parent who is only comfortable adopting a biracial Black child is truly prepared to adopt across race, the decision is framed as a consumer choice in which the parent has the latitude to determine his or her boundaries and adopt accordingly.

Similarly, Tracy draws on the argument that acquiescing to clients’ comfort and consumer autonomy will ultimately serve in children’s best interests:

As an agency, I think that the theory is that we want them to be comfortable with the child. And if they are not comfortable with those things, it probably is not the best situation to put the child into. I think that as an agency we firmly believe that it is about what is good for the child, and allowing adoptive parents to be that picky is in the best interests of the child. And that being said, as a social worker I fully know that a biracial child can be as dark in color as a child that is full African American, and this is part of the counseling we do. And the meeting, and the talking, and all of the groups that we do, and the educational courses are so we get families to the point when they say, “You’re right. You’re very right.” It is sort of sad, but we get families who say, “We want them to look like Beyonce.”

Interestingly, Tracy positions her agency’s position as racially progressive, emphasizing that her White clients have to be “all in” for a biracial
child, regardless of the baby’s actual pigmentation. She minimizes the fact that some of her clients may be selecting a biracial child to increase their chances of getting a lighter-skinned baby, stating, “It is an all-or-nothing type of program. You are all in for a biracial child who may look African American.” She draws the line at allowing prospective parents to specify that the eventual son or daughter would need to be lighter than a paper bag, emphasizing that it would not be fair to the pregnant woman to impose such explicit specifications. “There’s no shades,” she responds. “That’s not fair to a birth mother. She doesn’t know. Ultrasounds are great nowadays, but they are not that great. And I always say to imagine how it is for a birth mom. The fact that she got to a place where she is ready to make the adoption plan and to take that hit is devastating to the birth mom, and I will never put a birth mom in that situation.” Having drawn the line, Tracy positions her agency as racially enlightened, contrasting it with other agencies. “There are places, maybe other agencies, who believe race isn’t such an issue. . . . I see it every day. It is definitely an issue, and it is definitely something that you have to be willing to talk about with families and be open and honest about it.”

Despite the assertion that allowing parents the consumer option of selecting a biracial Black child was a progressive child welfare strategy, other women I interviewed were adamantly opposed to the practice. When I asked Fiona about pinpointing such preference, she was reluctant to endorse it, recognizing that it often serves as a market strategy for White parents to obtain a presumably lighter-skinned child. “For two White parents, I think that I would have a hard time with it. I don’t like that. I feel like you want the child to be a little bit more like you and [have] whiter skin. And I would question, what is that about? Are you embarrassed? Are you looking for a lighter shade?”

Likewise, Amanda was very vocal in her opposition. She viewed these concessions as drawing a “ridiculous” line that gives in to consumers’ desire for lighter-skinned children:

We will not allow a family to be open to biracial only. We will not do that. Philosophically, we feel that if you are prepared to adopt a child who is half African American, you need to be prepared to adopt a child who is African American. That is a ridiculous line to draw because if you are prepared to support the child’s identity, you have to be prepared to support the child’s identity. . . . If our role, or part of our role, was to determine if they would be able to support a child of a different ethnicity, there is no amount of logic that would say to me that supporting half that identity is feasible. We know what’s behind it: “I can parent an African American child as long as they are light-skinned.”
Although this policy continues to be debated among adoption workers, I discuss the practice not to argue the merits for and against these placements. Rather, the key sociological takeaway is that extant adoption policies not only follow but also perpetuate the prescriptions of a Black–non-Black divide. It is important to remember that the Black side of this divide is not a monolithic category. Just as there are divisions on the non-Black side regarding how Asians, Hispanics, and Whites are racialized, distinctions are drawn on the Black side as well. When White social workers emphasize the relative attractiveness of biracial Black children and allow White parents to be picky in their specifications, it has the unintended consequence of further refining the racial color line. When adoption practitioners implement practices that separately count, preferentially request, and accordingly price biracial African American children, they further segregate monoracial African Americans.

To further support my argument that domestic adoption policies move the color line toward isolating monoracial native-born Black children, in the next section I investigate the rising popularity of adoptions from Africa and the Caribbean. There is an interesting paradox in this distinction because unlike biracial Black children who may be lighter complexioned, these African and Afro-Caribbean children are likely to be as dark as—or darker than—native-born Black children. Thus it appears that there is something else at play besides a pigmentation hierarchy driving the exponential growth of transnational adoptions of Black children, particularly from Ethiopia.

**Blackness of a Different Color: Foreign-Born Black Children**

In *Whiteness of a Different Color*, Matthew Frye Jacobson traces how non-Anglo Saxon nineteenth-century immigrants like the Celts, Slavs, and Iberics, and from the Mediterranean were once seen as “distinct white races.” He shows how these immigrants were relegated to a different and less worthy “shade” of Whiteness and how their rising numbers among American immigrants “posed a terrible threat to the well-being of the republic.” But over time they assimilated and these “swarthy” White ethnics were able to claim a common identity as members of the “Caucasian race.” Jacobson’s work is useful because it shows how variegated distinctions can exist among subgroups largely considered to be the same race. Just as Celt and Mediterranean Whites were presumed to be Whites of a different color, there are also distinctions between African immigrants and African Americans who embody Blackness of a different color.

There is a growing sociological literature showing that Whites tend to hold Black immigrants in higher regard than their native counterparts. This is especially apparent when examining the labor market. In a review of the literature, Mary Waters, Philip Kasinitz, and Asad Asad conclude, “Whether due to simple racism, the perception that immigrants make better workers,
African Americans’ less effective use of social networks, or employers’ perceptions that immigrants are more exploitable, the preference for immigrants seems quite consistent.” 72 For example, Waters’ research on Black immigrants shows that White employers often have more positive associations toward foreign-born Blacks because they too are immigrants “just like you and me.” She finds, “In effect these whites saw themselves in the immigrants even as they saw American blacks as ‘the Other’ or people who shared none of their values and characteristics of their families.” 73

In line with the favoritism in the labor market for Black immigrant workers, I argue that in the adoption marketplace there is a consistent preference for Black immigrant children. Although there are multiple sending countries in Africa such as Liberia, Nigeria, and Ghana that have each placed over a thousand children in the United States, Ethiopia had been the driving force in African adoptions. Between 1999 and 2016, Americans adopted 15,317 children from Ethiopia—more so than the rest of Africa combined. 74

In the previous chapter I showed that part of the allure of adopting from Ethiopia was that relatively young children were available. In this section I expand on this market calculation, paying particular attention to how adoption practitioners and the parents they serve differentiate between native-born and foreign-born Black children.

While it was fruitful to use domestic adoption fees as a window into the color line, this approach is flawed for comparing the relative value of children sent via intercountry adoption because there are too many contingent factors. We know in general that intercountry adoptions are the most expensive form of adoption. According to the National Survey of Adoptive Parents, 93 percent of international adoptive parents report that it cost more than $10,000 to adopt their child. 75 In likelihood the total outlay was much higher, considering that a recent study found the median price of an adoption was $34,000. 76 But one cannot do a direct cost comparison of fees since sending countries impose different travel requirements (e.g., one trip versus two trips) and the strength of the U.S. dollar varies. For example, one agency estimates that it costs up to $46,000 to adopt from Korea while the total fees are $42,500 to adopt from Ethiopia. 77 This price difference does not necessarily indicate that Korean children embody a higher status than Ethiopian children. It costs a lot less to hire caregivers in Ethiopia than South Korea, so it makes sense that the fee for service would be considerably less in one country compared with the other. These contingencies are beyond the control of adoption agencies, so a direct cost comparison cannot really tell us how the racial color line is enacted and perpetuated. Since this mode of inquiry is bound to give us limited results, in the following section I draw more heavily from the perspectives of adoption workers to understand the ways in which African and Afro-Caribbean children are promoted as embodying a more positive type of Blackness.
Like transnational adoption in general, the fact that Ethiopian adoptions are largely closed remains a significant factor contributing to the country’s popularity. Notably, Ethiopian adoptions are more open than other international adoptions from countries like China or Korea since families adopting from Ethiopia are often given the chance to meet with birth-family members during their travels. But the level of contact does not nearly approach what is mandated via domestic adoption. So while international adoption workers encourage these families to “embrace the spirit of openness,” in my interview with Fiona she notes there is a big difference between domestic and international openness. She contends, “There is open and open,” elaborating how the gulf of geography, language, and resources mitigates adoptive families’ fears about the birth family and contributes to the allure of intercountry African adoptions:

I also feel like adopting an Ethiopian child rather than an African American child over here, . . . parents have the feeling that “if I adopt an African American child from over here, that means that their family might come with it.” And they are [geographically] closer. The family in Ethiopia is not going with it. They are still open, but there is open and open. . . . What’s the likelihood that a family from Ethiopia is going to get on a plane? I am thinking pretty low.

Danielle also mentions how parents’ concerns about openness fuel their decision to pursue an Ethiopian adoption:

I always ask people who are adopting from Ethiopia why they didn’t do domestic. The reason I ask this is that domestic is becoming more and more open, and if someone is choosing Ethiopia because they didn’t want the openness in domestic, I challenge them a little bit. We talk about what about the openness in domestic bothered you? You know, it is not exactly the same. In domestic there is the possibility that maybe you’d see this person. Maybe you’d have annual meetings. Maybe they’d run into them at the grocery store. Africa is pretty far away. That is not going to happen.

Despite the fact that the White parents adopting from Ethiopia had similar motivations for adopting abroad as parents choosing children from Latin America and Asia (e.g., a relatively young and healthy child in a semi-closed adoption), many of the social workers I interviewed implicitly differentiated between the transracial adoptions of African versus other foreign-born children. For example, Heather discusses the new challenge of vetting families who adopt Black children, stating, “The biggest recent change has been the shift to Africa. And that brings up new issues in terms
of race and finding the right families.” The fact that some social workers differentiated between White families adopting African versus Asian children underscores the effect of the Black–non-Black racial divide. Olivia muses about this difference: “If they are adopting an Asian child or a Hispanic child, I can see how they may not think this is as big of an issue.” However, she compliments the White parents choosing Africa, stating, “I do think that families who are adopting from Africa are more thoughtful.”

Recall Danielle’s classification that parents without flexibility tend to seek out adoptions from Korea. She refers to these parents as “white bread,” juxtaposing their desire to minimize risk and race with those adopting from Africa. Whereas the former transracial adoptive parents are painted as risk-averse and inflexible, she characterizes the latter as “really comfortable with the idea of being a conspicuous family.” The idea that transracial adoption of a Black child makes one “a conspicuous family” while the transracial adoption of an Asian child is “less of an issue” or “less of a transracial adoption” is notable because in both cases White parents adopt non-White children. But even though these pairings are all technically transracial adoptions, it is clear that Black children occupied a separate status.

As the supply of young children from other sending countries dwindled, African adoptions attracted a wider range of parents who may not have been as “thoughtful” about race. Danielle muses, “I would say that distinction—initially when those [other] programs were up and running we found that parents who were prepared to parent a Black child had the most comfort with race. So they weren’t trying to say, oh everybody loves Asian kids. Asian kids are so smart, or they will look almost like me.” Yet as parents’ consumer options declined, she details how Ethiopia rose in prominence. “But with Guatemala being closed, with Korea being almost closed, with China being almost closed, essentially Ethiopia is getting in the mainstream.” Similarly, Nicole’s assessment of how the rise of Ethiopia stemmed from depleted market options is almost verbatim to Danielle’s characterization: “I think that China slowed down, Guatemala opened and closed, Korea slowed down. It was sort of the perfect storm.” She continues, “Ethiopia is now getting in the mainstream.” Lindsay echoes these sentiments, detailing how she has seen a “flood of Ethiopia adoptions” among White parents. She follows up, underscoring the explicit connection between the popularity of Ethiopia and the availability of infants, remarking, “Those children are under a year, which is part of the deal.”

Ethiopia became so mainstream that some parents who were caught in a seemingly never-ending wait for a Chinese infant girl opted to switch programs and adopt from Ethiopia. Erin told a story about calling her clients to let them know about the possibility of changing programs and adopting from Ethiopia instead of China. Presented with the opportunity to adopt a
relatively healthy infant girl in less time, some families were willing to switch and traverse the Black–non-Black divide, but others were far more hesitant. “We brought up the idea to a lot of China families because we wanted to let them know their options,” Erin reports. But for some applicants, the Black–non-Black color line was too wide to cross. She details how one family declined this offer, recalling, “And one of the families I was working with, their biggest concern was they lived in the suburbs somewhere and not having a very diverse neighborhood. [They asked,] ‘What will we do in terms of connecting this child to this community?’ I was like, ‘The onus is really on you to do that.’” She continues that her agency accepted the clients’ decision “without any judgment on their part,” and she praised the family for their honest assessment of their capacities, stating, “I think that it is great that they were able to realize that before the child is in that situation.”

This story deserves further analysis on several levels. First, it is important to underscore that this White family had already committed to a transracial adoption when deciding to adopt from China. Even though this family “lived in the suburbs” and did not have a “very diverse neighborhood,” the parents (and the social worker who approved the home study) were seemingly not as concerned about what that would be like for a Chinese child. In this regard, perhaps they saw the adoption as less of a transracial pairing. Yet the idea of bringing a Black child into the same neighborhood raised concern because in their eyes, a Black child, as opposed to a Chinese child, would need a more diverse neighborhood. Put another way, racial diversity, and perhaps race itself, was seen as less of an issue when transracially adopting a Chinese child than when adopting a Black child. Rather than raise a potential red flag that her agency had approved a family that did not live in a very diverse neighborhood, Erin lauds her clients for their self-awareness that an Asian child would be acceptable, but a Black child would not.

Second, although this particular family opted not to switch to the Ethiopia program, several adoption social workers told me that many of their clients did move to the Ethiopia program once they discovered that relatively healthy infants were available in a much shorter time frame. Faced with seemingly unending waiting times for the China program that stretched years beyond what parents had imagined, several families decided to switch into the Ethiopia program. These are the same families who invariably passed on the option to domestically adopt an African American infant in favor of adopting from China. In response to this calculus, Beth concludes, “I think some of them have the idea that it is easier to get a Black child from Africa and raise that child than it is to get an African American child.” This brings up the question: What makes the adoption of a foreign-born Black child a more acceptable market option than the adoption of a native-born Black child?
I spoke with Patricia about this phenomenon. She reveals her frustration that prospective adoptive parents often have the misperception that adopting from overseas will be easier. She states:

It is also very interesting that people will adopt internationally an older child and not domestically an older child. And [they] don’t really understand orphanage care, institutionalization. I find it very interesting that someone would say, “Well, I could adopt a four-year-old from Costa Rica,” but if you asked them to adopt a four-year-old from the U.S., people are like, “What?” I don’t know if there is a fantasy in their mind [that] the child is going to come as a blank slate. No child ever comes to anyone with a blank slate.

Barbara Yngvesson writes of the allure and the fallacy of the clean break, noting how the practice of labeling children available via intercountry adoption as social orphans, regardless of whether they had known living birth families, promoted the “centrality of the child’s orphan status—the legal clean break that is required to make him or her available for adoption.”78 Similarly, Dorow notes that Chinese girls were especially sought after precisely because they were thought to come with “light baggage” or, in other words, the “racial flexibility, good health, young age, distanced birth mothers.”79 She continues, “Factors of race, gender, age, and health play into the narratives of choice that imagine the possible relocation of some children, and not others, into adoptive homes.”80 Bestowed with a racially flexible status and seemingly unburdened by ties to biological family, these children were seen as distinct from other racial minorities and immigrants.

Whereas internationally adopted children are afforded this racial distinction, transracially adopted domestic minorities—especially via foster care—are not granted a similar dispensation. Anna Ortiz and Laura Briggs argue that one reason why foster care is seen as so undesirable is that it gets coded as poor and African American. They connect the messages put forth by influential studies such as Oscar Lewis’s “The Culture of Poverty” and Daniel Moynihan’s “The Negro Family” (also known as “The Moynihan Report”), which set the foundation such that “race emerged sharply as a term to characterize pathology.”81 Ortiz and Briggs trace how these negative stereotypes dominated domestic adoption policy, eventually creating the “crack baby crisis.” They show how these narratives, taken together, created “a biologically suspect and racialized U.S. ‘underclass’” which “rendered its members—and particularly its children—intrinsically pathological and completely irredeemable.”82 Despite policy interventions designed to move greater numbers of foster care children into adoptive families, many White parents deliberately eschewed the foster care system as “dealing with poor
and traumatized kids,” and turned to “the private system being the source of ($30,000) White infants.”

In paradoxical contrast to “the exceptional undesirability of U.S. foster care children,” Ortiz and Briggs argue that foreign-born children available for transnational adoption—even those who are older and presumably have been exposed to neglect in institutional care—were able to escape the label of being “damaged goods.” Confirming this sentiment, Nicole reflects how “it became very trendy to adopt from Ethiopia. Part of the reason is that these children are not coming from histories of abuse and neglect. They are coming from poverty and disease. That feels a lot more comfortable to families [than it] might be adopting domestically from the foster care system, where there is a history of abuse and neglect and the child’s parents have had their parental rights terminated.”

Conscious of the fact that most of her clients were averse to foster care, Beth (somewhat mischievously) describes how she purposely asks new clients applying to Ethiopia whether they considered adopting from the foster care system. Even though she is aware that many of her clients assume that “children of African American descent . . . are born with drugs in their system and they come from a much more volatile background,” she still asks them, “Why not do U.S. adoption? It costs you a lot less, and it is right here, and we have just as many children in need.” According to Beth, the most common answer she receives is, “Those kids are usually drug-addicted, and their risks are high,” underscoring the extent of negative connotations surrounding foster care.

It is not solely prospective adoptive parents who buy into these characterizations. Occasionally during the interviews and information sessions I observed, I witnessed how adoption workers perpetuated these distinctions, subtly communicating the message that adopting an African American child from foster care carried too many risks. For example, during an information session at Kid’s Connection, the presenter assured her audience, “In Ethiopia, drugs is never the issue.” Additionally, during my interview with Lindsay, her comments highlight the assumption that there are elevated risks in foster care. This exchange came about when I asked her whether parents are typecasting an American birth mother versus a foreign birth mother. She does qualify this distinction, stating, “[In] Russia you have the fetal alcohol syndrome, and people are very wary of that.” But she adds that these children can be identified and possibly winnowed out of the pool because, “That is very identifiable. A lot of times it is apparent in their physicals.” Lindsay attests that prospective parents “are just as afraid of fetal alcohol [as] they are of drugs. Culturally there [Russia], you are more likely to have fetal alcohol.” Unlike fetal alcohol effect, which can be presumably identified with the medical screening such that prospective adopters can decline a referral, Lindsay states that would-be parents worried that they would not be able to
identify crack exposure in time. “Here you have drugs, crack cocaine,” she states, detailing, “The crack epidemic, there was a great fear of it.” Elevating the risks of drugs over alcohol, Lindsay defends the fears of adoptive parents as legitimate concerns, contending, “Do I feel that they are maligning birth mothers? No, because it turns out that is a real risk.”

If a racialized fear of African American birth mothers serves as the push factor moving prospective parents away from foster care, the allure of an exotic child contributes to the pull toward Africa. Along this line, several adoption workers credited the growing number of celebrity adoptions from Africa as adding to the exotification of these children. Abigail states, “Right now a lot of families are interested in adopting from Africa because that is the place where a lot of celebrities are adopting from.” Nora specifically cites the publicity that ensued when Angelina Jolie adopted from Ethiopia and Madonna adopted from Malawi, adding, “I think that there’s a glamour to it.”

Playing up these supposed distinctions between glamorous African-born children and underclass native-born African American children, some adoption agencies and workers propagate finely tuned distinctions between these groups. For example, I conducted an interview with Carolyn, a social worker who had worked in international adoption for over a decade. At one point in the conversation she describes White parents’ interest in Ethiopia, mentioning that Ethiopian children have “a different look.” She emphasizes that Ethiopian children “do not look like African American children.” Although Carolyn was hesitant to go into further specifics as to how Ethiopian and American Black children may differ by phenotype, her statement that Ethiopian children “do not look like African American children” suggests that these children embody Blackness of a different color.

Beth passionately and angrily discusses how some adoption professionals explicitly differentiate between native-born and foreign-born Blacks. She describes this phenomenon: “Other agencies started getting into Ethiopia and putting on their advertisements . . . ‘We have a program in Ethiopia. These children are not African looking; they do not have the big lips or the wide nose. And their skin complexion is’—I was irate.” Beth states that upon hearing about this, “I just hit the roof.”

The extent to which differences between Ethiopian and native-born African American children are calculated and characterized harkens back to the historical practice of making distinctions between White ethnicities. Jacobson describes how “these new White races were subject to the new epistemological system of difference—a new visual economy keyed not only to cues of skin color but to facial angle, head size and shape, physiognomy, hair and eye color, and physique.”85 Notably, this eugenic practice ceased as Whites were able to coalesce around their imagined identities as Caucasians. However, these cues still retain their currency when distinguishing between Africans and African Americans.
In addition to perceived phenotypical differences, another potential benefit of international adoption was that it gave White parents the leeway to draw on the narrative of engaging in a humanitarian act. The fact that poverty and disease are seen as more “comfortable” factors for White parents echoes Dorow’s assessment of how rescue serves as a redeeming narrative in transnational adoption. As Dorow argues, “saving” children “served as a complementary justification. Humanitarian rescue discourses helped distinguish international adoption from domestic adoption options.” In line with this assessment, Beth contends, “With Africa there is this whole rescue mentality. We are saving poor African children from really bad situations.” The cache of the rescue narrative was especially potent after the devastating 2010 Haiti earthquake and the outpouring of sympathy that followed. Many were understandably moved by the constant media coverage of how one of the poorest countries in the world was especially vulnerable after such a natural disaster. Compelled to try to alleviate such suffering, several adoption workers reported that they had a groundswell of contact from people interested in adopting from Haiti.

Jennifer, whose job entails answering the intake calls at an adoption agency, can attest to how a natural disaster often catalyzes interest in adoption. She juxtaposes those callers with clients who tend to come to adoption from infertility, describing how few of these callers ever go on to pursue adoption:

The other time we will see an uptick in information calls will be after a natural disaster, like with Haiti. For about two weeks we were quite busy with phone calls where we weren’t necessarily talking about our programs as educating the public. Because there was a larger percentage of people than usual who hadn’t necessarily thought about adoption or weren’t drawn to adoption in terms of infertility calling. So there is a whole different air that you have when talking with people like that too. . . . A handful of those people would go on to inquiring in greater detail. Most were moved by the urgency of the moment.

Looking back on this phenomenon, Nora conjectures, “People saw kids in Haiti, and they want to adopt from Haiti. But those parents won’t necessarily take an American foster kid. The same black face, the same desperate need, but it is the American way to go out and save the world.”

Tracy also spoke of how the emotional humanitarian urge creates dissonance between Black children overseas and native-born Black children at home. I asked her why she thought people were so interested in adopting from Haiti, and she responded, “It is more along the lines of ‘We are saving one of those children in Haiti.’ It looks better. Adoptive parents perceive it as
‘It looks better because we saved a child,’ rather than having a child who is born here who is African American.”

She goes on to tell a story about how she received many interested calls from her roster of existing clients. To clarify, these prospective parents had deliberately decided not to pursue the adoption of African American children and were currently waiting to be chosen by expectant women placing White children. However, as Tracy details, many of these waiting families saw a clear difference between a Haitian child and an American Black child. She recalls:

We had several parents who were in our Caucasian group who called us and said, “How can we adopt from Haiti? How can we get one of those children from Haiti?” I say, “Okay, but you’re not in our African American/biracial book.” And they are like, “We know.” And I say, “Can you explain the difference to me?” They’re like, “They’re Haitian.” That was a hard pill for us to swallow as social workers, but they were clearly able to see in their heads that this child is of Haitian descent, and they are not Black.

Given that many adoptive parents had the notion that their African-born children were “not Black,” or at least a different type of Black, several social workers I interviewed mentioned their concern that some White parents were purposely trying to distance themselves from the African American community. Nicole describes how families adopting from Ethiopia would come to her and say, “‘There is no Ethiopian adoptive community in my neighborhood.’ And I would say, ‘Well, what about domestic adoption and families who have adopted transracially [native-born Black children]?’ And for so many families, they were like, ‘Wow, it never really occurred to me.’” Rather than try to make connections with African Americans, or even White parents with African American children, these adoption professionals emphasize how White parents of foreign-born Black children prioritize their child’s ethnic identity, rather than a racial one.

Later in the conversation Nicole describes the potential drawbacks of this emphasis on culture instead of race, stating, “One thing that wasn’t talked about among the families but was often talked about among the staff was that a lot of these families are really committed to connecting to the Ethiopian community but not connecting to the African American or Black community.” She continues, “A lot of parents were clinging so tightly to this Ethiopian identity. That is really big in the Ethiopian adoptive community, going out for Ethiopian food, using Amharic words. . . . I think there is this whole place of wanting your child to be part of not the African American community but of the African or Ethiopian community.”
As several scholars have pointed out before, the act of engaging with a child’s cultural origins by going out for ethnic food and peppering one’s vocabulary with key phrases learned at culture camp has become the normative strategy for transnational adoptive parents. Jacobson coins this strategy as “culture keeping,” writing, “For international-adoptive parents, culture keeping can be hugely enjoyable and personally rewarding. Learning about a new culture, purchasing and consuming new ethnic goods and foods, and participating in new holiday traditions can be pleasurable experiences.” She continues that culture keeping “provides a comfortable avenue for mothers” that can “fulfill the ethnic expectation they place on their children based on racial difference, yet the cultural practices themselves are loose enough that they can easily be slipped on or off.” This comfortable approach to engaging with an exotic culture stands in stark contrast to the perceived risks and pitfalls associated with the appropriation and performance of African American culture such that White parents may feel like they have less license to slip on or off elements of domestic Black culture.

Yet for foreign-born Black children, the practice of culture keeping seems to be more accessible since White parents can follow the well-worn model of going out for Ethiopian food and attending culture camps, activities that allow parents to remain firmly in control of the narrative of racial difference. Lindsay describes how the White parents she works with distinguish their children, stating, “Somehow if you take a Black Caribbean child or a Black child from another country, somehow it is more exotic, so they are not African American; they are just African or Caribbean. Somehow that doesn’t come with as much baggage in this person’s mind.”

While White parents navigating the adoption marketplace may choose to apply these finely graded distinctions, it does not necessarily mean that the outside world will abide by the same logic. Parents may think they are getting a pass by adopting an honorary White child, or they may try to mitigate racial stigma by adopting a biracial or a foreign-born Black child, but race remains a master status no matter how much some people may want to wish away its power. Because so many prospective adoptive parents come to adoption with a color-blind frame of reference, adoption practitioners have their work cut out for them. Nicole details how she tries to prepare her clients for the road ahead: “I would say [to prospective parents] that nobody is going to look at them and say, ‘Look at this sweet Ethiopian child.’ I was like, ‘Your kid is Black and will be recognized and treated as such in the United States.’”

Despite some social workers’ best efforts to adequately prepare future transracial adoptive parents that their children will grow up to become persons of color, many acknowledged that they often fell short. Erin explains that many of her clients just want to adopt a baby and are not thinking about...
the future. She laments, “I don’t know how much this resonates with families. Because it is almost like tunnel vision. They just want a family; they just want to adopt a baby and they maybe can’t get to that level of thinking.”

Presumably, it is the responsibility of the adoption social worker to move prospective adoptive parents out of their tunnel vision toward a more nuanced level of thinking about the role of race in society. Yet as this chapter shows, many of the policies and practices employed by adoption providers do not just reflect the racial hierarchy; they also perpetuate it. This replication of the color line partially stems from the consumer model of private adoption. As Briggs argues, would-be parents intentionally seek out private adoption precisely because “they become more like consumers, seeking a child and then paying a fee.” Cognizant of their role, agencies and employees may be hesitant to set the bar higher and require additional time and money from applicants. Some workers were clearly worried about turning away potential customers or losing families to competitors. Nicole describes how supervisors at her previous agency discouraged her from mandating more rigorous training, rationalizing, “We really need these families.”

In the following chapter, I show how there are several missed opportunities for thoughtful and engaged dialogue regarding transracial adoptive parenting. I argue that the silence surrounding the responsibilities and implications of transracial adoption gets perceived as an implicit endorsement of color blindness. By diminishing and in some cases obliterating any discussion of racial difference, adoption workers send the message that race should not matter. Ironically, this color-evasive attitude starkly contradicts what I call the color-explicit descriptions that some practitioners use to describe available children. These mixed messages perpetuate a consumer approach to transracial adoption that ultimately undermines adoption workers’ goal of serving the best interests of children.