Post-Soviet Americans:

Familial and National Belonging for Russian Adoptees in the U.S.

A Dissertation

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Abstract

This dissertation focuses on the following research questions about Russian adoption in the U.S.: First, how do disputes to claim and care for children play out in national politics? Second, how do adoptive parents and adoptees do family across differences of age and national origin, particularly with older child adoptees? Finally, where and to whom do adoptees feel they belong? In Chapter 3, I demonstrate that the figure of the disabled or "special needs" Russian child as belonging in the U.S. appeared in both the U.S. and Russia press responses to the Dima Yakovlev Law banning adoptions to the U.S. Focusing on disabled children's supposedly happy lives served as a rallying cry to continue international adoptions. This focus on disabled children perpetuated an approach of being child-centered that was objectifying rather than inviting children and adoptees to participate in discussions and policy decisions affecting their lives. In Chapter 4, I highlight parents' experiences of adopting from Russia, analyzing how they give accounts (1) of the process of drawing boundaries around who now counts as family and (2) what activities the family shares as adoptive parents work to transform adoptees into American children and to do culture-keeping (or not) as a family now putatively Russian-American. I demonstrate the complexity in how adoptive families decide who counts as family in the cases in which adoptees have biological siblings. In Chapter 5, I forefront the stories of Russian adoptees on their own journeys and negotiations within U.S. families and highlight a counterhegemonic discourse of some adoptees' ambivalence in coming to the U.S. Adoptees may have been most familiar with and preferred communal living with children and caregivers who shared their culture and language. While their life chances may have been limited were they to have stayed in

institutional care and then aged out, childhood studies encourages taking seriously children's own perspectives. I suggest continuing to ask how adoptees can be invited to participate as decision-makers in their own lives, defining family, care, and belonging for themselves and having meaningful opportunities to connect with and critique their countries and cultures of origin and adoption.

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Ch. 1. Introduction

In August 2022, Russian lawmakers proposed banning the adoption of Russian children by citizens of "unfriendly countries" (Reuters 2022). (Reuters 2022). The rationale? In part, the bill read, "Sending our children to be raised in 'unfriendly countries' is a blow to the future of the nation." In the face of sanctions following its February invasion of Ukraine, Russia's list of unfriendly countries expanded to include much of the rich industrialized world: the United States, United Kingdom, European Union, Japan, and South Korea, while excluding Russia's strategic partners China and India. The proposed bill raised but did not answer questions about how children adopted internationally would figure into "the future of the [Russian] nation" if they would have become citizens of another country.

This dissertation, *Post-Soviet Americans*, is concerned with these geopolitical struggles over children who, in various renditions, are "ours" or "theirs." I focus on Russian children who have come to the U.S. and have been transformed into transnational adoptees. Who claims these children at different moments, to what ends, and with what implications in the lives of actual children and in the understanding of what constitutes a good childhood? In recent years, Russia and the U.S. have resumed clashing on the world stage to claim the mantle of humanitarianism, with particular attention to the fate of those considered to be the most vulnerable and symbolically significant: children. This struggle for moral supremacy plays out through arguments about how each country treats its people and has recurred over time, previously in the Cold War era between the Soviet Union and the U.S. and even earlier in the 19th century with American anxieties about tsarist Russia. As the proposed Russian bill regarding adoptions to

"unfriendly countries" highlights, this attention toward the treatment of children specifically is rooted in imaginings of the futures of these nation-states, both cultural and citizenship-based.

In December 2012, ten years before the proposed adoption ban to "unfriendly countries," and some twenty years after Russia began facilitating child adoptions to the United States, the U.S. Congress passed the Magnitsky Act. This legislation forbade a group of Russian decisionmakers who were connected to the death of an imprisoned Russian whistleblower, Sergei Magnitsky, from banking in or traveling to the United States. In this way, the U.S. symbolically punished what it framed as a human rights abuse with a legislative response that came years after Magnitsky's 2009 death. In response, the Russian parliament passed the Dima Yakovlev Law, named after a Russian adoptee who had died in the care of his American adoptive parents in 2008, also some years earlier. The Dima Yakovlev Law included an article banning pending and future adoptions of Russian children by U.S. citizens. This response to the Magnitsky Act was paired with claims from Russian government officials that the human rights abuses worth punishing and preventing were being perpetuated by American adoptive parents against Russian children. The Dima Yakovlev Law ended a twenty-year practice of Americans adopting children from the former Soviet superpower, with roughly 60,000 Russian children adopted to the U.S. by the end of the period. The adoption ban and the ensuing uncertainty about whether in-process adoptions could be completed provoked mixed reactions in Russia and public opposition in the U.S. from politicians, adoption advocates, and those in the midst of adopting.

This abrupt ending prompted me to investigate Russian adoption in the U.S. and its meaning for the two nation-states in the wake of the Cold War, as well as for the thousands of adoptees and adoptive parents who had become families through this process. Because I majored

in Russian language and studied young mothers' responses to Russia's pronatalist "maternal capital" policy on a post-baccalaureate Fulbright in 2008-2009, I decided to again use my language skills and cultural knowledge to analyze a different means of family formation, transnational adoption to the U.S. When I tell (other white) people in the U.S. about this research, often they respond with some variation on, "I know someone who adopted from Russia!" On the one hand, this familiarity is unremarkable, given that international adoptions were a common means of family formation in the 1990s, hitting all-time highs internationally and in the U.S. in the early 2000s (Selman 2009), and that transnational adoption in the U.S. has been primarily practiced by white Americans. On the other hand, people's awareness of Russian adoptees "among us" is revealing. It communicates that Russian adoptees have not been silently or invisibly incorporated into families, simply passing as white Americans and biologically related to their adoptive parents, as was typical for U.S.-born white children adopted in the early 20th century. That era of closed domestic adoptions meant that many adoptees themselves did not initially know they were adopted. This recognition of Russian adoptees and adoptive families with children from Russian has also been accompanied by certain understandings of Russianness and the meanings of adoption, which I explore throughout the dissertation.

In what follows, I illustrate the complexity of transnational adoption as practiced and perpetuated not solely by a sending country or a receiving country but by the interaction of the two countries' histories and cultural values. While some previous adoption scholarship has taken this transnational approach (Dorow 2006; Hubinette 2006; Kim 2010; Wang 2016; Yngvesson 2010), these studies largely focused on adoption to the U.S. from Asia. There is a need to continue doing the kind of analysis that keeps both the U.S. context and the sending country's

context in mind. By focusing on Russia, I add to the scholarship on the geopolitics of transnational adoption by analyzing a case in which the exchange of children was not between the U.S. and a country in Asia where there were histories of on-the-ground military involvement, as with Korea and Vietnam. Analyzing the case of adoption from Russia to the U.S. provides a contrast with adoption from China, prominently practiced in the same decades. Adoptions from Russia and China differed for a few key industry-based reasons, particularly the requirement that prospective adoptive parents get court approval to adopt a child from Russia. This meant that Russia's adoption industry was decentralized in comparison to China's, reliant on adoption-approving judges in various regions throughout the country. I demonstrate how interacting with the particulars of the Russian adoption industry shaped adoptive parents' experiences and perceptions of Russian culture writ large, their adopted child's culture of origin.

I argue that the geopolitical context of U.S.-Russian adoption is key to understanding it as a power struggle between nation-states claiming to provide identity, rights, and well-being for these children/adoptees. In *Post-Soviet Americans*, I focus on the following central research questions: First, how do disputes to claim and care for children play out in national politics? Second, within households, how do adoptive parents and adoptees do family across differences of age and national origin, particularly with older child adoptees? How do the adults who adopt become or gain legitimacy as parents in adoptees' eyes? Finally, how do adoptees themselves perceive these struggles over their rightful place—where and to whom do these children and young adults feel they belong?

CHAPTER OVERVIEWS

In Chapter 2, I situate this research within sociological, social scientific, and transdisciplinary work on ideologies of family and mothering and the history of child adoption, both domestic and transnational. I illuminate the tensions between different ways of being child-centered, from understandings of "the family" as incomplete without children and the child-saving perspectives that have driven adoption in the U.S. since the 1800s to the contemporary emphasis in childhood studies on considering and prioritizing children's right to participate in research and policy that shapes their lives. I use these literatures to consider how "the best interest of the child" has been conceptualized in a way that creates the conditions for the rise and fall of transnational adoption from Russia to the U.S. I also provide an overview of the data and methods I employ in the empirical chapters that follow.

In Chapter 3, "Only Americans Really Volunteer to Adopt Special Needs Children," I demonstrate that the press in both the U.S. and Russia responded to the Dima Yakovlev Law by providing a platform for pro-adoption actors who focus on the figure of the disabled or "special needs" Russian child as belonging in the U.S. The two decades of child adoptions from Russia to the U.S. had been accompanied by shifts between a politics of pity and a politics of consternation as questions arose about the fitness of formerly institutionalized children to be raised in family settings and the fitness of adoptive parents to provide healthy and loving environments for adoptees. But in the face of Russia's impending adoption moratorium, focusing on disabled children's supposedly happy lives served as a rallying cry to continue international adoptions. This focus on disabled children perpetuated an approach of being child-centered that was objectifying rather than inviting children and adoptees to participate in discussions and policy decisions affecting their lives. I explore the slippery uses of the term "special needs" in the

context of adoption discourse and across national borders and employ both childhood studies and disability studies perspectives to critique this objectifying move.

In Chapter 4, "Forming and Performing Family," I highlight parents' experiences of adopting from Russia, analyzing how they give accounts (1) of the process of drawing boundaries around who now counts as family and (2) what activities the family shares as adoptive parents work to transform adoptees into American children and to do culture-keeping (or not) as a family now putatively Russian-American. First, I demonstrate how this process of boundary drawing establishes adopters as parents, in ways that may be experienced either as effortless or cumbersome, as they gain legal permission and then self-recognition as parents, including a gendered experience of mothers being made and unmade as they grapple with the experience of parenting internationally adopted children in the context of the U.S.'s ideologies of intensive mothering. Second, I highlight the activities of family that make a child a child in the U.S., activities which parents talk about as developmentally appropriate and thus universal but can also be seen as socially constructed particular to middle-class childhoods in the contemporary U.S. Third, I demonstrate the complexity in how adoptive families decide who counts as family in the cases in which adoptees have biological siblings. I illustrate how siblings are counted in or out of their adoptive family, both legally and more informally. Finally, I argue that the limited culture-keeping adoptive parents engage in that stops short of return travel to Russia is in part facilitated by a particular narrative about the dangers of dual citizenship and the imagined threat of adoptee conscription. And for gay and lesbian parents who adopted as unmarried individuals, return travel is seen as additionally perilous because of the dissembling necessary to adopt as well as Russia's contemporary anti-gay laws.

In Chapter 5, "Bringing in Adoptee Voices," I forefront the stories of Russian adoptees themselves out of an ethical commitment to giving them the last word on their own migration journeys and negotiations within U.S. families. I highlight a counterhegemonic discourse, that of some adoptees' ambivalence in coming to the U.S., or simply the strangeness they experience of establishing familial relationships between unrelated adults and children who originate from different countries and speak different languages. Adoptees may have been most familiar with and even preferred communal living with other children and caregivers, people who shared their culture and language. While their life chances may have been limited were they to have stayed in institutional care and then aged out, employing a childhood studies perspective means taking seriously children both as human beings during childhood, as well as human "becomings" aiming toward adulthood. Attending to adoptees' ambivalence adds to childhood studies' emphasis on children's agency. My findings about adoptee ambivalence contribute to the literature by critical social scientists who find a disjuncture between adoptee experiences and adoptive family/nation's aspirations of easeful transition and connection. Adoptees spoke about a variety of settings in which they experienced loving relationships during their childhoods, indicating that a good childhood in their own estimation was possible not only in an adoptive family in the U.S. With this heterogeneity, I suggest continuing to ask how adoptees can be invited to participate as decision-makers in their own lives, defining family, care, and belonging for themselves and having meaningful opportunities to connect with as well as to critique their countries and cultures of both origin and adoption.

To this end, I conclude in Chapter 6 with a final challenge to the discourse of rescue and happiness as possible (only) through adoption to the U.S. My analysis of U.S.-Russian adoption

can help us understand not only how Russian adoptees can be meaningfully included in the U.S. nation, but how we value children in the U.S. more broadly. I close by reflecting on how U.S.-Russian adoption can help us rethink current contestations over the proper place and value of children, the primacy of "parents' rights," and discuss how this can lead those who want to be meaningfully "child-centered" to connect with visions of justice that prioritize interdependence.

Ch. 2. Literature & Methods

I argue that despite the diversity of family arrangements today, the American ideal of family continues to implicitly or explicitly center a white heteronormative model with children and the mother (and, to a lesser degree, the father) who raises them. I bring together various critiques of this model, including the idea that the instrumentalizing focus on children as central to families can be fruitfully rerouted to consider children as active subjects. This in turn suggests the necessity of listening to children's own evaluations of their experiences, especially important for adoptees who have long been objects of inquiry.

Legal adoption has been practiced by millions of American families, adding diversity to families and reflecting patterns of inequality and disadvantage as well as holding out the promise of innovation and resistance (Fisher 2003; Modell 2002). As a type of family created by law, these sorts of adoptive families make visible the social construction of family. They are an example of families created by contract and by choice, and thereby have lent themselves to thinking through what makes a group of individuals a family beyond the typically recognized blood ties (Fisher 2003:337).

Adoption is deserving of greater sociological scrutiny because of how its practice shapes and is shaped by issues of inequality and identification: the intertwining of race, class, gender, dis/ability, sexuality and, in the case of transnational adoption, nationality. Legal adoption is predicated on the practice of severing ties between birth mothers and children, separations which are shaped by patterns of undermining and questioning the parenting abilities and the very sanity of poor women and women of color, through such means as the twentieth-century use of the

capacious label "feebleminded" as a justification for coerced sterilizations (Carp 2000; Clare 2017; Finn 2009). Because racism and classism to a large extent determined which children (and families) would be associated with the sort of trouble that led to family separation, "the shadow side of 'progressive' calls for family preservation was the regulation of which families were worthy of preservation" (Finn 2009:50). Families deemed unworthy of preservation by state agents provided and continue to provide children for adoption (Roberts 2022). As such, studying legal adoption not only brings up issues of reproductive justice (Luna and Luker 2013) for birth mothers, it also requires examining late twentieth-century "queer liberalism" that extends the right to parent to single adults and same-sex couples (Eng 2010).

Keeping reproductive justice in mind means remaining aware that children who become transnational adoptees were somebody's children (in Laura Briggs' (2012) phrasing) before they were taken by the Russian state (Rockhill 2010) and then available to be claimed by American adoption agencies and prospective parents. But these "somebodies" to whom adoptees first belonged are often nobodies in their own societies, mothers who don't matter—women marginalized by social class, race/ethnicity, marital status, age, or their own or their child's perceived disability. The motherhood mandate I overview below, i.e., the enduring ideology that women should become mothers and make mothering their primary pursuit, excludes these women, who are not considered as capable of qualifying as good mothers.

Compounding birth mothers' devaluation within their own societies are the legacies of colonialism that facilitate the flow of children from poor or otherwise disadvantaged birth families in the global South to privileged families in the global North. These legacies position some countries as places where children are saved *to* and others as places from which children

need to be rescued *from*. As a result, children are made available to be adopted, thereby fulfilling American families' needs, and simultaneously providing poster children of post-war healing or multiculturalism or U.S. triumph in the Cold War and beyond.

IDEOLOGY ABOUT FAMILY AND CHILDREN

Bourdieu (1998) argues that family is a mental structure shared by people who have been similarly socialized, leading them to "recognize" family when they see something that matches their expectations. The idea of a traditional family comprising "two parents rearing their children" is relatively recent, having emerged in the Victorian era (Carp 2000; Coontz 1992; Gillis 1997; Shorter 1975).[1] Before the Victorian era, the majority of European and white American children and youth lived apart from their biological parents. They might have been sent out as apprentices to other households. Life expectancies were lower and maternal mortality rates were high. Therefore, children commonly lost one or both parents during their childhood or adolescence. So, while it may be true that families at this time were less likely to experience disruptions from divorce, it is inaccurate to assume that this meant that children grew up in stable, two parent—headed households.

Conceptions of children had to change, too, to bolster the ascendance of this model of family. As Philip Aries argued in his pivotal work, *Centuries of Childhood* (1965), childhood has not always been considered a life stage but instead became a period distinct from adulthood in modern Europe, thereby enabling the development of a sentimentalized view of the private sphere containing a nuclear family focused on childrearing. Once seen simply as adults in miniature, children began to be seen as occupying a separate place and time—"childhood"— which was imbued with ideas about children's innocence and need for nurturance. Children's

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[1] As family sociologist Andrew Cherlin (2012) points out, if the "traditional family" were understood as the family type that has predominated for the majority of human history, then the model would be of hunter gatherers, not middle-class Europeans and settler-colonial European or twentieth-century Americans.

newly perceived innocence and malleability (Carp 2000:8) meant that not only did childhood

exist in dialectic relation to adulthood, it was also useful in defining the family and the limits of

European and white American women's worlds as mothers. As feminist scholars have argued,

"the 'needs of the child' figure prominently as grounds for the bounded and naturalized domestic

space of modernity and for a marked sexual division of labor associated with differentiated

spheres of reproduction/consumption and production" (Stephens 1995:14). New expectations for

childhood meant new expectations for the family, i.e., specific ideals for *mothering*, buttressed

by the productive power supplied by *fathering*, understood as paid employment. Thus, the neat

ideological package of family-household containing parents (emphasis on mother) and children

could be created.

This vision of family life was meant to describe and circumscribe the lives of European,

white American, and colonial families. In part, it was meant to contain women and children in

the private sphere, while at the same time it held up this way of life as "civilized" in contrast to

the pejoratively labeled "primitive" habits of other cultures and communities with which colonial

ventures created contact (Stoler 2002). This juxtaposition is key when considering the meaning

of intimacy in transnational adoption.

In the twentieth century, the American ideal was the nuclear family, and its centrality was

reinforced by media. This ideal was of course not a ubiquitous lived experience, rooted as it was

in the geographically, racially, and class specific reality of the white, mostly middle-class

suburbs (Marchand 1945). As such, the nuclear family might be better thought of not as the

twentieth-century norm, but as "the postwar domestic stereotype" (Meyerowitz 1994:2). This

stereotype, which centered around white women as mothers and homemakers, was bolstered by

advertisers and women's magazines which reinforced the idea that women's work was within

their homes (Friedan 1963). Shows like *Leave It to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best* centered on

idealized families, and have become touchstones for nostalgia about the mythical "traditional

family" of mid-century (Coontz 1992). But as Coontz reminds us, "*Leave It to Beaver* was not a

documentary" (1992:29). The disconnect between these portrayals of family life and people's

experiences is highlighted by the fact that by the early 1960s, married women were a majority of

women who worked (Spigel 2013:33).

Nonetheless, the ideal family continues to be the cultural measuring stick against which

real families are measured and with which they are punished. It is the family formation most

often encoded in policy and thereby granted regulatory power. Jane Collier and Sylvia

Yanagisako (1987) argue that family is an ideology, since it prescribes how intimacy and

households ought to be arranged. The contemporary ideology of family is encapsulated in the

ideological code of the "standard North American family," or SNAF (Smith 1993). Smith

defines the SNAF as a household made up of a breadwinner-husband and his legal wife, a

woman who prioritizes "care of husband, household, and children" (1993:52), even if she works

for pay outside the home. Meadow and Stacey (2006) succinctly qualify the specificity of this

model, as well as its fantastical nature for many:

> Originating within the white middle class, this family structure came to represent
> modernity and normality. Yet it was not until the mid-20th century that a significant
> percentage of male workers could earn enough to sustain such a family, and it has
> always exceeded the reach of most African Americans and new immigrants (53).

Not only is this vision of traditional family historically specific, the authors point out, it is

also racialized—taken from white society and applied to immigrants arriving with different

familial arrangements, as well as African Americans who had been denied the right to marry, divorce, or keep their children with them in the era of enslavement. The ideological requirement that the husband be the breadwinner was systematically reinforced as a white privilege at various points in the twentieth century, since benefits granted to workers through the Social Security Act and the Wagner Act were not extended to farm or domestic work, sectors mostly made up of Black and brown workers (Lipsitz 2006:5). Finally, this vision of family is religiously particular, excluding the polygamy of Mormons and other groups.

Despite being unrealistic because of the class and racial status generally needed to attain and sustain it, this model of the family is undeniably central in the (white) middle-class imaginary. The trinity of breadwinner-homemaker-kids represents the belief in family as a "haven in a heartless world" (Lasch 1977), the sort of "families we live by," in the words of historian Paul Gillis (1997). These idealized families "must be forever nurturing and protective" (Gillis 1997:xv), in contrast to the families people live *with*, which can be fragmented and impermanent. Since the mid-twentieth century, the model family has been imagined to have children at its core (Gillis 1997:73; May 1997). "Conjugal families" were posited to be the household counterpart to urban industrial life after World War Two (Goode 1963). In the United States, the nuclear family took on special salience as a feature of "domestic containment" in the Cold War era (May 1988). Specifically, large, suburban families represented postwar regeneration and the vitality of the United States as a capitalist democracy vis-a-vis the Soviet Union's perceived denial of private space for families and domestic life.

PRACTICES OF CHILDBEARING AND CHILDREARING

In the midst of all this ideology, how has family formation, both in terms of having

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children and raising them, actually fit into people's lives? Paul Glick (1947, 1988) described a "family life cycle" that individuals in the twentieth-century United States were imagined to follow, "a linear progression from being single to getting married to having children to experiencing an empty nest and finally to death or widowhood" (Cherlin 2010:403). Childbearing and rearing represented the apex of the life course trajectory. In the twenty-first century, however, the chronology can easily be scrambled. While "[married] couple, two children" was still the top offering of "predefined families" in a 2011 interactive graphic on the *New York Times* Web site, selecting that option yielded the message, "These households were most likely to occur in 1960" and that only 7.25 percent of households match that description today (White et al. 2011). In other words, the cycle of family life is not neatly scripted; it can bring children first or exclude marriage completely (Edin and Kefalas 2005), and coupling can take the form of multiple partnerships, marriages or otherwise, and can involve raising children from different unions. Just as timing is more varied, so too is the geographic distribution of American families, no longer easily equated with single-country households. Families span the globe, as women from the global south are employed to do the work of social reproduction in the global north (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; MacDonald 2010; Parreñas 2005) or when children are sent abroad in the hopes of improving their life chances (Orellana et al. 2001).

It's important to note that Glick's life cycle model, like the ideology of the nuclear family, never applied to *all* families in the U.S. This neat progression did not necessarily fit the lived experience of the black women who cared for white children before immigrants took over (Collins 1994:51), the Asian American families separated by exclusionary immigration policies (Dill 1988), or the urban Black families portrayed in Carol Stack's ethnography of kin networks

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(1975), where the work of social reproduction and childrearing was shared across households. As with those whose lives Glick was intending to describe, childbearing and rearing were certainly important life events in these communities, too. However, childbearing and rearing did not necessarily take place within a single household or neatly bookended by marriage and an empty nest. Yet despite differing from white America's ideal, opening them up to longstanding accusations of pathology among black families, given voice by the Moynihan Report in 1965, these families cared for children in their own way.

Despite the contemporary variations in the timeline or household arrangements for love and marriage, Americans still expect the baby carriage as a sign denoting a family. The presence or possibility of children is what transforms a couple into a family in the public eye, as a representative survey of Americans reveals (Powell et al. 2010). The authors' Constructing the Family Surveys, fielded in 2003 and in 2006, involved more than 1,500 respondents overall. The surveys confirmed that the nuclear model of a legally unified, heterosexual pair with children— "husband, wife, children"—was universally accepted as a family. Likewise, the second and third most recognized forms of family are a single man or woman *with children*, with 94.2 and 94 percent recognition, respectively. The fourth most widely recognized family figuration— "husband, wife, no children"—has 93.1 percent of respondents classifying it as a family, seeming to contradict the idea that recognition as a family relies on the presence of children. This seems at first glance to refute the centrality of children to defining the family as a social unit. However, the survey creators argue that respondents were likely operating on the assumption that children would soon follow the marriage (Powell et al. 2010:20), in keeping with Glick's classic model of the family life cycle. That is, they assumed the couple would only be

temporarily childless. The presence of a legal bond between husband and wife signaled an intention to make a lasting commitment, so that reasoning goes, allowing people to envision the couple as on the cusp of childbearing. This argument is convincing in light of the fact that the next adults-only grouping to qualify as a family, the "unmarried man, woman, no children," was deemed a family by only a third of respondents.[2] The successful rallying cry as same-sex marriage was nationally legalized in the U.S. may have been "love makes a family," but this survey suggests that kids continue to be key in qualifying as a family in society's eyes. Thus, one of the reasons childless couples may adopt is to be recognized as a family.

CONTEMPORARY IDEOLOGIES AND PRACTICES OF MOTHERHOOD

The enduring centrality of children in family gives a partial answer to why people become parents. But to provide a better understanding of the gendered dynamics of having children, which I argue is central to creating the desire and justification for adoption, I highlight the work of mothering that is done within a family. As the above models of ideal family demonstrate, the ideal mother is a homemaker, an emotional supporter of her husband, and the main caregiver for her children. The ideal mother is the primary keeper of rituals that represent the "families we live by" (Gillis 1997). The idealization of the mother figures grows stronger today, argues Arlie Hochschild, made more powerful by its nostalgic associations with "the family farm, local community, or even whole extended family" (Hochschild 2003:4) and the supposed bygone golden era of family (Coontz 1992). Symbolized in such a way, a mother is expected to provide all of the emotional satisfaction that these multiple institutions were imagined to provide. Pushing beyond the vision of American motherhood invoked by Hochschild, the "white mother" figure has also played an important role in establishing,

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[2] Same-sex couples garnered even less recognition as families. However, this survey preceded the widespread legalization of same-sex marriage in U.S. states (Hull 2014), which would add more possible family formations to this list and ostensibly attract more recognition of childless same-sex couples if they were legally married.

justifying, and symbolizing the preservation of European identity in the colonies (Stoler 2002), American hegemony in the Cold War era (Klein 2003), and child welfare interventions into Black families (Roberts 2001:172). Motherhood ideologies provide a template for how all women should behave and what enjoyment they should expect from raising children. Women can accept, refashion or reject these ideologies, but as research on mothers and non-mothers alike demonstrates, these ideologies are impossible to ignore.

How are women expected to enact this idealized role? Many scholars have discussed the ideologies of motherhood that shape women's lives, especially as they conflict with contemporary expectations that women will at the same time be dedicated employees. These expectations of "work-family balance" are fashioned around ideas of middle-class mothers, typically white. According to Hays (1996), contemporary American women face a conundrum: are they to spend their time in the home or out? Hays questions why a society that has come to celebrate high salaries, prestigious careers, and individualism for women as well as for men then simultaneously requires that mothers give children constant, intense and emotionally-taxing supervision. Women are caught in a double bind, since both paid employment and childrearing in this equation are "greedy institutions," demanding women's full time and energy to be done well. Hays argues that this dominant ideology of socially appropriate childrearing is a contemporary social construction and that in fact earlier norms of childrearing were less child-centric. Time-use data confirms this paradox: working mothers now spend just as much time with their children as before (Bianchi et al. 2000)—if not *more* (Sayer, Bianchi, and Robinson 2004)—because they have sacrificed time to themselves or with their partners. The contemporary motherhood paradigm is one of *intensive mothering*—childrearing that is "child-centered, expert-guided,

emotionally absorbing, labor- intensive, and financially expensive" (Hays 1996:129). The ideology compels women to choose between careers and motherhood; there is not time enough in the day to do both. This self-sacrificing, other-centered ideology of mothering constructs and is constructed by the "traditional" gender-based division of labor but when enacted; however, as Hays argues, it has the potential to simultaneously serve as a form of resistance to the individualistic myopic focus on career inspired by contemporary capitalism.

In the same vein, Douglas and Michaels (Douglas and Michaels 2005) (2004) refer to the ideology of intensive mothering as "new momism." They describe the three features of this ideology: 1) motherhood completes a woman; 2) mothers are a child's best caretakers; and 3) mothers devote themselves fully to their children —physically, emotionally, and psychologically. In this formulation, a woman's self-definition depends on raising a child, providing care singlehandedly and with singular focus. This ideology is restrictive for the women meant to be its target — women with the material, emotional, social, and psychological resources to live up to it, though these women may reject or refashion this approach to motherhood. However, more important for my focus on adoption is that this belief that mothers are the best caregivers for children is an ideology that can also justify as well as drive approval of domestic and transnational adoption, imagined as the act of removing a child from an institution where s/he is "languishing" without loving care, or from birth mothers who do not, or cannot, conform to the tenets of new momism. The ideology excludes women who share caregiving with other relatives or community members.

Similarly, the "family devotion schema" laid out by Blair-Loy (2003), enumerates the

expectations of mothers. This schema clashes with the "work devotion schema," which middle-class women are also expected to adhere to. Family devotion, in Blair-Loy's formulation, involves a wife subordinated to a husband, so that the husband can commit himself to paid work; considers homemaking a calling, in the Weberian sense; locates meaning in "time-intensive, emotionally absorbing care for child(ren) [who are] defined as vulnerable and sacred" (Blair-Loy 2003:6), thereby centering children at once as a defining ingredient of family and of womanhood; and promises women "fulfillment, meaning, creativity, intimacy, secure livelihood, [and] community with other mothers" through committing themselves to this work (Blair-Loy 2003:6). The power of this list of roles and responsibilities, as well as the seductive array of rewards assumed to follow their proper fulfillment, is apparent in that it operates even for the white women in Blair-Loy's study who have achieved success in their careers. These women must choose whether to pursue success according to both schemas, splitting their energy between paid work and childrearing, or whether to forgo one in favor of the other: to pursue career success at the cost of becoming a parent or parenting at the cost of finding individual satisfaction in their career competence. But if children are present, the devoted mother figure is expected to anchor the family. While women's lived experience suggests the strains inherent in these clashing demands, Blair-Loy's choice of framing—devotions—captures the appeal of the gendered sense of self promised through commitment to this schema. Extending Blair-Loy's idea to non-mothers, it is this promise of fulfillment that compels many who face infertility not to resign themselves to fate, but to seek alternate means of family formation, including adoption.

While all of these formulations focus on the gendered aspect of parenting expectations, it

is important not to lose sight of the class dimensions. Researchers argue that child-rearing is differentiated by class, and the "devotion to family" schema is no exception. Providing care that is "time-intensive" and "emotionally absorbing" is a privilege in the neoliberal United States, where care responsibilities are minimally supported by the state. An example of how working-class mothers may successfully adhere to this ideology is instructive: while they are unable to completely opt out of paid employment, they creatively solve this problem by taking in foster children, thereby still adhering to the family ideal even as they provide their families with much-needed income (Swartz 2005:97). In other situations, such as the aforementioned mothers employed transnationally as domestic workers and thereby separated from their children, at least by the workday (for children in the States with them) if not by national boundaries (for children left behind with other family members), these women must refigure what defines family and mothering. They emphasize not physical presence, then, but financial and emotional support, maintaining a mother-centered vision of family even as it operates long-distance (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997).

Yet another possibility for working-class or poor mothers is to practice a different kind of parenting, natural growth (Lareau 2011), letting children play often unsupervised and interact minimally with professionals.[3] Lareau argues that there are costs to this model of mothering/parenting, in that it does not equip these children with the same cultural capital and the ability to negotiate with professionals as their middle-class peers. In contrast, the intensive grooming of middle-class children is privatized, as their "gifts" are fostered and they are taught to relate to professionals with self-assurance and a belief in their right to get their way This is well-documented as a task falling to middle-class mothers who attempt to arrange their lives

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[3] Other scholars have questioned whether Lareau accurately captures poor and working-class parenting strategies (see for example, (Chin and Phillips 2004) and critiqued its denial of the centrality of race and racism to parenting approaches (Manning 2019)).

according to the belief that children need their mother's attention above all others (Lareau 2011). This demanding childrearing ideology conflicts with the equally "greedy institution" of work (Hays 1996), creating internal turmoil for women no matter which of the two "competing devotions" of paid work or home life they prioritize (Blair-Loy 2003). For those women with demanding work schedules who have the means to hire help, they employ "shadow mothers" to care for their children in their younger years so that the socialization of their children is still carried out according to their wishes (MacDonald 2010). Yet they too eventually shoulder the work of childrearing, fearing that the cultural capital they possess (and care workers lack) will otherwise not be passed on to their children.

Women themselves confirm that these ideologies are ubiquitous and impossible to measure up to. Warner (2006) referred to this ideology as the 'mommy mystique,' highlighting how meeting the demands of 'good mothering' takes an emotional toll on women. On the one hand, the women in the study acknowledge the impossibility of mothering in a way that meets implicit standards, but also, as Warner observes, continue to feel imperfect for their supposed shortcomings in parenting. In other words, the mothers did not see their goals of perfect motherhood as unreasonable and therefore something to be challenged.

In the above section, I have given an overview the ideal family, whether referred to as SNAF, families we live by, or the traditional family. Despite variations, it centers on children and often still invokes women/mothers as essential players in the private sphere. Yet this model is ill fit to lived experience, whether the model is considered outdated, heteronormative, or specified to white experience. Herein lies the potential for challenge and change. As Holstein and

Gubrium (1999) explain the socially constructed family, there is a dialectical relationship between cultural forms of family and lived practice. In other words, "local cultures of domesticity"—what Durkheim referred to as *collective representations*—"convey relatively stable and distinct ways of conceptualizing family, posing delimited conditions of interpretation that are, in turn, subject to interpretive practice" (Holstein and Gubrium 1999:8). The mainstream American view takes family as necessarily containing children, often idealizing women's roles in raising those children, the norm against which other families are measured. Yet "interpretive practice" is also able to challenge and reshape such norms. Below, I consider one exemplary challenge to this kind of child-centrism, a child-centricity that emphasizes children's perspectives and agency.

NONCONFORMITY AND RESISTANCE

In addition to the conventional understanding of the U.S. family as child-centric, in this section I draw on the new childhood studies to suggest that the family could be understood as child-centered in a very different way by shifting the focus to *children's views* of their place in families and society.

New childhood studies scholars attend to historical and geographical variation in what it means to be a child or have a childhood, as well as to children's agency in responding to socially constructed childhood (Cook 2002; James and James 2008; Qvortrup 2005; Stephens 1995; Wells 2009; Zelizer 1985). This scholarship rejects the flattening of such a diverse group into a single entity, "the child," arguing that children vary in age divisions, as well as along the same dimensions as adults do (race, class, gender, nationality, etc.). It also rejects the hegemonic idea that childhood is nothing more than "a prelude to adulthood" (Cook 2002:1). The hegemonic

understanding of children instrumentalizes them, making them available as "cultural resource[s]" for adults' projects (Castañeda 2002:1). In the twentieth century U.S., children served as the centerpieces of postwar domesticity and the rightful recipients of maternal attention—the core of the nuclear family (Stephens 1997). These ideas about children as people-in-progress are evident today in common slogans:

> Colloquial expressions such as 'children are the future of society,' 'children are the next generation' and 'children are our most precious resource' tend to deprive them of an existence as human beings in favor of an image of them as human becomings, thus underlining the suggestion that children are not authentic contemporaries of adults (Qvortrup 2005:5).

Rejecting this restriction of children to symbols or humans-in-waiting, childhood studies scholars recognize that, like adults, children have agency. This perspective was long absent in sociology in ways similar to—but not exactly the same as—how women's agency was overlooked by male scholars (Thorne 1987). In this new approach, children are recognized as subjects of historical and social scientific inquiry, since they too "are implicated in and affected by the political, social, and economic arrangements and relations that shape their families and communities, the institutions in which they participate, and the media which they consume and create" (Finn, Nybell, and Shook 2010:248). And just as feminist research on women necessitated a focus on women's relationship to men, so too does childhood studies precipitate an understanding of childhood as "a relational category that [requires] an understanding of the expectations of adulthood" (Wells 2009:6). This is why I have emphasized the expectations for establishing heteronormative families and mothers in U.S. society as crucial context for understanding how children and adoptees are represented, and why I suggest that children's

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rejection or reshaping of these representations is an important area of inquiry.

Childhood studies does not suggest that children are completely independent actors, however. Children's movement through childhood is a task accomplished by children and adults/parents together, requiring both parties' participation. This cooperation is reflected in the complimentarily of the ideas of children simultaneously "growing up" and "being raised" (Orellana et al. 2001:578; Thorne 2001). But as Thorne is careful to concede in her discussions of children's agency, there is variation among children in their need for adult care, as well as general differences in children's independence and ability to assert themselves depending on various factors, including but not reducible to age. Childhood is a catchall that invokes a variety of ages in its common usage, from infancy, toddlerhood, and preschool age (3-5 years old) to middle childhood (6-12 years old) and adolescence. Nonetheless, scholars have begun to turn to children as respondents, validating their ability to offer their own views of their futures and pasts (James 2005). With this turn, there are new opportunities to seek out children's perspectives.

Also useful is queer theory's call to reject the fixation on "the child" within heteronormative society (Edelman 1998, 2004). Instead of unreflexively revering children as central to families and society at large, this line of thinking challenges how children are used symbolically *against* certain populations in order to exclude these groups from "proper" society and along with that, discounting them as unfit and unworthy of parenting. Edelman (1998) issues a rallying cry for the queer community to reject settling for the seduction of what Ferguson (2005) terms homonormativity, i.e., inclusion in normative American institutions such as the family (with children) and the military. Instead of going to extreme ends to marry or have children and being satisfied that by achieving these domestic ends, all is well, Edelman invites

queers to publicly question the race to achieve a normative family in a society that has preemptively disqualified them. Edelman highlights how children's cultural reduction to passive recipients of socialization, to adults-in-waiting, was exploited in the anti-gay crusade, which used "the future […] as its prop" to castigate and exclude the queer community. Queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz challenges Edelman's nihilism, agreeing with the turn away from "mere inclusion in a corrupt and bankrupt social order," but instead insisting that "we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds" (2009:1). Here, I suggest that Muñoz's queer vision of dreaming and enacting utopias, as with Rebecca Solnit's conception of hope as requiring engagement to work toward a better future (2016) or abolitionist Mariame Kaba's catchphrase "hope is a discipline" (2021), can include children as *participants*, particularly queer children and youth (Jaffe 2018; Thoreson 2015). Centering children need not be left to adults instrumentalizing or weaponizing them, but instead can be inviting them to be co-creators of ways of being and co-conspirators in counterhegemonic world-making.

Thus, as empirical scholarship and theory suggest, the imperative for children to be at the center of the contemporary family, nurtured primarily by mothers, is strong. But is it not totalizing; nor is it universally embraced. It is a pervasive ideal, but one soundly critiqued as having its foundation in white, middle-class, heterosexual ideals and experience. This hegemonic vision of family has in turn been used to justify stripping foreign mothers of their claim to the children they have birthed, so that Western women/couples who fit familial ideals, encoded in adoption requirements, may stake their claims to offering these children "proper" childhoods.

Next, I examine how legal adoption in the United States has allowed the involuntarily

childless[4] to create a contingently acceptable family in a culture that prizes biological connection as the basis for families.

ADOPTION AND BIOCENTRISM IN U.S. FAMILY FORMATION

Adoption is defined as the practice of adults who are not a child's biological parents raising a child as a member of their family, in an arrangement that society acknowledges as a family (Howell 2009:150). Some of the reasons for adoption throughout history that anthropologists and historians have identified are

> to provide childless couples with social progeny and heirs to their property, to facilitate relations between groups, to provide men with more children in order to increase their number of networks, and to assist with the workload in the household, farm, workshop (Howell 2009:153).

Carp (1998), writing about the contemporary United States, defines legal adoption as "the method of establishing by law the social relationship of parent and child between individuals who are not each other's biological parent or child" (3), adding to Howell's definition by emphasizing the legal establishment of a specifically *parent*-child relationship between the child and the adult undertaking the legal adoption, i.e., the adoptive or social parent.

Adoption and foster care in the United States have served many of the purposes highlighted by Howell over time, including children as manual laborers. In colonial and Victorian-era United States, foster children were expected to work, as were biological children. In the mid-nineteenth century, the New York Children's Aid Society initiated one of the first large-scale fostering operations. The organization rounded up poor and immigrant children to send them out West on so-called orphan trains. By the organization's own calculations, nearly half of these children had parents, but these adults were disqualified from keeping their children

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[4] Understood as opposite-sex couples with fertility issues, same-sex couples or single individuals, the involuntarily childless are the primary practitioners of adoption. A much small percentage of adopters already have biological children.

because they were perceived as "poor and degraded" (Carp 1998:9). Philanthropists believed that discipline and moral guidance would turn the children of the poor into proper citizens, so they promoted the removal of poor children from poorhouses and separation from their families (Holloran 1989). In addition, these poor children and youth were seen as a threat to the innocence of middle-class children (Kett 1972, Griffin 1993, 2001), and thus their removal from the city was supported. As a result, nearly 200,000 children were shipped to farms out West between 1850 and 1929 (Nebraska State Historical Society). They were expected to work, and it was hoped that the families they worked for would eventually adopt them. In this system, older boys were the most prized as potential farm workers, a reversal of them being the most feared as dangerous and deviant influences in the city because of their age, gender, and impoverished/immigrant status. Orphaned and abandoned infants were seen as an undesirable burden, because they represented another mouth to feed and were stained by stigma if they had been conceived outside of marriage (Zelizer 2011:62).

It was also in this period that the first adoption laws began to appear. Adoption's legal regulation in the United States began in 1851, when Massachusetts passed the first modern adoption law. This shifted the understanding of adoption's purpose from offering any of the array of benefits to adults outlined above, instead codifying the practice as a means of ensuring "child welfare." Thus, the intended beneficiary of adoption was not supposed to be the adult adopter, say, gaining an extra worker, but the child adoptee. The exact definition of children's welfare was left to interpretation by the judiciary, but it was based on the stipulation that the married couple doing the adopting were "of sufficient ability to bring up the child, and furnish suitable nurture and education[5]" (Massachusetts 1851).

[5] Likely because of this concern for financial support, the law also allowed adoptions by single men, but not by single women, the inverse of adoption as it is practiced today.

Domestic adoption as an institutionalized and widespread legal practice did not take root

until the turn of the twentieth century during the Progressive Era, a considerable lag after the

Massachusetts law. The rise of adoption depended on the reform work of elite educated women

that targeted child welfare, an effort formalized in 1912 with the founding of the U.S. Children's

Bureau. Reformers criticized and dismantled the orphanages which had flourished in the mid-

nineteenth century (Carp 1998:8), instead placing children in foster care. Finally, they

established adoption in the 1920s and 1930s. (Melosh 2002:3). Reformers referred to the family

as "God's orphanage." In this earlier era, formally facilitated legal adoption was a privilege

reserved for white adoptive parents (Billingsley and Giovannoni 1972).

Only in the later nineteenth century and early twentieth century did "the sacralization of

children" take place with children becoming economically worthless but emotionally priceless

(Zelizer 2011:43). Children moved from spending most of their time contributing to labor in the

family farm fields to studying in the classroom; as a result, the category of "school children"

emerged in the late nineteenth century (James and James 2004:21). Along with this sacralization

of children, the value of (illegitimate) infants available for adoption went from negative to

positive by the 1920s and 1930s (Zelizer 2011:61). Thus, in the twentieth century, children were

selected for adoption on the grounds of their emotional appeal rather than their physical strength.

No longer was a strong, able-bodied young man the most in-demand youth for fostering. In the

twentieth century, white infant girls came to be the most desirable commodities in the

marketplace of adoption, believed to be innocent, malleable, and worthy of the emotional

investment involuntarily childless middle-class couples were prepared to make in them. Yet the

eagerness to adopt was tempered by American understandings of kinship that led to the matching

of children and potential parents as late as the 1950s according to physical resemblance, ethnicity, religion, and even supposed intellectual potential (Gill 2002). The ideal adopters were infertile, a status which was sometimes verified by testing before adoption was approved, and they displayed traditional gender roles in their marriages (Herman 2008). Thus, the emotional investment in adoptees also came at a cost to adoptive parents, since forming a family through stranger adoption exposed the intimate lives of potential adoptive parents to the scrutiny of experts, such as social workers and doctors, which was a disruption for people who typically had the privilege of considering their family lives private. But adherence to normative models of family has been a powerful motivator. While psychological thinking has infiltrated the family through childrearing manuals and the like, inspiring self-disciplining family members (Rose 1999), the process of gaining approval to adopt continues to be a more overt experience of discipline. It is followed by interactions with society that reveal an ongoing ambivalence about adoption (Carp 1998:2); half of respondents in a 1997 poll agreed that adoption is "not quite as good as having your own" (Fisher 2003:352). And among 876 women without children, only 12 percent were actively considering adoption (Park and Wonch Hill 2014), according to 2004-2007 data from the National Survey of Fertility Barriers, a nationwide survey of 4,792 women of childbearing age.

This judgment of adoptive families as second-best is rooted in the biological bias in the American conception of family or kinship. This conflation of the biological and social aspects of parenting is not universal, as numerous anthropological studies demonstrate (Howell 2009). But whites in both North America and Europe conceive of kinship in biogenetic terms. This uniquely Western emphasis on biological relatedness as the basis for defining family was highlighted by

Schneider (1968), who theorized Euro-American kinship as centralizing "the blood relationship, the fact of shared biogenetic substance" (107). It follows from this "biocentrism" (Howell 2009) that the dominant cultural belief in the U.S. is that parenting involves the same actors in both childbearing and childrearing (Kirk 1964). When child socialization is performed by the same people who contributed genetic material to the child, this is then taken as the natural and therefore optimal arrangement. Consequently, the language of "mother" and "father" conveys a connection created both biologically and socially. This explains the old language of adoption which contrasted "natural" parents with adoptive parents, as stated in the 1851 Massachusetts statue and elsewhere. This language thereby implied that adoptive parents' relationship to the child they were raising was *un*natural. Today, stranger adoption is joined by other newer formers of kinship created through the use of assisted reproductive technologies, so that there are a number of ways of forming families that make plain the difference between biological and social relatedness, parenting, and family construction (Logan 2013:36). However, as I discuss with suspicions surrounding African American and Eastern European adoptees, blood ties have not totally loosened their hold in the American imagination as the foundation for family, especially with the potentially still-treacherous crossings of racial and national lines.

And any eagerness to adopt was also tempered by the moral taint that accompanied assumed-to-be-illegitimate children (Carp 1998:17). Part of this was a medicalized discourse of "feeblemindedness," which questioned the mental soundness of women who had children out of wedlock and posited that this condition was heritable. Thus, "[a]dopted children were thus burdened with a double stigma: they were assumed to be illegitimate and thus tainted medically and they were lacking the all-important blood link to their adoptive parents" (Carp 1998:18).

This created a paradox: while orphans and adoptees could be seen as doubly tainted, white middle-class Americans were arguably doubly *served* by adoption's institutionalization in the twentieth century. On one side, adoption served middle-class Americans (women) who were the social workers cementing their professional prestige through adoption's governance (Kunzel 1995); on the other side, infertile white middle-class couples benefited from adoption's ability to grant them the normative status of parents. As Brian Paul Gill writes, "Adoption agencies at mid-century are perhaps best understood as guardians of a conventional (white middle-class) definition of family against the threat that was implicit in the legal creation of unnatural [*sic*] kinship" (2002:174). Since non-biological kinship was suspect, agencies prioritized creating families that were normative by all other accounts—race, sexuality, class, gender roles, etc. Other work confirms that in the post-World War Two period, the majority of adopters were white, suburban, opposite-sex married couples who owned their homes (Leon-Guerrero and Carp 2002), with the "complete sentimentalization of adoption" leading to the social inclusion of their families (212). The height of popularity for domestic adoption began in the 1940s and peaked in the 1950s and 1960s, when the familial ideologies were strongest amidst the Baby Boom and era of domestic containment (May 1988, 1995). Drawing on May's work, Carp (1998) attributes the increased interest in adoption to "wartime prosperity, a postwar pronatalist climate of opinion, and medical advances in infertility diagnosis" (29). At this time, adoption was portrayed as a win-win solution to young women's nonmarital pregnancies at the same time it could provide infertile couples with children. It was to eliminate the stigma of single motherhood for the birth mothers and the stigma of childlessness for the couples. However, more recent scholarship has challenged such a sanguine interpretation of that era for the gendered and raced inequalities it

belies. During the "adoption mandate years" of 1945-1970, according to historian Rickie Solinger (2000), maternity homes housed primarily white women and placed their babies with white couples. But rather than celebrating separation from their children as a "freeing" solution to a problem, the women who went through these maternity homes report coerced relinquishments and resulting anguish, especially during the era of closed adoptions, which prevented birth mothers from having any contact with their children after relinquishment (Edwards 1999; Fessler 2006).

Further, because of the exclusivity of these maternity homes as transferring children from white women to white couples, they served to bolster the image of whites as having tidy, intact nuclear families while denying any such support, ambivalently accepted as it was, to women of color. Thus, this practice reinforced the fiction of white families, allowing white birth mothers to go on to marry and have "legitimate" children later and granting childless white couples the opportunity to rear children. It also fed into the public image of women of color as the primary— and problematic—practitioners of nonmarital births. This stereotype, fed by fears of a "culture of poverty" and the language of the "pathological" black, female-headed households inadvertently popularized by the 1965 Moynihan Report, lives on today (Abramovitz 1988; Bridges 2011; Hays 2003). The pathologizing of black mothers and families trickled down to delegitimize black children, too: "Growing preoccupation in the 1960s regarding the 'culture of poverty' and the 'pathology' of the black, female-headed family served to further racialize constructions of at-risk children and risky youth" (Finn 2009:53). The fear of black mothers also attaches itself to representations of black birth mothers as likely to attempt to reclaim children (see discussion of the film *Losing Isaiah* in Perry 1998).

The racial exclusivity of legal adoption changed in the second half of the twentieth century, alternately attributed to positive postwar developments or as following the legalization of abortion in *Roe v. Wade*. According to Carp, World War Two inspired adoption practitioners to offer their services to more than just young, white, abled children as well as to non-white adoptive parents because of a newfound "deep humanitarianism, […] demographic shifts in population as over one million African Americans moved out of the South to Northern and Western cities, and a consequent liberalization of race relations" (Carp 1998:32). Alternately, feminist scholars argue that *Roe v. Wade* allowed white women to opt for abortions instead of nonmarital pregnancies (Solinger 2002), creating a "white baby famine" (Ortiz and Briggs 2003) that left potential adopters with fewer opportunities to quickly adopt healthy white infants, leading them to accept nonwhite infants and older children. But transracial adoption became controversial thanks to its historical connection to the control and forced assimilation of non-white populations such as through the American Indian boarding schools, with the Indian Child Welfare Act outlawing the adoption of Native American children by outsiders and the National Association of Black Social Workers issuing a statement against the adoption of black children by white parents (Briggs 2012).

Yet because of the growth of the number of children in foster care in the 1980s, the right to adopt was extended to even more potential parents. In this period, "[t]he concept of a so-called suitable family expanded to include single parents, grandparents, parents of different ethnicities, lower-income families, and, since the 1990s in many states, lesbians and gay men (Esposito & Biafora 2007)" (Moore and Stambolis-Ruhstorfer 2013:496).[6] On the other hand, Ortiz and Briggs (2003) discuss the policing of black women's drug use that led to the proliferation of

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[6] However, concerning the agreements governing *international* adoption, no sending country sanctions the international adoption of children by same-sex couples (Howell 2009).

supposed "crack babies" taken into foster care in the 1980s, a now-debunked belief that long-term damage to children was traceable to pregnant women's use of crack cocaine (Chavkin 2001). In the U.S., the disenfranchisement of birth mothers was codified by the Multiethnic Placement Act of 1994, which prioritizes severing birth parents' legal claims to their children and streamlining the adoption process (Briggs 2012). Dorothy Roberts (2002, 2022) questions the racist logic behind the punitive approach to pregnant black women during this period as well as the fact that black children have continued to be disproportionately removed from their families and put into foster care (Knott and Donovan 2010).

All of these developments in adoption mean that there is disagreement over whether it can be unequivocally celebrated for contributing to a growing "transparency in family makeup" (Brian 2012:5) as biological and social parenting have been visibly uncoupled through transracial adoption, the inclusion of older children in families, and LGBT adoption. Playing with the LGBT movement's language of coming out, anthropologist Judith Schachter Modell argues emphatically that adoption is "*out*" and "struts boldly across the stage of American culture" (2002:1), no longer bound to secrecy by the stigmatizing of nonbiological bonds formerly dismissed as unnatural. And as historian Julie Berebitsky writes, "By sanctioning the creation of families across the boundaries of race and sexuality, [adoption could] stretch or even shatter the conventional model of the racially homogeneous and heterosexual nuclear unit" (2000:176). With adoption, more individuals and couples can parent and become families in the eyes of their fellow Americans through transracial adoption and adoption by same-sex couples. But despite the growth of transnational and transracial adoption in the latter half of the twentieth century, contemporary surveys demonstrate that opposite-sex couples still prioritize biological

reproduction. While some couples or individuals do report that they decide to adopt out of altruism, adoption generally serves as a back-up plan when biological reproduction is unattainable. Fifteen percent of women treated for infertility had sought to adopt, compared to 3 percent of women who hadn't, according to data from the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth (Hollingsworth 2000). Another study drew on data from adoptive parents in California, finding that nearly three-quarters reported deciding to adopt because they had not been able to have a biological child (Berry, Barth, and Needell 1996). In a more recent study looking at gay and lesbian as well as heterosexual adoptive parents in the United Kingdom, infertility was more likely to be a motivating factor for heterosexual couples than for same-sex couples, who preferred adoption over other alternatives to becoming parents such as assisted reproductive technology, surrogacy, etc., that could have granted some biological ties to the resulting children (Jennings et al. 2014), though technology in this arena is creating an ever-shifting landscape of options (Inhorn 2020).

Anthropologist Kristi Brian agrees with the positive evaluations of adoption's newfound inclusiveness, initially: "While some adopters still prefer racially or ethnically matched adoptions, families participating in any form of transracial adoption […] forfeit the possibility of hiding the 'multiracial' status of their families, which many are happy to do" (2012:5). But Brian suggests that in our present colorblind era, it is necessary to probe even more deeply, by asking "how genuinely open are adoptive families to learning about the birth origins" of the children they have adopted, or how open birth and adoptive families are "to the idea of kinship networks as opposed to nuclear families?" (Brian 2012:6). The answer to these questions for families adopting transracially and transnationally often reveals a more complicated picture than adoption

an unproblematic example of family diversity, as posited by Berebitsky or Modell, and instead highlight the intransigence of the white heteronormative family ideal and the colorblindness that denies the salience of racialization and race-based discrimination against adoptees.

SOCIAL SCIENCE DISCOURSES ABOUT ADOPTION

Seeking to determine the "success" of adoption, psychologists, social workers, and quantitative sociologists in the twentieth century began to study adoptee well-being—how adoptees adjust, and whether there are negative effects of adoption. They have focused on issues surrounding identity, traditionally defined as a "sense of psychological well-being, a feeling of being at home in one's body, of knowing where one is going, of inner assuredness of anticipated recognition from those who count" (Erikson 1968:165). Social scientists hypothesized that feelings of "being at home" or belonging would necessarily be more complicated for adoptees than for others, an assumption that some have come to question.

There is a sizable body of scholarship that finds that adoptees fare worse than their peers raised in intact biological homes (Brodzinsky, Schechter, and Henig 1993; Sharma, McGue, and Benson 1996). Used as evidence of this is the fact that adoptees are overrepresented in clinical populations and that they have more reports of behavioral and school-related problems, though the differences between adoptees and non-adoptees are small (Wierzbicki 1993:447). The causes of adoptees' problems are variously attributed to relinquishment, implicating underlying family problems (Smith, Howard, and Monroe 2000:558) as well as birth mothers' behavior while pregnant (Yates et al. 1998); inherited genetic disorders, such as schizophrenia (Wierzbicki 1993); pre-adoption abuse (Verhulst 2000:36); or institutionalization (Frank et al. 1996).

Challenging this view that adoptees have more psychological and behavioral problems,

Brand and Brinich (1999) found in a nationally representative study that the difference between adopted and non-adopted youth on measures of behavioral, emotional, and academic adjustment was attributed to a minority of adoptees who had severe problems, according to their parents. In other words, the study found that most adoptees do *not* have more serious problems than non-adoptees, thereby challenging the belief that adoption is inherently damaging to children or that adoptees as a group are "damaged." Another study drew on survey data from adoptees and non-adoptees as youth (14-21 years old) and then again as adults (23-30 years old) and found that the negative behaviors and attitudes reported at higher rates among adoptees at the younger ages disappeared in adulthood (Feigelman 1997).

In contrast to studies that set adoptees apart from others, and instead of concluding that adoptees have unusual struggles with identity formation, Brodzinsky (2011) argues that *all* adolescents must cope with challenges around identity. However, the particular challenge for adoptees, according to Brodzinsky, is in society's belief that adoption is an unequivocally positive event in adoptees' lives—that once they have been taken into a so-called "forever family," their problems are over. This societal celebration of adoption, without considering what it means to adoptees to lose or disconnect from birth parents, may contribute to adoptees' more serious mental issues, Brodzinsky posits.[7] Society in general puts adoption in a rosy light, which can lead to adoptees experiencing feelings of "disenfranchised grief" (Doka 1989, in Brodzinksy 2011) when non-adoptees are unable to recognize or validate their feelings of loss. Disenfranchised grief, Brodzinsky continues, can potentially lead from feelings of being ignored,

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[7] Adult adoptees made a similar point in 2010, cautioning against the rush to adopt children after the devastating earthquake in Haiti: "We have learned first-hand that adoption (domestic or intercountry) itself as a process forces children to engage their true feelings of grief, anger, pain or loss, and to assimilate to meet the desires and expectations of strangers" (quoted in Brian 2012:2). I include this here as a footnote since is not an example of the hegemonic discourse, but a reaction to it.

misunderstood or unsupported to more serious mental health issues such as depression (204), thus pushing adoptees into clinical populations.

Another approach to understanding findings of maladjustment among some adoptees has been to question researchers' framing of adoption as a "risk factor," as well as whether it makes sense to use children from intact, biological (heterosexually-headed) families as the comparison group for adoptees. In their research on adoption in Spain, Palacios and Sanchez-Sandoval (2005) challenge the choice of this adopted/nonadopted binary, arguing, "the more the investigation is based on a hypothesis of adoption as a mild psychopathological condition and the more clinically biased the sample and the measurement methods are, the more likely it is that the results will show deficiencies and clinical problems in adopted children" (138). Instead of this starting premise, critics argue that adoptees' outcomes should be compared to what might have been, had they stayed in their previous situations: foster care, neglectful/abusive households, etc. (Hoksbergen 1999, cited in Yngvesson 2010). If that is the comparison made, studies have shown that adoptees fare better than their counterparts who remain in state care or in negligent or abusive families (Maughan, Collishaw, and Pickles 1998). They enjoy benefits ranging from better healthcare to fewer residential moves, thereby contributing to their upward social mobility (Fergusson, Lynskey, and Horwood 1995).

However, this critique should be taken with two caveats: first, that it does not problematize who decides which pre-adoption situations were actually harmful to children, a decision that many scholars contend is constructed with white, middle-class norms in mind (Briggs 2012, Roberts 2002), and second, it does not simply *point out* that the adoption allows the adoptive parents to confer new material privilege to their children (as in Leiter, McDonald,

and Jacobson 2006), it *actively celebrates* that transmission of class privilege and on that basis alone concludes that adoption is positive without delving any deeper into adoptees' qualitative experiences. In other words, there is still no middle ground provided between adoptees as pathological and adoption as preferable[8]. What is missing is the idea that adoption has good and bad aspects. In large part, I would argue that is because adoptees themselves are typically not the ones defining success in these studies, so their potential ambivalence is silenced.

An additional group of psychology and social psychology studies switch their focus from adoptees to the characteristics of "unusual" parents, i.e., single parents and same-sex couples. A meta-analysis finds that single-parent adoptions, mostly practiced by women, have been successful in the last quarter of the twentieth century (Haugaard, Palmer, and Wojslawowicz 1999). Same-sex couples are too recently allowed to raise children on their own to have a clear understanding of the effects of this parental configuration on children, since the majority of children being raised by same-sex couples through the 1990s were the biological children of one of the partners from a prior heterosexual union. Therefore, the effects on children of that household transition could not be disentangled from the fact that they were now being raised by a same-sex couple (Stacey and Biblarz 2001). However, the authors did conclude that children raised in such households felt less bound by traditional gender expectations and were more likely to be open to same-sex relationships themselves, which the authors argued should not take as negative but as a simple fact (Stacey and Biblarz 2001:165). More recent discussion on this topic has moved even further, challenging the latent homophobia underlying scrutinizing same-sex parents in this way (Meadow 2013).

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[8] One smart challenge to this binary interpretation of adoption as successful or not is Barbara Yngvesson's discussion of how the racism and xenophobia of Swedish society can have detrimental effects on transnational adoptees (2010).

In this spirit, instead of asking "what happens to adoptees?", and answering either with the popular cultural ideal that they live happily ever after or the social scientific conclusion that they often fare worse than children raised in intact heteronormative families, critical scholars such as Eleana Kim (2010) emphasize instead that adoption "is the middle of an ongoing narrative [i.e. an adoptee's life] that offers no predictable resolutions" (266). Kim's interpretation of adoption questions the validity of simple yes/no answers as to the adjustment of individual adoptees, rather encouraging two types of scholarship: more macro-level inquiries into the forces that have made adoption possible between certain countries and categories of mothers, and adult adoptees' responses to their experiences outside the confines of surveys.

In the preceding section, I have attempted to give a brief overview of the practice and study of domestic adoption and fostering in the United States since the nineteenth century. This means of family formation has allowed some involuntarily childless couples to pass as normative families. More recently, it has allowed single individuals and same-sex couples to share in the social reproductive work of childrearing and created transracial families. In what follows, I give an overview of transnational adoption's practice and popularity since World War Two, considering why Americans decide to go to the trouble of adopting outside the nation's borders to adopt when there are thousands of adoptable children in the U.S. foster care system.

TRANSNATIONAL ADOPTION: DISCOURSE AND PRACTICE

Below, I review transnational adoption's dominant discourses and practice in the U.S., leading up to and including adoption from Russia. I also highlight the conditions that led to a supply of children without parental care in Russia. My aim is to show how the attraction to Russian adoptees in the U.S. is not merely an instance of two states converging in their

interpretations of how best to protect and provide for children. Nor was Russia's decision to halt U.S. adoptions just a clash or solely a case of Russia sacrificing children in order to rebel against the U.S., as the mainstream U.S. media has primarily framed it. Instead, I argue that the adoption exchange and the present ban reflect Cold War ideologies. On the side of the U.S., there is domestic containment within and a demonization of the socialist superpower without; on the side of Russia, we see the Soviet ideology of "children as the only privileged class" and the reality of women accustomed to co-parenting with the state. Add to this tension neoliberal policies that have lessened public support for women and children and privatized care responsibilities around the globe, so that many Russian women now lack the financial support to keep their children and subsequently lose their children to the state, and from state care adopters may claim them.

This reframing of U.S.-Russian adoption contributes to the more general critique of the practice of transnational adoption and the accompanying discourse that children are "saved" when they are taken from their countries to join families in the United States and other countries in the global North. Children who become transnational adoptees were somebody's children (to use Laura Briggs' phrase (2012)) before they were available to American adoption agencies, prospective parents, and the gaze of psychological researchers. In contrast to the negotiations predominantly white and relatively affluent (Hellerstedt et al. 2008) internationally adoptive parents must engage in for social recognition domestically, where they may face stigma for deviating from the Euro-American biogenetic standard of family, on the global level the power of receiving states such as the United States grants adoptive parents a privileged place vis-a-vis birth mothers.

Here I am setting up the case for analyzing the meaning of U.S.-Russian adoption and the

Russian state's 2012 decision to end this exchange. Most Russian adoptees fit well into the white

majority[9] of the United States, and their migration was facilitated by ideological links between

the former Soviet Union and the United States that established the U.S. as a desirable destination.

In light of this, I read this moratorium as Russia reclaiming these children and along with them, a

claim to standing as an equal adversary rather than a subservient nation. In this way, the

moratorium is about more than children's welfare; it allows Russia to set itself apart from the

countries in Asia, Latin America, and Africa that were actual and symbolic battlegrounds during

the Cold War and many of which, in large part because of those disruptions, became the

countries which primarily supplied adoptees to the U.S. and other countries in the global North.

A NOTE ON LANGUAGE: "INTERNATIONAL" OR "TRANSNATIONAL" ADOPTION

   While adopting children from other countries is often formally referred to as international

or intercountry adoption, such as in U.S. government documents, many scholars insist that it is

more accurate to refer to the practice as transnational (Briggs 2010; Cartwright 2005; Dorow

2006; Trenka, Oparah, and Shin 2006; Volkman 2005; Yngvesson 2010). For some, this label

more accurately conveys the back-and-forth movements that may take place in the lives of

adoptive parents and adoptees as potential adopters go to another country, sometimes multiple

times, to visit an orphanage, meet a child, and bring him or her to the U.S.; as adoptive parents

and adoptees participate in "roots tours" in which they visit children's birth countries as tourists;

as adult adoptees return to their birth countries to meet birth mothers and siblings and/or stay to

live and work (Jones 2015). For other scholars, the use of "transnational" emphasizes the

connection between adoptees and transnational immigrant diaspora communities in the U.S., as

well as the connections between mostly white adoptive parents and the racist and xenophobic

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[9] And Russian adoptees who are ethnically central Asian or mixed may instead grapple with "honorary whiteness" similar to adoptees from Asian countries.

"transnation" in the U.S. that excludes some citizens, particularly Asian Americans, as "forever foreign" (Kang 2003). Thus, while the bureaucratic phrase "intercountry adoption" emphasizes a child's one-way movement between states, the scholarly use of "transnational adoption" captures both the potential for circular movement of the actors involved at the same time that it points to the nationalistic tendencies in the U.S. that undermine the neat narrative of adoption as an act of seamlessly incorporating foreign children into American families and the American nation.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND ON CURRENT ADOPTION PRACTICES

Nearly 23,000 transnational adoptees came to the United States in 2004, when the number of transnational adoptions peaked both here and worldwide. The annual number of adoptions has since declined for most countries, including the United States (Selman 2009). As adoptees' birth countries increase their wealth, experience nationalist backlash against images of their inferiority implied by sending children abroad, or grapple with the black markets that arise to supply infants to foreigners, they slow or stop the flow of adoptees.[10] As to receiving countries' influence on the decline in transnational adoption, other forms of transnational reproduction have become available to prospective parents in the major receiving countries in North American and Western Europe. These alternatives include engaging in "reproductive tourism," i.e. hiring a surrogate mother in another country, such as when Americans, Europeans, and Israelis hire surrogates in India (Lee 2009; Markens 2012; Pande 2014; Rudrappa 2015).[11] Therefore, it is likely that one of the reasons for the decline in transnational adoptions is an issue of demand in receiving countries: prospective parents are turning to other reproductive

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[10] One of the most cited examples of this pushback is South Korea's decision to impose new policies regulating transnational adoption after the 1988 Seoul Olympics (Brian 2012, E. Kim 2010).

[11] The United States is also a country that allows commercial surrogacy, so clients have come from abroad to use Americans surrogates as well.

technologies that allow them to adopt infants and may even allow them to have biologically related children.[12]

Even if transnational adoption is no longer a growing phenomenon, there is still ample reason to study it. To ignore adoption as a practice because there are fewer being conducted each year would be to focus too narrowly on the legal act of family formation, neglecting the fact that adoptive families "do" family long after an adoption is initiated and finalized. As U.S.-China adoption researcher Sara Dorow writes, "We need to move from asking whether we are 'for or against' transnational or transracial adoption to asking what adoption, *as practiced*, is for and against" (2010:279).

Adoption "as practiced" involves the process of adoptive parents and adoptees figuring out how they fit together and into the American nation, at the same time that it involves how birth mothers and adoptees may grapple with feelings of loss following adoption because of the way it is structured. For example, as Kristi Brian argues in her study of Korean adoption in the U.S., "legacies of separation, ambiguities of belonging, and a yearning for answers will hardly be affected by" the Korean government's announcement of its intention to phase out international adoptions (2012:ix). The decrease in transnational adoption suggests a logical moment in which to shift the focus of research to the experiences and narratives of adoptees already here or to the experiences of those whose adoptions were halted by policy changes, such as Russia's moratorium. Studying adoption as practiced means considering whether being adopted may become salient at different life milestones and family events, such as when adoptees marry, have children, or experience the death of adoptive or birth parents. These suggestions of adoption's

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[12] This alternative to adoption likely became increasingly attractive as suspicion grew in the United States regarding the mental and physical health of so-called "post-institutionalized children," usually referring to children from Eastern European orphanages, another factor which could have dampened demand for international adoption (Cartwright 2005).

aftereffects strike a dissonant chord with the popular narratives of adoption as symbolizing a "win-win" for children and adoptive parents or as emblematic of Americans' achievement of interracial and international harmony. This is a dissonance worth probing, even as adoption rates may continue to decline.

The countries of origin for transnational adoption have shifted over time, but North America and Western Europe have remained the primary receiving regions. Large-scale transnational adoption began with World War Two, when the first children were refugees from European countries, primarily Greece, Germany, and Austria (Selman 2009). In the 1950s and 1960s, on the heels of U.S. military involvement, Asian countries including Korea and Vietnam became the main sending countries. This was followed by Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s (Weil 1984), especially Colombia (Selman 2009). China became a major source for adoption in the 1990s. At this time, Europe also re-emerged as a sending region after the breakup of the Soviet Union, with adoptions from Romania followed by Russia, Bulgaria, and Ukraine (Selman 2009). Approximately 60,000 children from Russia were adopted in the United States in the 1990s and 2000s. While children have been adopted transnationally in Canada, Western Europe, and Australia, the United States has been the leading receiver of international adoptees since World War Two. It has accounted for half or more of all transnational adoptions since at least the 1980s (Selman 2009, Yngvesson 2010:178), though crude rates of transnational adoption, proportionate to a country's population, have historically been higher in Sweden and Norway (Yngvesson 2010:180).

The reasons that the United States started receiving adoptees in large numbers are multifaceted. Transnational adoption first became widely practiced in the United States as a way

of absorbing child war refugees and children fathered by American GIs in Europe and Asia during World War Two. More than 19,000 children arrived between 1948 and 1962 through the Displaced Persons Act of 1948, which allowed 4,065 "orphans" to enter the country (Weil 1984:279). These child migrations from Europe were ostensibly humanitarian, as this policy "was not to facilitate transnational adoption for the benefit of United States citizens or for orphan children generally, but to relieve an emergency refugee problem" (Carlson 1987:326). Migration scholar Kirsten Lovelock's work on the history of adoption policy in the U.S., Canada, and New Zealand partially supports this assertion, insofar as she identifies the period of 1950-1970 as an era of adoption prompted by "finding families for children," in contrast to the subsequent era of "finding children for families" as demand for international adoptees surged (2000). But at first, unaccompanied children came to the United States and only were then matched with families, rather than the contemporary practice in which American adults select a specific child to bring to the U.S.

Despite early adoption policy's humanitarian context, it was simultaneously subsumed under the United States' racist, exclusionary immigration law. As Lovelock summarizes, "[W]hile there were many children needing families internationally, only those children that could meet immigration criteria had the opportunity of finding families in these recipient societies" (2000:917). The racially-explicit parameters of who could become a U.S. resident or citizen as codified in immigration policy set the conditions for adoption policy (Lovelock 2000). In other words, international adoption had to be seen as first and foremost facilitating national ends of building an acceptable citizenry, before it provided for foreign children's welfare. The national needs generally embedded in immigration criteria include the need to reproduce the

nation by assuring a sufficient supply of future laborers and citizens, balanced with the need to craft a certain reputation and image among other states through humanitarian acts such as accepting child refugees (Lovelock 2000:910).

Even as children's migration under the guise of humanitarianism was restricted in ways that made it serve national ends, these children were still subject to scrutiny and suspicion as foreigners within the United States. This is reflected in early discussions of child refugees not as innocents unequivocally deserving of safe haven in the United States, but as outsiders provoking fears that they might "present a threat to national security," "serve as a drain on resources," or "potentially have a 'bad influence' on their American peers" (Forbes and Weiss 1985, quoted in Lovelock 2000:913). These worries reveal preoccupations with the earliest child refugees that pathologized them as dangerous or damaged goods and questioned their deservingness as dependents of the state. The response to child refugees was an "Apollonic" vision of children as evil and in need of control (Jenks 1996), in this case because of their foreignness. The problem of child refugees as a drain on resources has been partially solved by the contemporary practice of adoption as parents seeking children and accepting the privatized cost of their upbringing and the work of training them as Americans, but suspicion and othering of transnational adoptees continues today. This adoptive "sponsorship" and commitment to care is more visible to the general public than is the recruitment relationship between employers and adult migrants, migrants who are inaccurately feared to rely on public support and attacked by policies that communicate the U.S.'s acceptance of their productive labor while simultaneously abhorring their reproduction (Colen 1986, 1995; Roberts 1998).

Though my primary focus is on the adoption of Russian children by adults in the United

States, it is interesting to briefly consider post-Soviet Russia's position as an adoptee-supplying country in contrast to earlier periods in the Soviet Union's history. The Soviet Union was a country that itself received child refugees in the twentieth century. First, the Soviet Union took in Armenian children after the Armenian Genocide in the Ottoman Empire during World War One (Hubinette 2006:142). They also took in some 4,000 Spanish children who were relocated during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) (Hubinette 2006:142; Payne 2008:243). Considering this history, a culture of child circulation and transnational care is not alien to Russia, but one that is familiar to both the state and to the population of the region. Russia has not always been a sending nation for transnational adoption but rather has both received and sent children abroad.

FIGHTING THE COLD WAR THROUGH WARM HEARTHS AND HAPPY CHILDHOOD

In this section, I historicize my question about the meaning and politics of transnational adoption between the post-Cold War United States and postsocialist Russia. How did these two countries portray children and childhood when they were the rival superpowers of the Cold War? What were the Soviet and American politics of reproduction in this period? Each regime promised happy childhoods on the basis of its superior ability to bring prosperity to all people, through socialism or capitalism (Kelly 2008; Peacock 2014). Both sides promoted population growth and large families, particularly enabling ethnic Russians and white Americans, respectively (Kelly 2008, May 1988). Discussing the importance of children in this preceding period helps highlight why the figure of the contemporary Russian adoptee is so emotionally charged for both countries.

Children as a focal point of family during the Cold War served nationalist aims in both the U.S. and the USSR as both superpowers sought legitimacy for their policies at home and

appeal for their influence abroad. Each regime promised a better future if citizens and other countries would follow their example. And there is no more powerful symbol of the future than the child.

Having (several) children proved attractive to the majority of Americans following World War Two—hence the Baby Boom. This generation also spent more time on their children than before. Sociologist Andrew Cherlin surmised that this turn to the private in the 1950s and early 1960s might have been prompted by the Great Depression and World War Two, when poverty and war disrupted family life for much of the population (2012:431). Historian Elaine Tyler May (1988) offered an alternative interpretation: the Cold War enforced a culturally mandatory pronatalism in the U.S., since childlessness was cause for suspicion about a person's political affiliations and therefore his or her fitness to be an American. In this era, children "gave evidence of responsibility, patriotism and achievement" (May 1988:142). This push to procreate, which also served to justify (white) women's return to domesticity after their wartime work, was an implicit policy of domestic containment.

This domestic containment could not stop some women who wanted to continue public work, and activism at that. Some responded to the U.S.'s nuclear program with disapproval, unswayed by the rhetoric that it was for children's protection. Women Strike for Peace demonstrated against nuclear weapons in 1961 in many American cities. While usually the Cold War consensus made "potential critics feel ashamed, fearful, unpatriotic and too ignorant to question its basic tenets," Women Strike for Peace was able to argue on behalf of child to promote not acquiescence, but opposition to the state (Stephens 1997:119). Political opposition was enabled, paradoxically, by the vision of the American home in the Cold War era as a space

of altruism and peace, so that the home could serve as a potentially subversive "site of alternative values and perspectives" that these activists espoused in their opposition to nuclear weapons as threatening children's well-being (Stephens 1997:120).

For other women, domestic containment redirected their work toward politically palatable projects. Women such as Pearl S. Buck and Josephine Baker turned to the promotion of transnational adoption as the focus of their anti-racist activism (Klein 2003). Such efforts served both to grant "re-domesticated women a role in the national project of global expansion" and promoted a positive image of the U.S., as "the white mother stood alongside the tough man as an iconic figure of the nation," at once maternal and paternal(istic) (Klein 2003:190). These images of the American nation are the counterpart to the Soviet's emblematic portrayal of its nation, the Eastward-facing, mid-stride statue of the male worker holding a hammer and the female collective farmer holding a sickle.

But for the majority of American adults, focusing on childrearing was meant to assuage individual parents' worries "in the midst of the terrors of the atomic age," May argued:

> A home filled with children would create a feeling of warmth and
> security against the cold forces of disruption and alienation.
> Children would also be a connection to the future and a means of
> replenishing a world depleted by [World War Two] deaths
> (1988:17).

Beyond individual fulfillment, though, U.S. postwar parenthood was framed as an act of "world citizenship," placing upon parents the "tremendous responsibility of sending forth into the next generation men and women imbued with a high resolve to work together for everlasting peace" (Church 1946, quoted in May 1988:135). In this model of societal success through

domestic containment, peacemakers were to be forged not in the crucible of social movement

collectives, but within the family. In sum, as a reward for compliance with state policy, the

United States held up the suburban nuclear family as both the prize for its own citizens and "a

beacon to the free world; this was the family ideal worth protecting against hostile forces" (May

1988:161).

Drawing on May's scholarship, childhood scholar Sharon Stephens cited the Cold War's

new threat of nuclear war as the impetus for Americans' domestic focus and a convenient tool

for state agents looking to justify social control. Stephens argued that "images of children and

childhood […] were central to what has been termed the 'American Cold War consensus'"

(1997:104). Stephens defines this consensus as:

> "a political and cultural 'postwar settlement,' according to which
> widespread, largely uninformed public support was given to state
> projects (prominently including the top-secret nuclear weapons
> programs and policies of the Cold War period), in exchange for
> promises of public order, stability, and the chance for more people
> to participate more fully in the postwar culture of
> consumption" (1997:104).

In Stephens' account, the state claimed justification for its foreign policy and nuclear

program by claiming its actions best ensured the protection of children and that safeguarding the

vulnerable domestic core of American society from any and all adversaries "require[d]—and

legitimate[d]—a vast national defense apparatus" (1997:104). Stephens also attended to how

domestic containment not only placed suspicions on the childless and restricted what were

considered respectable pursuits for women, but also constrained the children imagined to be at

the center of the Cold War American family. Normal children in Cold War America were to be

"strong and able children, with a firm sense of individual and social boundaries, strong moral

values, and clear personal and political loyalties" (Stephens 1997:112).

Historian Margaret Peacock offers a similar assessment of the symbolic use of children during the Cold War, on both the American as well as the Soviet side. Suffering children, along with women, have always been used to justify war, Peacock argues, echoing earlier feminist theorists (Enloe 2014; Nira Yuval-Davis 1997). But the Cold War required a particular defense against a more unpredictable threat than in the physical warfare of the past; nuclear war was "a war against which there was no real defense," which consequently required "accepting the self-proclaimed legitimacy of the state and its policies as the primary means of ensuring the country's protection" (Peacock 2014:2). In this schema, children symbolized the nation's ability survive (Peacock 2014:5). Additionally, while Stephens talks about the Cold War period more generally and May focuses more heavily on the 1950s and 1960s, Peacock conducts a more fine-grained historical analysis in her work on shifting images of children and childhood in the U.S. and the Soviet Union.

Peacock argues that over the decades there was a change in ideas about children on both sides, from their docility, loyalty to the regimes of their birth, and belonging in the home, to a more active, public role imagined in peacemaking. This was perhaps most publicly represented through the Soviet Pioneers and American Boy Scouts, who gradually came to be seen "as emissaries for international activism and peace," struggling to counteract the imperial tendencies of the American or Soviet enemy, respectively (Peacock 2014:4). This faith was shaken, however, by images from Vietnam. As a result, there was a crisis of confidence in both countries "over who could best protect the young and whether the ideological crusade of the Cold War was worth the potential sacrifice of the next generation" (Peacock 2014:2).

On the Soviet side, childhood was symbolically powerful as the Soviet rulers argued that "childhood is the only privileged class." Yet as contemporary scholarship has revealed, there were class-based and ethnic differences in how childhood was experienced. The Young Pioneers were the public face of childhood in the Soviet Union, whose organization provided children with free clubs and camps and taught them the principles of communism. But as in the United States, stratified childhoods were nonetheless a reality in the Soviet Union, belying the idea that all children were deserving of care and protection (Peacock 2014, Kelly 2008). Childhood was not a universally privileged time. The best-off children in the Soviet Union would have been ethnic Russians and the children of the political elite (Kelly 2008). As a general rule, the majority of Soviet children were negatively affected by consumer goods shortages. More acute periods of crisis, resulting in orphaned and abandoned children, were the 1917 Revolution, the 1920 famine, and World War Two. But perhaps the grimmest examples of unequal experiences of childhood contradicting state ideologies were committed under Stalin. First, the 1917 Decree on Land created a class of people referred to as kulaks, or wealthier peasants. Stalin targeted the kulaks in 1929, ordering their elimination as a class. "Elimination" was accomplished through violence and deportation, resulting in family separation or orphanhood (Kelly 2008). Then during the period of 1935 through 1953, as chronicled in *Children of the Gulag* (Frierson and Vilensky 2010), tens of thousands of non-ethnic Russians were killed or deported. As a result, children could end up in Soviet orphanages "because of the ethnic or national identity of one of their parents," including dozens of national groups ranging from Finns, Germans, and Koreans to internal minorities such as Chechens, Crimean Tatars, and Turkic peoples (Frierson and Vilensky 2010:235).

Soviet policies and attitudes as to who should care for such children left without parental supervision changed over time. Soviet law in the early twentieth century forbade adoption, likely because it would have been out of line with the ideals of dismantling the private family. However, there was a law passed in 1926 which permitted the adoption of one child per peasant family, likely to provide them with an extra worker (Kelly 2008:212). Adoption was commended by the state in 1943, but not widely socially accepted until the 1980s. Cultural beliefs about poor genes and "bad blood" have stigmatized institutionalized children in Russia (Fujimura, Stoecker, and Sudakova 2005; Khabibullina 2009), similar to the eugenicist fears that children available for adoption in the twentieth-century U.S. might suffer from genetically transmitted "feeblemindedness." Those Russians who have adopted domestically have typically wanted to keep the adoption private (Cummings 1998:16). And the fall of the Soviet Union led to widespread poverty that meant adoption or fostering would not be a realistic possibility for many Russian families, who struggled to provide for existing family members (Kelly 2008). It was in this period that transnational adoption from post-Communist states began.

Large-scale transnational adoption to the U.S. took off 1950s through the 1980s, coinciding with the Cold War. Americans claimed more than their own biological children as a means of providing reassurance and signs of their moral superiority vis-a-vis the Soviet superpower in the postwar period. They also adopted children from abroad in increasing numbers, whether the adoptions were through financial sponsorship, or legal adoption of children, where they were physically relocated to the U.S. to be raised by American parents. In particular, transnational adoption from Asia, as a part of the world where battles between capitalism and communism were being waged, served American interests by symbolizing a

caring form of global integration of the "free" world that could be contrasted with the closure

and conquest supposedly exemplified by the Soviet empire:

> [T]he postwar global imaginary […] depended on a logic of inclusion, of strengthening the 'free world' by inviting many nations and peoples into its protective embrace. […] The family emerges here as an answer to the 'What are we for?' question: it offered a way to claim some of the communitarian energy associated with communism, while avoiding the conflation of the community with the state. As one *Reader's Digest* article put it, the family as a model of collectivity offered a way to bridge the ideological gap between the 'ruthless collectivism' of communism and the 'selfish individualism' with which the U.S. was so often identified (Klein 2003:151).

An additional benefit of this model of integration through familiarization was that even as

it symbolized the people of the world coming together, the U.S. could still imagine itself

dominant. This was thanks to the paternalistic symbolism of transnational adoption as the

hierarchical union of white parents with Asian children, which maintained a racial/national

hierarchy through age difference (Klein 2003:150). As Americans adopted from Asia, the U.S.

could also obscure its history of racist immigration policies that included Asians from joining the

American nation (Klein 2003). The adoptive family was particularly appealing as a symbol of

postwar integration, Klein argued, because it served as a microcosm of how American leaders

portrayed their nation's place in the world, dominant but benevolent, a global hierarchy in which

the United States, as the more established democracy—i.e., the more "adult" country—could

ostensibly be in solidarity with, but ultimately hold power over, newer nations.

Orphaned foreign children could be transformed into adoptees—what one author termed

'tiny ambassadors' for America (quoted in Klein 2003:153)—neutralizing the possibility that

they might turn threatening and deviant, i.e., tempted by communism (Klein 2003:154) and

reinforcing the U.S.'s role as a paternalistic enforcer of peace. The sponsorship of symbolic

adoptees by American adults through organizations such as the U.S.-based Christian Children's Fund (CCF) which facilitated financial sponsorship of Chinese children starting in 1938, solidified the belonging of the adopters as normative Americans. In some cases, these were Americans whose sexuality, and therefore political allegiances, were suspect if they did not have biological children of their own as May discussed (1988). They could be dismissed as selfish or "perverted," code for homosexual. So, this inclusionary power of adoption can be seen as the precursor to the homonormativity or queer liberalism that in the post-Cold War United States now more explicitly extends parenting rights to LGBT couples and individuals, whether through custody of biological children from previous heterosexual unions, the legal ability to foster and adopt, or creating biologically related children through reproductive biomedicine.

While my primary aim here is to provide historical context for the intimate international relations of transnational adoption between the former superpowers of the Cold War, Klein's work on imaginings of Asia during the Cold War can help explain the lingering symbolism of hierarchical integration that might inform Americans' embrace of post-Soviet adoption, and also provides a possible explanation for why the practice offends the pride of state actors and citizens in post-Soviet nations.

AFTER THE COLD WAR

In the above section, I historicized my question about the symbolism and politics of child exchange. I highlighted how the rival superpowers of the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union, conceived of their children as representatives of the success of competing ideologies and as recipients of their preferred futures, provided that nuclear war did not annihilate them and that unruly figures of children such as those suffering during the Vietnam

War did not undermine state promises they could ensure the good life for their citizens and allied nations.

Ideological battles with the Soviet Union had prompted the U.S. to maintain its welfare state supports so that capitalism couldn't be renounced as inhumane (May 1988). But with the end of the Soviet Union, the spread of Empire, as conceived by Hardt and Negri (2001), was hastened.

As political scientist Ken Jowitt wrote in 1992, reflecting on the end of the Soviet Union:

> For half a century we have thought in terms of East and West, and now there is no East as such. The primary axis of international politics has 'disappeared.' [The Soviet Union/Empire's] 'extinction' radically revises the framework within which the West, the United States itself, the Third World, and the countries of Eastern Europe, the former Russian Empire, and many nations in Asia have bounded and defined themselves. The Leninist Extinction will force the United States to reexamine the meaning of its national identity. (quoted in Verdery 1996:38)

The family had been central to the United States in establishing its Cold War-era national identity, as a "domestically contained" nation ensuring happy childhoods. Thus, the end of the Cold War meant that the United States had to rethink the symbolism of family in reinforcing national identity. May, in an updated epilogue to her 1988 book on the centrality of family for Cold War Americans, postulated that the new conflict over national identity was now the country's internal Culture Wars. "Now the nation appears divided not between loyal citizens and suspected subversives," May wrote, "but between those who adhere to the 'family values' represented by the alleged golden era of the 1950s, and those who do not" (May 1999 [1988]:207). Adherence to such "family values" in part lends itself to continued support of international adoption as a practice that largely reproduces the nuclear family. Transnational

adoption simultaneously underpins normative family formation in other countries, promoted by

the U.S.'s Christian Right transnational activism advocating that "single mothers should give up

their children and relinquishing a child for adoption is the ultimate expression of paternal

authority" (Briggs 2012:205). After the Cold War, intimate geopolitics aren't played out through

domestic containment, but through the globalization of culture wars (Cheney 2010).

The end of the Cold War also ushered in an era in which G. Pascal Zachary, writer for the

Wall Street Journal, would proclaim, "The hybrid is hip," and declare the U.S. the "winner" of

the Cold War (quoted in Klein 2003:270). This triumphant willingness to hybridize also laid the

groundwork for post-Cold War transnational adoption, not only from China as Klein (2003)

argues, but also from the former enemy nation of Russia, as well as from Guatemala and

Ethiopia, two countries popularly supplying adoptees in the 2000s. This may be in part because

of the appeal for white Americans whose ethnicities have become optional (Waters 1990) of

harnessing adoptees' symbolic ethnicities.

FRAGILE FAMILIES, SINGLE MOTHERHOOD AND THE POST-SOVIET STATE

While Zachary blithely deemed the end of the Cold War a victory for the United States

and for hybridity, celebrating hybridity-through-adoption would miss a major contextual factor

in that transnational adoption, as well as transracial adoption, typically relies on the

dispossession of birth mothers (Briggs 2012; Perry 1998; Roberts 2002). This is pertinent in the

case of post-Cold War adoption from Russia, as I highlight below. My concern about

dispossession starts from the assumption that most, if not all, women would keep their children if

they had access to contraception and abortion to prevent unwanted pregnancies, along with the

financial and social support to raise the children they gave birth to (Perry 1998). What were the

conditions for women, mothers, and children in post-Soviet Russia that made rates of child

relinquishment and the loss of parental rights grow in the 1990s and 2000s? Rockhill, citing

Lakhova 2006, reported that "the number of parents whose parental rights have been terminated

has jumped tenfold in the post-Soviet period, from 6,700 cases in 1992 to 70,000 in 2005"

(2010:3). Most of the children institutionalized in post-Soviet Russia are not technically orphans

whose parents have died. Instead, they are "social orphans," whose parent or parents have lost

parental rights or whose mothers have relinquished them. Some research suggests that mothers in

Russia typically relinquish a child because of the child's premature birth or the mother's young

age, unmarried status, or residence with her family of origin (Issoupova 2000). Other research

adds that only 10 percent of children are left alone because of their parents' death or disability;

other factors contributing to social orphanhood, are mothers'/parents' alcohol and drug

addiction, imprisonment, and health-related inabilities to care for children (Fedulova et al.

2003:21). In the 2000s, there were more than 110,000 children placed into care annually after

their parents were deprived of their parental rights (UNICEF 2010:16). More than 330,000

children remained in residential care at the end of 2007; 142,000 of those were children with

disabilities (UNICEF 2010:22, 28).

In order to understand the transformation of Russian children into U.S. adoptees, it is

important to consider the place of mothers on the margins of post-Soviet society, marginalization

caused by the cultural attitudes codified in the state's approach to poverty, single parenthood,

and child welfare. Many families' ability to do the work of social reproduction independently or

with meager state supports is severely limited. This need to provide independently for one's

family is out of sync with the Soviet gender contract, which saw the sidelining of men in

domestic duties as parenting labor was split between the state and mothers (a strategic move by

the state, since women were needed as laborers for industrialization—hence the concept of

"mother-workers") (Ashwin 2010; Rockhill 2010). The post-socialist period has seen the social

safety net for mothers shrink, in part due to collaboration with Western social scientists and

policymakers who advocated for reducing social supports to only provide for the poorest of the

poor (Haney 2002; Klein 2008). Pronatalist ideology has persisted, however, and multiple-child

families in Russia are promoted by social policies such as maternal capital, a one-time allowance

for a woman's second child (Rivkin-Fish 2010). However, such policies are designed in such a

way that they do not help the most vulnerable; instead, middle-class, heterosexual couples are the

ones best positioned to benefit from them (Borozdina et al. 2014; Zavisca 2012).

Poverty is one of the main reasons for parents losing custody of their children in post-

Soviet states (Ismayilova, Ssewamala, and Huseynli 2014). Circumstances for single mothers in

particular in the post-Soviet period have deteriorated, along with women's conditions in general.

Some single mothers in Russia find ways to cope, including relying on the intergenerational

support of grandmothers as childcare providers (Utrata 2011, 2015). But as Iarskaia-Smirnova

and Romanov (2012) summarize, the situation is dire for many such women:

> The decrease in the state social-protection programs, the lack of
> accessible childcare services, the shortage of options in the labor
> market, and gender inequality in career opportunities have put
> single mothers at a high risk of poverty. As a result, single-mother
> households came to have among the lowest economic status of any
> households in Russia (Lokshin et al., 2000; Ovcharova, 2008).
> (210)

Once such vulnerable mothers come in contact with the state, they are likely to lose

custody of their children (Rockhill 2010). This is because some of the requirements to regain

custody of children are not even known to parents until after the state has custody of children. These requirements include demands that parents improve their housing, find better-paying employment or otherwise increase their income, major life overhauls which some parents are unable to accomplish on the timeline necessary to reclaim their children (Rockhill 2010:88). There is class stratification in terms of which women the state rewards for their childbearing and assists in their childrearing (through benefits such as maternity capital), and which women appeal to state support only to lose custody of their children.

This understanding of how Russian parents lose custody of children dampens the celebration that might otherwise accompany the news that foster/guardian care rates have steadily increased in Russia in the post-Soviet period (UNICEF 2010:35). Likewise, domestic adoptions have made up 50 to 70 percent of all adoptions since 1995 (UNICEF 2010:39). Together, the countervailing trends of increases in the revocation of parental rights, as discussed by Rockhill, but decreases in institutional placements for children, as discussed in the UNICEF report, indicate that Americans' moral outrage over the U.S. adoption ban as a policy that leaves children institutionalized may not accurately reflects children's situation. They appear to be increasingly incorporated into families in Russia. The cause for moral outrage could be rethought: how families might be able to rely on state support in childrearing without completely losing custody of children and how the inclusion of people with disabilities might be supported. With this reorientation would also come the need to acknowledge that these challenges exist for American society as well.

CONCLUSION

In the preceding section, I have explored transnational adoption from various angles,

contrasting the dominant discourses of transnational adoption as saving children with moments when adoptees were pathologized. I reviewed the ideologies and lived experiences of children in the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia, focusing particularly on children who were most likely to be taken into state care because of the marginalization of their mothers. I also returned to the centrality of children in the United States in the Cold War period, to highlight how transnational adoption practices begun then served ideological purposes of bolstering an American sense of superiority and anti-Communism that likely have flowed over into the post-Cold War period and informed adoption from Russia. Finally, I suggest that a more interesting way to think about U.S.-Russian adoption could be to scrutinize how child relinquishment and the removal of parental rights in Russia really differs from the treatment of similarly positioned children in the United States as a way to further our thinking about solidarity on issues of reproductive justice transnationally.

Methods
Research Design

      To investigate the practice and meaning of the adoption of Russian children to the U.S., I combined analysis of semi-structured interviews with 47 adoptees and adoptive parents with discourse analysis of media coverage of the adoption ban from both the U.S. and Russian press in 2012-2013. Analyzing multiple sources of data allowed me to consider what it means to adoptees to be claimed as members of American families in the United States, while at the same time sketching out the transnational context and contested nature of adoptees' membership in the two nations in which they have lived. In-depth interviews were conducted with adoptees and adoptive families in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metro area in 2015-2016. This community is a

useful site for studying adoption as it has been one of the top receiving states within the U.S. (Meier 1998), a hub for transnational adoption (Larson 2016) facilitated by adoption agencies such as the Children's Home Society of Minnesota with medical support from the University of Minnesota's International Adoption Clinic. In the case of adoptees from Korea, it is estimated that up to a fifth of all Korean adoptees in the U.S. were raised in Minnesota, and that adoptees may make up more than half of Minnesota's Korean population (Koo 2008).

A. *Interviews*

In-depth interviewing is a method that permits researchers to include people typically excluded from public arenas such as the mainstream media (Weiss 1995). This project's multiple data sources allow for putting these lesser heard-from actors in conversation with the media discourses about them. This study design offers the advantages of triangulation, as the mainstream media narratives I analyzed highlighted hegemonic discourses about children and adoptees in Russia & the U.S., while interviews with adoptees and adoptive parents provided an opportunity to echo, expand on, or challenge these public discourses through accounts of people's lived experiences. Conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Russia within a global ethnographic framework (Burawoy et al. 2000), including interviewing birth mothers/parents, would also have been a rich source of data on adoptees' origin stories, but this was outside the scope of the current project focused on adoptees' perceived and felt sense of belonging having come to the U.S. Interviewing birth parents would also have been challenging in terms of feasibility due to the restrictions around foreigners conducting qualitative research and fieldwork in Russia that increased throughout the 2010s while U.S.-Russian relations worsened, followed by Western-imposed sanctions restricting scientific collaborations in the early 2020s (Earl 2021;

Merzlikin 2019).

Qualitative in-depth interviews were at the heart of this research project, as they have been for the majority of other recent inquiries into the meaning and experience of transnational adoption for adoptees, adoptive parents, and adoption agency workers (Brian 2012; Dorow 2006; Jacobson 2008; Seligmann 2013). More broadly, much research about youth identities and experience has been ethnographic and primarily school-based, whether the focus is sexuality (Pascoe 2005), consumption (Pugh 2009), work (Estrada 2019), social class (Bettie 2014), gender (Musto 2019), and/or race (Lewis 2004; Perry 2002). But adoptees do not have a single physical site which would serve as a field site for research providing the same sort of long-term access as schools. Therefore, in-depth interviewing was the primary method of this study. IRB approval was obtained from the University of Minnesota before beginning recruitment and interviews.

The U of M's International Adoption Project within the Gunnar Lab allows me to recruit respondents from the Parent Registry, which included families with more than 700 Russian adoptees. I employed a purposive sample to compare interviews with single-parent adopters, same-sex couples, heterosexual couples, male and female adoptees, adult adoptees, and older adoptees who joined U.S. families after age 5.

I recruited 21 adoptees and 26 adoptive parents to do interviews. Interviews were conducted with individuals, unless adoptive parent pairs preferred to be interviewed together, and there was one single mother who stipulated that she and her under-18 daughter would participate if they were interviewed together as an adoptee-adoptive parent dyad. My sample of adoptive parents interviewed included opposite-sex and same-sex couples as well as single

parents. For the interviews in general, matched pairs of adoptees and adoptive parents were the ideal. In that case, accounts of adoptees' experience could be sourced from multiple family members, allowing for comparing and contrasting parents' and children's accounts and pulling details of events from multiple perspectives. In all but two cases, I did speak to multiple family members from the same adoptive family. Interviews were held at a location convenient and comfortable for the respondent, including on campus at the university, in the respondent's home, or at a coffee shop. Interviews lasted an average of one hour.

In addition, I recognize that age at adoption and present stage in the life course shape adoptees' stories. I was particularly interested in the adoption experiences of those who were adopted after the age of 5 and who may have had memories of inclusion in Russian families, life in children's homes (orphanages), and Russian society more broadly. These memories likely shaped their experience of being adopted and their perceptions of the U.S. in ways very different from those individuals who were adopted as infants or toddlers. As I discuss in the chapter "Bringing in Adoptee Voices," these older adoptees sometimes had more of a basis upon which to think critically about being adopted transnationally.

My decision to prioritize adoptee participation is in response to the tendency in qualitative adoption research to most prominently feature the stories and perspectives of adoptive parents. A number of factors can explain this: historical research relies on adoption agency files, where adopters' information has traditionally been more detailed than that of the children or birth parents involved; adoptive parents being more accessible as interview respondents than birth mothers or adoptees who are under eighteen, two groups whose vulnerability has been a concern of Institutional Review Boards and ethical researchers. But sidelining the stories of birth mothers

and (youth) adoptees is not the only or best solution. The choice of respondents matters for how the story of adoption is told, since adoptive parents are the actors who typically occupy a relatively privileged position in the adoption exchange, whether in terms of race, class, age, ability, marital status and/or citizenship and nationality. Therefore, in response to this focus on parents, more recent scholarship, sometimes penned by adoptees themselves, has begun to foreground the perspectives of birth mothers and adoptees and has also prioritized deeper geopolitical context (Kim 2010; Pate 2014). This emphasis is in keeping with the principles of women's studies, children's studies, reproductive justice and critical adoption scholarship. The epistemology of these ways of approaching scholarship drove me from zeroing in on adoptive parents' and state actors' desires and actions to also taking children's experiences seriously. This requires recognizing children as social actors even within the limited legal power afforded them and the specific constraints of being adopted. Thus, my sample includes some under-18 adoptees, recognizing the insights they can offer and using Clark (2010) as a methodological guide. Regardless of age, adoptees and birth mothers in previous research have highlighted experiences of loss, exclusion, racism, and violence (Brian 2012; Fessler 2006; Kim 2021; Stryker 2011). These narratives are offered in addition to, or in opposition to, the dominant discourse of adoption as improved life chances and the rescue of children and placement in supposed "loving forever families," for which they are expected to be eternally grateful. This body of critical research does not condemn adoption per se; instead, it seeks to center oft-silenced voices and to complicate the saccharine or sensationalistic narratives too often attached to adoption.

The political and cultural context of adoption shifted in the period after U.S.-Russian adoption began in 1991, so I attended to this in my sampling as well. "Russian adoptees" is a

catchall term for a diverse population of children, youth, and young adults whose individual life circumstances and national contexts have shifted dramatically over time. During these decades, the relationship between the U.S. and Russia has opened and closed, including collaborations as well as antagonisms now undeniable with the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war, at the same time that each country's political landscape and attitudes toward institutionalized children and childhood have changed. As such, I sought out adoptees from three different birth cohorts, roughly mapping onto those who were born in the Soviet Union during the 1980s, those who were born in the 1990s during Russia's post-Soviet transformation (Verdery 1996), and those who were born in the 2000s during Putin's presidency.

Because transnational adoption from Russian only began in the early 1990s, U.S.-Russian adoptees belong to a restricted number of birth cohorts; they are still a relatively young group. While some of the first adoptees may have been adopted as older children, at the time I conducted interviews I expected that the majority of the population of Russian adoptees would be under 25 years old. This limited the range of possible life experiences interviewees had and life course milestones they may have passed, events such as graduations and marriages, when individuals may be prompted to reflect on adoption's impact on their life chances and their inclusion in family and nation. Thus, this study cannot speak to the experience of Russian adoptees across the entire life course, but only through young adulthood. In addition, as with other interview-based qualitative studies that rely on respondents to opt in to participating, there is always the possibility that the people who are willing to be interviewed are those who are more likely to have had positive experiences and/or to be more social people who are comfortable speaking with strangers (Weiss 1995). One final additional limitation of my study is

that I did not interview siblings, whether fellow adoptees, biological children of the adoptive parents, or the adoptees' own biological brothers or sisters in cases of sibling adoption. Siblings may be able to give another perspective onto the experiences of adoptive families. Future research could include siblings, while keeping in mind the necessity of balancing sibling accounts with a commitment to centering adoptee voices.

The adoptee interview schedule included topic areas such as the experience of adoption, the adoptee's sense of belonging in the adoptive family and the U.S., what they like and don't like about being adopted, what they like and don't like about being an American (citizen), and what their relationship to Russia and being Russian is. I asked for their perspective on the macro level context of their adoption experience, i.e., how they felt about U.S.-Russian relations with the adoption moratorium and more general tensions, and how they felt about the fact that the way their family was formed through U.S.-Russian adoption, was no longer a possibility for other Russian children and American adults. I asked both adoptive parents and adoptees for their adoption stories. Parents sometimes started with discussions of their plans to have children and the ways in which they considered doing this (biological childbearing, domestic adoption, international adoption from a different country, etc.). Adoptees' adoption stories sometimes included a discussion of their situation in a children's home or with a birth family prior coming to the U.S. I also asked respondents to reflect on how Russian adoption has been portrayed in the media, soliciting their responses to the story of the woman in Tennessee who sent the boy she had adopted back to Russia unaccompanied. As a story of rejection and abandonment, this is a story likely to elicit negative reactions, creating a challenge for maintaining rapport and facilitating an overall positive or neutral experience of being interviewed. Therefore, I closed the

interviews by asking participants what their vision was for the best-case scenario for institutionalized children and also asked them what else they would want to ask future participants.

Analysis

As I conducted interviews, I transcribed them verbatim. In addition to reading and re-reading interview transcripts, I used Atlas.ti to more systematically organize thematic coding of interview transcripts. Initial coding was informed by theories from the existing literature on the political uses of children and adoptee experiences of belonging or liminality. Beyond that, I also paid attention to themes that emerged from the interviews themselves as I re-read transcripts in the process of interpretive analysis. Informed by cultural sociologist Allison Pugh's defense of in-depth interviewing as a method suited to "excavate and interpret emotions" (2013:44), my analysis was also sensitive to how interviewees expressed their feelings about their experiences. I sought saturation (Roy et al. 2015) in coverage of the themes analyzed in the three main chapters that follow.

B. *Media Discourse Analysis*

Interviewing adoptees and adoptive parents got at the lived experience of adoption, while my media analysis interrogated the public discourse that served as the context for these individual adoption stories. Framing transnational adoption as an act which places children in families where they belong—i.e., the U.S. government's discourse of "loving forever families"— is a hegemonic but not uncontested discourse. As with all hegemonic discourses, it must be renegotiated during moments of conflict or crisis. One such recent conflict over transnational

adoption was the Russian government's decision to ban adoptions by American citizens at the close of 2012, justified on the basis of reported abuse and deaths of Russian adoptees at the hands of adoptive parents. Through preliminary analysis I found that mainstream U.S. newspapers published stories in response to the ban that reasserted the narrative of transnational adoption as child rescue, interwoven with the discourse of American exceptionalism. Articles conveyed the U.S.'s superiority vis-a-vis its former Cold War adversary through assertions that the majority of adopted children enjoyed a good childhood and access to the American Dream. In this work, I have deepened my analysis of U.S. sources as well as compared them to similar Russian sources. I also highlighted whose voices are privileged in responding to the ban and, in turn, which responses are made thinkable. This included being attentive to how the denial of voice for adoptees and the discourse of vulnerability in these portrayals elides adoptees' own reflections on where they have felt love and belonging, thereby connecting the media analysis to the interviews. In this analysis, I considered how the media frames the adoption ban's effects on the parties and countries involved. How are those claims made? I explored how discourses about where children belong, how belonging is defined (biological, national, etc.), and what institutionalized children need shaped arguments for and against Russia's ban on U.S. adoptions. This additional analysis of U.S. and Russian media sources contributes to answering the question of how Russian adoptees become Americans, framing children's transformations from Russian to Russian-American or American (or not) within the national context, broadening the scope of what interviews alone would capture. To reiterate my commitment to transnational analysis, comparing media coverage from the two countries adds depth to this research, providing a comparative element that is too often missing from adoption research focused only on children in

their birth country or adoptive country. Analyzing Russian sources provided an additional answer to the question of how children were being used (Castañeda 2002) in this larger political conflict between the U.S. and Russia.

Why do discourses transmitted through the mass media matter? I begin from Michel Foucault's understanding of discourses, defined as "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (1972:49). Discourses are persuasive communication, intended to influence others to think in their terms. They shape how people think about objects, whether those objects are things, events, or other people; as a result, discourses also shape how people *act* in relation to those objects. Thus, discourses mold us into subjects who think and act in particularly ways— what is referred to as the productive power of discourse. Within a discourse, there is a symbolic order that relates different concepts, categories, and oppositions. This order, or way of knowing, is infused with power. In Foucault's terms, the relationship between power and knowledge is important in terms of what is made visible or invisible, and thus either possible or unthinkable, by dominant discourses. Therefore, what people know, whether gleaned from school, news, advertising, or other institutions, is the result of power struggles that simultaneously perpetuate some ways of thinking and foreclose others.

I follow those who build on Foucault to argue that discourses can be challenged and changed (Pêcheux and Nagpal 1982; Smith 1990). Key in this approach is reading against the grain and attending to silences, since discourses are "principally organized around practices of exclusion" (Mills 2004:11). Therefore, I attend to disruptions, silences, and exclusions—most notably the silence or rare instances of quoting birth mothers, institutional caretakers, or orphans and adoptees—in my analysis of the hegemonic "orphan rescue" discourse that the Dima

Yakovlev Law impelled U.S. and Russian media-makers to revisit.

As mentioned above, the symbolic order of discourses includes oppositions. Thus, my analysis of the discourses surrounding the adoption moratorium is attentive to U.S. civil society's polarized symbolic order, which elevates the United States as good, sacred, and democratic, while "they" (in this case, Russia) may be denigrated as bad, profane, and undemocratic (Alexander and Smith 1993). These divisions are what Lamont and Molnár (2002) term symbolic boundaries, and conflicts can transform them into social boundaries through codification in sanctions and other legal means. In other words, these categorizations not only affect the countries' (and their citizens') images of self and other, but can also shape international relations and translate into policy actions (Dell'Orto 2013).

This power in discourses is something which Foucault attends to but theorists such as Alexander and Smith (1993) ignore. The classificatory act is one that depends on the legitimacy of the classifier. Alexander writes that in conceptualizing the discourse of American civil society, he and Smith "draw upon historical notions of civilization and civility" (1993:160). Yet the U.S.'s notion of "civilized" has always been in opposition to the peoples white Americans are subjecting to colonialism. While Alexander's binary is useful for analyzing this discursive struggle between the U.S. and Russia, for my purposes it is more complete when paired with Edward Said's critique of Orientalism (1978) in relation to non-Western countries. One of the techniques for discounting any Russian criticism of the United States is by placing Russia on the side of "counterdemocracy." This Orientalizing move resonates with historical distrust of the Russian and Soviet state and suspicion over its "Eurasian" status, a liminal position geographically and symbolically. For an example of historical distrust of Russia in the near past,

see Alexander's own discussion of U.S. presidents' failure to completely reclassify Gorbachev as a trustworthy democratic partner to the U.S., despite Gorbachev's efforts to transform the Soviet Union through perestroika (1993:192-196). The genealogy of this Othering impulse toward Russia, a tendency to simultaneously condescend and evangelize to the U.S.'s "dark double," can be traced back even earlier in history as a recurring theme documented in U.S. newspapers and magazines, dating as far back as 1881 debates about whether U.S.-style democracy could take root in Russia after the assassination of Tsar Alexander II (Foglesong 2007). From the Russian side, the globalization of American media following the USSR's collapse has been perceived by many Russians scholars as a tool of political imposition (Pilkington et al. 2002). Thus, some scholars argue that U.S. political leaders and media-makers have expressed a recurring impulse to reform Russia in the U.S.'s image during moments of upheaval in Russia.

A final note on my approach to discourse analysis: I am also attentive to the *emotional* uses of adoption and adoptees in media, complementing my analysis of the lived experience of doing or performing adoptive family. Children serve as symbols of the family and of the nation both in the private realm and public discourses, so I will consider the emotional effects of these symbolic uses with both kinds of data. Discourses about humanitarian failures and successes such as those surrounding the Dima Yakovlev Law are high-stakes accusations and contestations over stigmatized identities. In such cases, it becomes apparent that discourses matter and shape action not only through what they make people *think*, but also through how they make people *feel*. The emotional aspect of discourse's power is underacknowledged in sociology, though Durkheim's discussion of the "classificatory function" explicitly discusses the importance of affect. Distinctions between sacred and profane, friend and enemy are the result of a process

"more affective than intellectual" (Durkheim and Mauss 1903 in Wray 2014:21{Citation}). Durkheim adds, "*[I]t is this emotional value of notions which plays the preponderant part* in the manner in which ideas are connected or separated" (Wray 2014:21, emphasis added). Thus, the power of discourses and cultural codes is in the categorizations, linkages, and oppositions they make seem logical, but also in that these connections appeal to people and "feel right," thereby inspiring people's allegiance to their storylines. To translate this from the language of sociology to the language of the Cold War: discourse's power is in lodging not only in minds, but also in hearts.

Ch. 3. "Only Americans Really Volunteer to Adopt Special Needs Children": Using Disability to Defend U.S. Exceptionalism

Dennis was adopted from Russia in the early 1990s, when he was four. Now a young adult, he prefers to downplay his physical disability, but he did share that his adoption story was featured on a television station in the community where he was adopted. The story aired over the span of three nights. In the style of silent movies which flashed text between visual shots, viewers of Dennis's story were told with a sense of melodrama, "[He] has met adoptive parents before…only to be rejected." In a teaser for the second night, the narrator intoned dramatically, "His life of hopelessness is about to change forever." Part two opens with a visual frame showing four toddlers sharing a large crib. The narrator speaks: "These are the faces nobody wants. Abandoned by their mothers, they're called throw-aways. They're born with serious birth defects, like one-month old Ivan." The camera shows an infant without legs. These are the sorts of melodramatic messages that have been transmitted to Americans about conditions for children in institutional care in post-socialist countries, part of what has stoked interest in adopting internationally.

The feature conveys a simple sense of boosterism, that coming to the U.S. will be a seamless upgrade that allows an adopted child to finally flourish. Dennis's adoptive parents voice this philosophy, in an interview woven into the televised story: "If we can help him know that he can do anything, then he can." Dennis's adoptive parents express optimism, a sense of life without obstacles, if only one believes. These are the fantasies that were internalized by many white adoptive parents and adoptees alike about what it would mean for institutionalized

children to be adopted by U.S. citizens, that a can-do attitude is all it would take to succeed.

The feature includes a cautionary tale about how most of these children's stories will play out if they remain in Russia and age out of care. The narrator intones: "Most will never be adopted. [*flashing children's faces*] By age 16, forced to leave [the children's home], fend for themselves or be further institutionalized." The feature cuts to Dennis's adoptive mom, who says that despite various physical disabilities, they are "all perfect children." Zooming out from the story of the particular children's home where Dennis was adopted from, text flashes across the screen: "There are Thousands of Orphans Waiting to be Adopted in Russia." Viewers in the U.S. are again being interpellated as they were when "Shame of a Nation" aired and focused Americans' attention on children's homes in Romania. This interpellation calls on U.S. viewers to save the "thousands" who are "waiting."

This message implies that viewers might think about charitable actions they can take abroad. They are not asked to think about what would improve marginalized children's well-being in their own country, such as poverty-fighting measures that could be adopted to provide systemic upstream solutions to children's institutionalization in post-socialist countries. They are not asked to think about the family policing system in the U.S. (Roberts 2022), about how in the U.S. poverty, particularly in non-white communities, is often either punitively or mistakenly interpreted as child neglect (Glaser 2023), or about what happens when U.S. youth age out of the foster care system.

Family care is implicitly lauded as the rightful place for children in Dennis's story. "For the first time in his four years, Dennis no longer lives with 60 other children. He has his own room; he has his own bed; he *truly* has a place to call home." In this telling, congregate living is

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no "true" home for a child. In this telling, middle-class white standards of family living rule: one bedroom per child equals a proper home. The TV coverage omits any time before institutionalization for Dennis—viewers do not know what conditions his birth family lived in. The story concludes with well-worn ways of seeing adoptees as chosen, saved, and thus obligated to feel grateful: "Dennis is one of the lucky ones. There are thousands of others in Russia just like Dennis, waiting to be adopted." Again, viewers are reminded that these children number in the thousands. An adoption agency representative is interviewed, and says, "We jokingly say we see 99% happy endings. That's the joy of working in adoption." What does a 'happy ending' look like? Who makes that assessment? And what does a happy ending mean in the context of an ongoing life and relationships, anyway?

The coverage frames Dennis's time in a state-run institution as one in which he experienced abandonment, rejection, and hopelessness. At the same time, Dennis's adoptive mom expressed the belief that those experiences could simply be shaken off ("If we can help him know that he can do anything, then he can"). In their interview with me, two decades later, Dennis's adoptive parents express a tempered sense of their potential influence as parents, Dennis's potential to shake off any ill effects of institutionalization and navigate adulthood, and wondered how the telling of his adoption story shaped his sense of self as he watched and re-watched the tape. Dennis's adoptive parents look back at the video as both a time capsule and also an unhelpful way of framing his experience, especially because Dennis repeatedly watched the story while he was growing up, seeing himself described as rejected and unwanted. His mom explained:

> They did a three-part series, first…that played three nights in a row, you know, when the stations are doing their ratings week, the ratings time, so it was three nights in a row, and
>
> then they did a follow-up a few months later. Um…and it won some prizes, some media

prizes nationally; it was nicely done. There are things about it that I think I regret now, that I – I wish hadn't been said, (*dad laughs softly*) but I think it also was really—you know, for [Dennis], he has no memory of the orphanage, with the exception of the memories that are on that tape, and they provided him with – who the caregivers were, who his friends were, what the orphanage looked like. When he was little, he would play that tape over and over and over again, and watch it and say, 'Oh, I'm so cute, and (*dad laughs*) look at me, you know, and there's my friend,' and um, so for that standpoint it was a really nice thing….

What I'm uncomfortable with now, and having had Dennis hear this over and over again because he watched it so many times, the lead-in to the three-part series always was, the newscaster's voice saying, "And coming up next, is the story of Dennis whose parents left him at the orphanage because he had [disability]." …Now– (*lowers voice*) that's the truth (*dad laughs*) – but, the – to have that over and over— (Dad (*softly*): Yeah.) That people didn't want you because [of your disability], at one point they said kids like this are called throw-aways. You know, stuff that TV does for sensationalizing things, that I wish now—just being protective that he hadn't had to hear. (*pause*) But it's also a reality. So. (*pause*)

The series garnered national acclaim, according to Dennis's mom, indicating that the telling of this adoption story resonated in the U.S. in the early 1990s. But how was adoption portrayed in the media when Russia eventually decided to end the adoption exchange in 2012? What can we learn from this U.S.-Russian conflict about how and when children are considered valuable and worthy of inclusion in the nation?

In this chapter, I analyze press accounts of adoption from the U.S. to Russia in both the U.S. and Russian press as Russia banned U.S. adoptions at the close of 2012. I find that the U.S. returns to defending transnational adoption as child rescue. The U.S. press invokes children with disabilities in particular to awaken a vision of helpless children "languishing" in group homes. With this framing, U.S. media responding to Russia's adoption ban revalorized adoption in the face of the Russian state's accusations that transnational adoption to the U.S. too often resulted

in neglect and abuse that went unpunished. Thus, U.S. media shored up a sense of American superiority in its treatment of children, and thus its superior values as embedded in Cold War-era cultural and political competitions between the two states. In contrast to how U.S. mainstream press accounts unanimously criticize the adoption ban, with a particular focus on "special needs" children, the Russian press provides a broader array of interpretations of the meaning of the adoption. Overall, these Russian press articles demonstrate that there was a fair bit of dissent from the Russian public and politicians over answering the Magnitsky Act with the Dima Yakovlev Law. At the end of the chapter, I discuss possible implications of paying attention to Russian accounts and the internal heterogeneity of opinion they highlight.

Discourses of Saving Children

To understand the U.S. media's response to Russia's adoption ban, it is instructive to consider how child-saving discourses have functioned in the past for similar populations of children. First, focusing on the happy lives of adopted children with disabilities uses Russian adoptees as poster children, similar to the mid-20th century "Jerry's kids" with telethon fundraisers or the March of Dimes. Poster children were oftentimes pretty white girls (Longmore 2013), not unlike the images of Russian adoptees that live in the popular imagination. Concretely, well-known Paralympians Jessica Long and Tatyana McFadden, both adopted from Russia, fit this pattern of pretty white female poster children for garnering sympathy and, as they rack up athletic achievements, admiration.[13] While Long and McFadden weren't featured on telethons, they have been exemplary supercrips (Schalk 2016) and ablenationalist role models (Mitchell and Snyder 2015), as high-achieving disabled athletes. Erevelles and Nguyen (2016) highlight how disability, gender, and age intersect so that disabled girls become "hyper-visible in

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[13] Long was featured in "Long Way Home: The Jessica Long Story" on NBC during the 2014 Sochi Olympics.

[their] ability to trigger an affective response" (3). This affective politics has been mobilized

through disabled adoptee bodies in recent years, with HBO's 2013 show *Miss You Can Do It*

featuring a disabled Ukrainian adoptee to bolster a sense of U.S. exceptionalism (Todd 2016).

Second, focusing on the happy lives of disabled Russian adoptees invokes the early 1990s U.S.

fascination with saving kids from post-socialist spaces that started with coverage of Romanian

disabled orphans in "Shame of a Nation" (Cartwright 2005). The broader national discursive

context of the 1990s is important, too: U.S. civil society's polarized symbolic order elevates the

United States as good, sacred, and democratic, while "they" (in this case, Russia) may be

denigrated as bad, profane, and undemocratic (Alexander and Smith 1993). Finally, the coverage

of Russia's adoption moratorium continues patterns of child-saving discourses that silence and

infantilize children (Baden and O'Leary Wiley 2007) by not including adoptees as sources in

these stories, marginalization amplified even further because of the infantilization of disabled

people (Capri and Swartz 2018). Age- and disability-based marginalization and silencing

intersect to make disabled adoptees the objects rather than the subjects of U.S. editorializing

about Russia's adoption ban.

Focusing on the happy lives of disabled adoptees obscures the tenuous claims to

citizenship and whiteness that disabled people have historically had in the U.S. with the

interweavings of eugenics, racism and xenophobia since the 19th century. Dolmage (2011) traces

how illness and disability were grounds for excluding would-be immigrants to the U.S. when

they were inspected at Ellis Island, and that "disabled bodies were 'raced' as nonwhite, or as

disqualified whites" (49). Stubblefield argues that in the early twentieth century U.S., the

concept of feeblemindedness–a catch-all term for anyone deemed socially unproductive–came to

operate as an umbrella concept that linked off-white ethnicity, poverty, and gendered conceptions of lack of moral character together and that feeblemindedness thus understood functioned as the signifier of tainted whiteness. "Off-white" ethnicity referred to people of Eastern European, Mediterranean, or Irish rather than Anglo-Saxon or Nordic descent (Stubblefield 2007:163). Relatedly, the U.S. media's focus on saving disabled children obscures the hierarchy of disability underlying the work that prospective parents and medical professionals have done to suss out and exclude from the adoption pipeline children they would deem "unfit" for adoption by screening for fetal alcohol syndrome disorder (Cartwright 2005). In practice, not all disabilities are desirable to American adopters, contrary to U.S. media narratives decrying Russia's adoption moratorium.

To interrogate U.S. media narratives on adoption from Russia following Russia's decision to halt adoptions, I searched LexisNexis for "Russian adoption ban" from Dec. 27, 2012 through January 27, 2013, to capture U.S. press coverage from the time of President Putin approving the moratorium through the ensuing reactions from Russian and U.S. officials, the Russian public, and prospective U.S. adopters. The sample includes 29 press accounts from the *New York Times* (n=17)*, USA Today* (n=2)*, and Washington Post* (n=10). These newspapers were selected for their relatively large and broad national readership (Adams and Coltrane 2007:26; Waggenspack 1998:63). I draw the fifteen Russian press accounts from *The Current Digest of the Russian Press*, a selection of English translations provided by East View Press. To analyze these press accounts, I employed grounded theory (Charmaz 2006) to closely read, re-read, and code the articles. The prominence of disability talk emerged from this analysis.

U.S. media sources cast halting adoptions as a wrongful interruption of child circulation, conceived as moving children from congregate care institutions to their "rightful" places in private homes in the U.S. The Russian law is portrayed as victimizing children in general, harming children with medical conditions in particular. Namely, U.S. press accounts focus on Russian children with illnesses and physical disabilities recognizable to a general U.S. readership, clear-cut impairments capable of eliciting unequivocal sympathy, as opposed to the behavioral issues highlighted in prior years' negative coverage of international adoptees (Jacobson 2014).

In the stories about the ban, there is no mention of adoptive parents disenchanted with the pathologies of "post-institutionalized children" from East Europe, a framing identified in earlier U.S. media coverage and public opinion (Cartwright 2005; Jacobson 2014; Sadowski-Smith 2011, 2018). Instead, Russian children/adoptees are cast as good and innocent, and any problems they have are medicalized, making them need American families with access to the U.S. healthcare system, rather than disqualified from belonging to them. They are placed back in the category of at-risk children, victimized by the decision of the vengeful Russian state.

To cast children from Russia as deserving potential adoptees, the Apollonian perspective of "children as innocent" as well as vulnerable and in need of protection is used (Mills and Mills 2002). This contrasts with earlier coverage of international adoption, and the finding that the majority of stories about international adoption in U.S. papers in the 1990s and first decade of the 2000s were negative and the second most common narrative of negativity being damaged children, particularly those from Russia (Jacobson 2014:661). Innocence and vulnerability are

established by emphasizing children's medical problems or disabilities and how that leaves them as unwanted and insufficiently cared for in Russia.

News stories from *USA Today* and the *Washington Post* exemplify how this is accomplished in U.S. media coverage of the adoption ban:

> Yet [Adam Pertman, executive director of the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute] says the 19 Russian kids who have died at the hands of their American parents are a tiny fraction of the 60,000 Russian orphans adopted since 1992, many of whom have special needs. (*USA Today* Dec. 27, 2012)
>
> [T]he vast majority of the nearly 60,000 adoptions by American couples over the past two decades have enabled Russian children, some with severe disabilities, to lead happy lives. (*Washington Post* Editorial Jan. 2, 2013)

In the *USA Today* article above, the framing in defense of adoption to the U.S. is particularly slippery. On one hand, "special needs" continues to be euphemistically used to denote disability in the U.S. This kind of euphemistic language critiqued in disability studies, where phrases like "special people/children" elicit cringing, since such terms "convey the boosterism and do-gooder mentality endemic to the paternalistic agencies that control many disabled people's lives" (Linton 1998:14). Within the world of adoption specifically, "special needs" is broadly construed. As Quiroz (2007) explains, "children used to be labeled 'unadoptable' (now 'hard to place' or 'special needs') because of their age, physical or mental limitations, or race" (44). Quiroz finds in her analysis of U.S. adoption agency materials that "special needs" is sometimes explicitly used to contrast with "healthy Caucasian infants." Thus, Pertman's comment in *USA Today* can be taken to nod euphemistically toward disability as in physical or mental impairments, but it can also indicate the age at which children from Russia are adopted (oftentimes later than infancy or toddlerhood), or their belonging to an ethnic

minority within Russia, increasing the likelihood of parental poverty or relinquishment as well as decreasing the likelihood that white parents, whether Russian or foreign, would adopt them because they would not pass as a biological family. The *Washington Post* editorial, published a few days later, appears to paraphrase the *USA Today* article. However, rather than using the phrase "special needs," the *Post* editorial names disability explicitly and goes on to argue that the outcome of those adoptions, in the "vast majority" of cases, is adoptees "lead[ing] happy lives." Both articles suggest that "special needs" children or adoptees "with severe disabilities" are a sizeable group among Russian adoptees in the U.S. in order to emphasize that adoption to the U.S. has been a net good. The same emphasis appears in a *New York Times* parenting blog entry later in the week:

> There are many ways to look at international adoptions, and even many possible views regarding adoptions from Russia in particular. But behind every one of those stories, there is a child. A 5-year-old who has been speaking on the phone every week to his promised parents, Russian-speakers raised in Russian families. A 3-year-old girl who is H.I.V. positive. (*New York Times* Motherlode Blog Dec. 29, 2012)

While the blog author initially concedes that "[t]here are many ways to look at international adoptions," she then elucidates her own position with her emphasis on the child "behind every one of those stories" and her chosen examples of a young girl with HIV and a boy who would be able to speak Russian with his adoptive parents, themselves part of Russian immigrant families in the U.S. Rather than making some sort of quantified claim about adoption as a social good ("60,000 Russian orphans adopted…many of them with special needs"), this author instead highlights families that may well be anomalous, but that evoke ideas of generosity, care, and closeness tied up in Americans adopting a child with a known illness or

being able to speak a transnational adoptee's first language. Of course, these invocations are depoliticized, not probing what the situation with access to HIV medication is in Russia or the U.S. for poor birth mothers and others in the "viral underclass" versus for middle-class Americans (Thrasher 2022). Nowadays, HIV medications can allow HIV-positive individuals to live long lives with undetectable viral loads and not to pass the virus on to sexual partners or children. But these medications are also cost-prohibitive: a 2015 study using 2012 U.S. health care expenditure data estimated that the discounted lifetime medical costs for an individual who acquires HIV at age 35 is $326,500 ($597,300 undiscounted), with 60% of the costs attributable to antiretroviral therapy (Schackman et al. 2015). Behind every HIV story are the questions of citizenship and insurance that make it possible, or not, to access antiretroviral therapy.

In the same vein as the Motherlode blog post is a story the following month from the *Times*:

> Despite the adoption ban that has roiled the Russian public and deeply splintered the country's political and intellectual establishment, Rebecca and Brian Preece arrived here from Idaho on Monday expecting to pick up their new child, a 4-year-old boy with Down syndrome. They plan to call him Gabriel (*New York Times* Jan. 16, 2013).

Again, adoption as a hopeful act placing disabled children in a loving "forever home" is the understanding that animates this description of the Preeces and their planned adoption of a child with Down Syndrome. It's a snapshot of faith and hope – that they can complete their adoption, and that they will name the child after an archangel. The article also emphasizes that some Russians are still in favor of international adoption, explaining the ban as something "that has roiled the Russian public and deeply splintered the country's political and intellectual establishment" between those who support and oppose the ban.

The news coverage of potential adoptees as innocent and deserving of family care in the

U.S. finds purchase in quoting Russian sources who agree, again insofar as disabled or ill

children are concerned. These are a few examples of articles quoting Russians who oppose the

moratorium:

> Robert Schlegel, a lawmaker from the majority United Russia party, which championed
> the adoption ban in the lower house of Parliament, posted on Twitter that he had
> proposed an amendment that would create an exception to the ban for children with
> disabilities. *(New York Times* Dec. 29, 2012)

> All week, prominent entertainers have been promoting [a demonstration against the
> legislators who backed the ban] by posting video clips online in which they explain --
> often emotionally -- why they are opposed to banning adoption by Americans. "It's a
> horrible story," said Liya Akhedzhakova, an actress beloved for Soviet-era comedies.
> "The most defenseless, unwanted children who are not quite healthy when they are born -
> - they are not needed by anyone." *(New York Times* Jan. 11, 2013)

> The authorities "expected that, as usual, we would swallow it, keep quiet," [Yelena
> Rostova, 61, a Russian protesting the adoption ban] said. "We have had two weeks to
> think about this law, and not everyone understood right away, but as time passed, people
> realized what it means to leave invalids, sick children, in Russia, where there is no help.
> Everyone knows what kind of medicine we have here." *(New York Times* Jan. 14, 2013)

The above excerpts quote Russian sources who hold that the moratorium is blocking the

movement of innocent children whose health is at risk if they are not adopted. Positions such as

these, of course, can also be read through a biopolitical lens – in other words, their statements

indicate a position of "let the Americans take children with medical problems," whose assumed

defects make them unwanted as part of the Russian body politic. Rather than national resource

extraction, then, this form of child circulation could be understood as akin to Russians approving

offloading 'damaged goods' to another country. Whatever the motivation driving Russians

objecting to the adoption moratorium, their conclusion is the same: let disabled Russian children

be adopted to the U.S.

Finally, one *Times* article discussed a Russian newspaper challenging the idea that Americans disproportionately adopt children with disabilities. However, the *Times* article went on to quote a Russian source who disputed the *Komsomolskaya Pravda* report:

> On Tuesday, a report in the newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda* was tilted heavily in favor of the ban and sought to dispel "myths" that adoptions by Americans were necessary to help sick children or because orphanages are underfinanced and not enough Russians want to adopt. The newspaper cited government statistics showing that fewer than 10 percent of Russian children adopted by Americans in each of the last five years were considered disabled.
>
> But Ms. Prozorova, who has worked in the field of international adoptions for 14 years, said that the report was misleading because virtually no one else was willing to adopt disabled children.
>
> "People who are involved in this problem -- I mean even higher-level authorities -- they know only Americans really volunteer to adopt special needs children," she said. "No Italian, no French, no Germans." She said that in recent years she had helped facilitate adoptions of children with H.I.V., spina bifida, cerebral palsy and other illnesses and disabilities. (*New York Times* Jan. 16, 2013)

In this article, the claims of a Soviet-holdover tabloid are pitted against an experienced international adoption industry professional whose years of work are emphasized. The tabloid is one of the highest-circulation papers in Russia, so ostensibly has great reach within Russia. But for readers of the *Times*, Prozorova is given the last word: "only Americans really volunteer to adopt special needs children." Americans, she emphasizes, are willing to take in and care for "special needs children." As discussed above, this is a phrase which in the adoption industry is a catch-all and synonymous with less desirable not only in terms of disability but also because of a child's minoritized race or ethnicity, age, or being a part of a sibling group. Yet in this context, with the ensuing laundry list of "HIV, spina bifida, cerebral palsy, and other illnesses and

disabilities," special needs once again shrinks to its usage as a euphemism for ill and disabled bodies. Prozorova contrasts Americans with Europeans, insinuating there is something cultural at work, rather than just general wealth or a broadly Western openness to parenting such children. This reinforces the narrative of American exceptionalism and humanitarianism implicit in taking in children with disabilities.

The Russian press response

Looking at Russian media coverage of the Dima Yakovlev Law yields greater insight into Russian arguments referenced in the January 16 *New York Times* article. First, I offer a deep dive into an article from Russia's most widely circulating weekly newspaper *Argumenty i Fakty (AiF)*, in which the Russian state (Edinaya Rossiya, or United Russia, ruling party) perspective is put forth on the Dima Yakovlev Law that banned U.S. adoptions of Russian children. Then, I delve into a broader analysis of press attention to the adoption ban during roughly the same period as I reviewed in the U.S. press.

The *AiF* article was published December 19, 2012. The law including the adoption ban subsequently passed in both houses of the Russian parliament, was signed by the president, and went into effect on January 1, 2013.

Concluding with extensive quotes from President Vladimir Putin and Pavel Danilin, a United Russia-affiliated political scientist, the article first discusses the Magnitsky Act, and how it comes three years after whistleblower Sergei Magnitsky's death. The underlying message to this delayed response on the part of the Americans is that such a delay makes suspect the sincerity of the care for an alleged human rights violation in Magnitsky's death. The article then lays out the Dima Yakovlev Law as a "hard-nosed response"[14] by representatives from Russia's

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[14] Translations of the *AiF* article from Russian to English are my own.

main political parties, arguing that it is a unified response. You won't push us Russians around, the article author insinuates through his choice of the adjective "hard-nosed." Duma members name the law after Dima Yakovlev, at the behest of the United Russia members, demonstrating that Russians can also dig through the recent past to invoke untimely deaths on the other country's watch.

The law is named after a toddler, who, according to the article, "perished in frightful agony" when his American adoptive father forgot to drop him off at daycare and instead left him in the car on a sunny day. Using their Russian birth names, the article goes on to list a couple more of the children who had died after being adopted to parents in the U.S. – a bruise-covered seven-year-old who died from bleeding around his brain (not included: his adoptive parents were convicted of involuntary manslaughter) and a starved eight-year-old (not included: his adoptive parents pled guilty to child abuse resulting in death and were sentenced to 22 years in prison).

Then, the article cites Edinaya Rossiya commentator Danilin at length: "The [Magnitsky] Act was a slap in the face and an affront to the entire country; the response was a matter of principle." Danilin continues, "Moral rectitude, humanism obviously is on our side: we are using our laws to protect namely our own citizens, children." Danilin makes an argument about where the children in question belong: under Russian jurisdiction. Common sense is on the Russian side, too, according to Danilin: "Indeed, if you analyze the ugly incidents with the American justice system in relation to the parents who tortured or killed their children adopted from Russia, then the predetermined outcome is obvious." [15] The Dima Yakovlev Law is a foregone

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[15] While this article is seeking to make the case that the Dima Yakovlev is an appropriate response to U.S. citizen wrongdoing that has gone unpunished, it does not explain that in the two cases it lists to expand on Dima Yakovlev, the adoptive parents were imprisoned. In the case of Dima, who was renamed Chase Harrison when he was adopted, adoptive father Miles Harrison was acquitted. The judge ruled that while Harrison was "plainly negligent," he had not shown "callous disregard for human life," and so was not convicted of involuntary manslaughter (Barry 2009). Harrison's experience was featured alongside other parents who had also forgotten

conclusion and an act of child protection, Danilin argues—rather than, say, a political tit-for-tat

coming hot on the heels of the Magnitsky Act, years after these adoptees' deaths.

In addition to Danilin's pro-Russian evaluation of the situation, the article includes

quotation from Putin as he met with Russian lawmakers: "What bothers us is not these tragedies,

although it is the most horrifying thing that could happen, as much as the reaction of the

authorities, the exculpatory response. That's what's bad." Here, Putin practices apophasis, the

rhetorical practice of bringing up a subject by denying it – that adoptees' death "is the most

horrifying thing that could happen." He then suggests it is the authorities' non-response that

Russia is reacting so strongly to. Yet two of the three cases invoked in this article did result in

the parents being found guilty in U.S. courts and imprisoned.

President Putin has the last word in this *AiF* article, addressing the authors of the

Magnitsky Act:

> A person died. He [Magnitksy] passed away in prison. That's a tragedy, of course. But
> what, in your prisons no one dies? Listen, Guantanamo already hasn't been closed for
> eight years, they hold people there without trial or investigation, like in the Middle Ages,
> they walk around in shackles. People who open secret prisons, legalized torture in the
> course of investigation… And these are the people who point out some sort of our
> deficiencies.

In this example of Russian media, then, the U.S. is thoroughly critiqued, not only for the

deaths of adoptees at the hands of U.S. citizen adopters, but also for broader issues of state-

perpetuated injustices such as the human rights abuses evident in the ongoing operation of the

military prison at Guantanamo Bay. In this telling of Russia's decision to ban adoptions to the

U.S., there is no mention of "special needs children" "leading happy lives" abroad; instead,

Russian readers are called upon to envision U.S. authorities shackling and torturing people in

their children in cars, causing death by hyperthermia, in a Pulitzer Prize–winning *Washington Post* magazine story
entitled "Fatal Distraction" (Weingarten 2009).

secret prisons. Both this *AiF* article and the U.S. accounts point at suffering in institutional settings, but in focusing on different institutions they are able to come to diametrically opposed conclusions about which country is upholding human rights and dignity. The U.S. is no defender of human rights, the *AiF* articles argues, and its invocation of Magnitsky's death as a cause for U.S. concern is hypocritical given its own failings. Looking more broadly at Russian media coverage from this period, however, highlights the conflict within Russia over the adoption ban. Other press accounts do not simply parrot the main Edinaya Rossiya position in support of the law. Instead, a more nuanced discussion of child welfare within Russia emerges.

The Russian press began covering the proposed adoption ban during the week of December 10, 2012. This is shortly after the Magnitsky Act passes the U.S. Senate on December 6, 2012, but before President Obama signs it into law on December 14, 2012. Here, I analyze fifteen Russian press articles that discuss the ban in December 2012 and January 2013, covering roughly the same period of press attention that I do in the U.S. I start the analysis sooner on the Russian side since the Russian press begins to cover the issue as it makes its way through Russian parliament. I draw the Russian press accounts from *The Current Digest of the Russian Press*, a selection of English translations provided by East View Press.

The 10 Dec 2012 digest includes two articles critiquing the Dima Yakovlev Law from the critical independent tri-weekly newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* (circulation – 90K+, publication suspended after 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine; perhaps best known as the publication employing Anna Politkovskaya, a murdered investigative reporter who had covered politics including the Second Chechen War). The first *Novaya Gazeta* article (Girin 2012) quotes political analyst Dmitry Oreshkin, who

believes the bill to be nonsense, a public relations stunt: 'The line about "our little ones being persecuted in the US" is a PR move aimed at Russian mommies and daddies, who are supposed to be outraged at the excesses of American imperialism. […] children are the best bearers of the advertising message. They evoke the greatest emotional involvement. It's not very smart, and it's not a rebuff to the Americans. This is an act for domestic consumption.'"

This is a Russian press critique of using children for political ends, which the Oreshkin frames as aiming to outrage Russian parents by focusing their attention on "the excesses of American imperialism." In terms of silences, there is no discussion of disabled children or outcomes for Russia's institutionalized children with the pathway to adoption to the U.S. foreclosed.

The second *Novaya Gazeta* article (Chernova 2012) critiques the proponents of the adoption ban for "us[ing] children as a cover in grown-up fights," particularly for "taking advantage of this child's tragedy in order to defend the interests of a few dozen corrupt Russian officials - who, after landing on the Magnitsky List, will suffer mainly […from] their frozen American bank accounts." Chernova's commentary digs into child welfare data in Russia, including how children adopted by Russians have fared. "[A]ccording to data from six years ago (more recent statistics could not be found), it turns out that in Russia, during the 15 years following the collapse of the USSR, 1,220 children adopted by Russian citizens died," Chernova writes. After highlighting this sobering figure, Chernova continues by noting that tens of thousands of children are orphaned or otherwise separated from their parents. "The deputies have never once displayed such outrage over these children," Chernova writes. This article *does* cover the issue of children with disabilities and voices critique similar to what I find in the American press:

According to the accepted standards, a child may be placed for adoption with a foreign family when no adoptive parents have been found for the child in Russia. The overwhelming majority of these children suffer either from congenital illnesses or behavioral problems. And finding families for children like that is a big job. They have no other chance at living a full life. Now those chances are being minimized by a démarche made by legislators just for show.

Here, the framing is that of children "suffer[ing] either from congenital illnesses or behavior problems" who, through adoption, get a singular "chance at living a full life." Chernova makes an unsubstantiated claim that these children make up "the overwhelming majority" of Russian children who are adopted internationally. Thus, similar to the U.S. press accounts, this article emphasizes children's medical and behavioral care needs as justifying international adoptions.

The following week there is more discussion of the ban. The 17 Dec 2012 digest includes six articles from three Russian sources, the center-right *Kommersant* (4 articles; circulation – 131K), the pro-government *Izvestia* (1 article; circulation – 234K+) , and the centrist *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (1 article; circulation – 40K).

A Dec 19 article in *Kommersant* again gives voice to those who disagree with the ban, including from within the government: "Education Minister Dmitry Livanov was the first to say that this 'eye for an eye' mindset, which could make children suffer, is wrong." Concurring with Livanov, Deputy Prime Minister for Social Issues Olga Golodets is quoted as saying, "When the issue concerns children, we should put their interests above all else." Even Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov spoke against the ban: "This is wrong, and I'm sure that in the final outcome, the State Duma will make a balanced decision." Finally, the head of the Public Chamber's social policy commission (the Public Chamber is a consulting body to Russian parliament) also

condemned the ban, asserting, "The deputies do not have the moral right to bring children into this," in a statement that directly challenges the position of Danilin quoted in the *AiF* article of December 12, that the ban is upheld by clear "moral rectitude." While children with disabilities in particular aren't mentioned in this *Kommersant* article, it does highlight several prominent political actors disagreeing with banning adoption.

In the new year, the 01 Jan and 14 Jan 2013 digests include continued coverage of the ban from *Kommersant*, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, *Vedomosti*, and *Novaya Gazeta*.[16] The 14 Jan 2013 digest includes five articles from three publications, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (1 article), *Novaya Gazeta* (2 articles), and the business daily *Vedomosti* (2 articles; circulation – 64K).

A January 14 editorial in *Vedomosti* directly addresses international adoption as a lucrative industry that commodifies children, an omission that I had critiqued the U.S. press for. While proponents of the adoption ban framed U.S. citizens adopting Russian children as child trafficking, the editorial countered with a critique of Russian practices:

> "Trafficking" in foreign adoptions has always involved a large number of bribes that adoptive parents (not only Americans) have to give to employees of medical and custodial institutions - i.e., Russian bureaucrats. Resounding statements from "patriots" about stopping the "export of orphans" imply the existence of a domestic market in orphans; it is silly to bandy such words about. As a matter of fact, they are an assessment of the adoption mechanism - and that mechanism is a purely Russian product.

A January 16 *Novaya Gazeta* article closes with another internal critique of Russian realities by providing statistics on children without parental care, juxtaposing the current number of such children against how many there were at the close of World War Two. The contemporary numbers are nearly as high as when the cause was wartime death of parents:

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[16] While the January 1 digest includes only one article mentioning the ban, this is likely due to a quieter political news cycle during the Russian New Year's celebrations at the beginning of January.

In May 1945, there were 678,000 orphans in the USSR, most of whom had parents who were killed during the war.

The total number of children without parental care as of the end of 2011 was 654,355 - 80% of them social orphans.

While U.S. media audiences have been interpellated to be savior-adopters of foreign children without parental care and with insufficient institutional care, here Russian readers are left to sit with a vision of parentless children in twenty-first century Russia invoking those of the postwar period in sheer numbers.

What Disability Does in U.S. and Russian Media Narratives of Adoption from Russia

This imaginary of disabled and ill children abandoned by the Russian state, "languishing" in institutions, and in need of adoption by U.S. citizens in order to live happy lives undergirds the U.S. media's defense of international adoption, reinscribing adoption and inclusion in the U.S. nation and families as the "common sense" solution for these children. This is articulated in three main ways. (1) Focusing on the subpopulation of institutionalized children/adoptees with disabilities reinforces the idea of adoption as child rescue or as providing individualized aid within a development paradigm. It adds another layer of imagined vulnerability on top of that of age. It frames these children as needing rescue not only for the general age-based reasons of gaining the protection and care of adults, but also because this will allow them to access the medical care and parental advocacy that result in a happy life as a disabled person. (2) Second, the focus on children with disabilities naturalizes their silence in these narratives. This silencing builds on an assumption that children in general, and children with disabilities in particular, cannot or need not speak for themselves about what constitutes a good life. The silence of

disabled adoptees means that there is no disagreement from adoptees themselves about these supposed fairy tale endings to being adopted. No competing narratives highlighting challenges, disappointments, or their experiences of discrimination and exclusion in the U.S. is presented. But such critiques of adoption's shortcomings are prevalent in critical adoption studies literature (Kim 2021; Kim and Park Nelson 2019; Koskinen 2015), though completely omitted from U.S. media coverage of Russia's adoption ban. (3) Finally, alongside silencing adoptees with disabilities, this focus on disabled children being better off in the U.S. also fails to mention the work that disabled U.S. activists have done in the second half of the 20th century and into the start of the 21st to change cultural attitudes, to get laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act passed, and to close abusive institutions which warehoused people with disabilities so that they can instead attend integrated schools and live in family and community settings. Disabled children in the United States have a different set of opportunities than they do in Russia because of decades of work and struggle by disabled people, as well as by parents and politicians (Carey, Block, and Scotch 2020; Pettinicchio 2019). This sociohistorical context is omitted in the U.S. media's nationalistic narrative which casts the United States and its citizen-adoptive parents as morally superior. In this framework, the American state and adoptive parents are simply more caring and inclusive than Russia in a conflict portrayed as only about humanitarianism and child welfare rather than as the persistent impulse for the U.S. to "liberate" Russia(ns) that reaches back to the late 19th century (Foglesong 2007). The U.S media's focus on disabled children reinforces national-level and family-based inclusion in the American nation for adoptees, rather than possible connections to disability community, the Russian diaspora, or broader immigrant community within the U.S. It focuses on family as the institution through which people belong

and are granted rights, not through civil society groups united through shared identities or coalitional politics engaged in struggles to gain rights. In this way, the media's defense of U.S.-Russian adoption echoes U.S. discourses of the Cold War era around superpower antagonism and Western superiority (Klein 2003). It also recalls the mid-20th century U.S. practices of "domestic containment" among middle-class whites that included an individualizing approach to societal issues, "undermin[ing] the potential for political activism" (May 1988:14).

While U.S. mainstream press accounts are uniformly critical of the adoption ban, latching onto the figuration of the "special needs" child to make their point, the Russian press highlights contestations among Russians, the political elite as well as everyday citizens voicing dissent, over the adoption ban and what it means for Russians, particularly institutionalized children. The coverage sometimes invokes ill and disabled children, but the critical engagement is more wide-ranging. While U.S. press accounts focused on Russian children with illnesses and physical disabilities recognizable to a general U.S. readership, clear-cut impairments capable of eliciting unequivocal sympathy, the Russian press did mention the behavioral issues highlighted in prior years' negative coverage of international adoptees (Jacobson 2014). Overall, these Russian press articles demonstrate that there was a fair bit of dissent displayed in the Russian press. One insight this provides is that when the U.S. press, politicians, and public focus most intently on Putin and the Russian government's ultimate actions, we lose sight of the heterogeneity of opinions within Russia and therefore lose the opportunity to see pathways toward different outcomes.

Ch. 4. Forming and Performing Family: Boundary Making and Privilege in U.S.-Russian Adoptive Families

Support for transnational adoption from Russia relied primarily on a nationalistic position on intercountry adoption as "granting children happy lives." These defenses peppered the front pages, editorials, and parenting sections of U.S. newspapers in response to Russia's 2012 decision to halt future adoptions to the United States. Russia's decision came as a tit-for-tat blow to American(s') interests, just days after the U.S. passed the Magnitsky Act leveling financial sanctions and travel restrictions on Russians connected to the 2009 death of corruption-exposing tax advisor Sergei Magnitsky.

This nationalistic discourse about how adoptees' stories typically end happily upon being taken into families in the U.S. not only sidesteps the geopolitics which made the exchange of children between the former Cold War superpowers possible, and then again impossible, all in the span of a few decades. Such reductionist nationalism also elides the work of legally *becoming* a family and the everyday practices that "doing family" encompasses for these children and adults who were once strangers. It obscures the vectors of privilege and oppression which can shape adoptive families' experiences of adopting/being adopted. Namely, parents' and children's race and ethnicity, social class, gender, marital status, age, and sexuality are often left unexamined when adoption is viewed through a normative lens, a good or bad binary, happily ever after or not.

There are a few recent exceptions to the above critique however. First, Powell et al. (2016) reviewed the sociological literature on adoption and found that adoptive parents tend to

invest heavily in their children, implying that these parents *have* the resources to invest through social class status and access to wealth. Second, Elizabeth Raleigh (2012) provides a quantitative analysis of adoption in the U.S. as a process of matchmaking shaped by vectors of privilege and oppression of both the children and the adults involved that illuminates some of the social forces at work. Analyzing a national sample of adoptive households, Raleigh finds that "nontraditional" same-sex and single adoptive parents are the most likely to adopt children of color, particularly Black children. In other words, Raleigh found that parents who are marginalized by marital status, family type, or homophobia are more likely to adopt children marginalized by racism.

In this chapter, I build on these survey-based inquiries with qualitative data to illustrate the various dimensions of privilege and oppression at play in the lives of Russian children and the U.S. citizen adults who adopt them, and how ideologies of family and adoption as child rescue inform and are informed by how they come together and perform family. In the previous chapter I focused on ableism and ideas around disability as forces shaping how adoptive families come to be, where "common sense" indicates Russian adoptees should grow up, and how adoptees and adoptive families were portrayed in the media to further nationalistic ends. In this chapter, I highlight parents' experiences of adopting from Russia, thinking about how they give accounts of the process of drawing boundaries around who now "counts" as family and what activities the family shares as adoptive parents work to transform adoptees into American children and to do culture-keeping (or not) as a family now putatively Russian-American. In particular, I consider how social class/wealth, gender, and sexuality shape adoptive parents' expectations of becoming a family as well as how adoptive parents and adoptees think about biological siblings and their place within or outside the boundaries of the new legally established

adoptive family.

My first argument in this chapter is that before adoptive parents could claim a child from Russia and draw boundaries around "their" family, adopting from Russia entailed having to seek permission to parent from various gatekeepers in the U.S. as well as abroad. This process involved experiences of submitting to surveillance that many adoptive parents found demanding and invasive for them as people who typically have been privileged in the U.S. through citizenship, being racialized as white, and having high socioeconomic status. This process of voluntarily submitting to adoption agency and state scrutiny contrasts with how birth parents in Russia often lose custody of their children, as I discussed in chapter 2. When economically vulnerable mothers interact with representatives of the Russian state, they are likely to lose custody of their children, with some of the requirements to regain custody of children unknown to parents until after the state has custody of children. These requirements include demands that parents improve their housing, find better-paying employment or otherwise increase their income, major life overhauls which some parents are unable to accomplish on the timeline necessary to reclaim their children (Rockhill 2010:88). Gaining permission to parent adopted children similarly contrasts with the experiences of many marginalized parents in the U.S. who disproportionately face child protective services interventions, and whose "fitness" to parent is oftentimes questioned because they are impoverished and/or racialized as BIPOC (Fong 2020; Roberts 2022). In other words, this chapter is an example of "studying up" to examine the experiences and perspectives of primarily privileged, white adoptive parents, during an invasive process atypical for those of their social status (Cassell 1988). I illustrate how these adults come to belong as parents, a normative status in the U.S. I highlight how the boundaries of family have

come to encompass these adoptive families through the cleaving of birth families. My intention is to provide this as an empirical case of adoption as a reproductive justice issue (McKee 2018), illustrating the interconnectedness of privilege and oppression in who may raise U.S. citizens, to play on Dorothy Roberts' (1998) phrasing. McKee argues that adoption is a reproductive justice issue because it comes up against the right to parent the children one gives birth to, and that "beneficiaries of adoption as well as other reproductive technologies predominantly operate as a racialized and privileged class of the world's population" (2018:75). As such, having to seek out permission to parent can rankle some prospective adopters whose racialized and social class-based expectations of privacy and autonomy are upset by adoption's gatekeepers.

My second argument engages the family literature that finds that doing family includes not only the work of building and maintaining familial connections through interactions and activities between family members, but also defining new family boundaries in the face of ambiguity (DiGiovanni and Font 2021; Hertz and Nelson 2019; Sarkisian 2006). Examining how adoptive parents and adoptees navigate this process of defining new family boundaries provides an opportunity to think through not just how an adoptee joins a family in the U.S., but also who is incorporated at a distance, sometimes shifting "immediate family" to geographically distant relatives, or simply left out of the new family, and by whose authority. Negotiating these familial boundaries is predicated on the fact that many post-Soviet adoptees are "social orphans" (Herman 2008). In other words, many children still have living family members, including not just biological siblings but also parents, but they become available for adoption for reasons other than parental death.

In what follows, I focus first on adoptees who have biological siblings still in Russia.

Adoptive parents may decide to adopt some or all of the siblings or only adopt a single child, and then decide what relationship to foster with their adopted child's biological siblings back in Russia. Second, I consider culture-keeping which establishes the boundaries not around *who* counts as family, but *what activities* make their family "Russian-American" (or not), and how the particular activity of taking an adoptee back to visit Russia is typically avoided. Transnational adoptees from Russia are Americanized and familialized/nuclearized, as Pate (2014) argues. But in the case of adoptees from the former Second World, I find that the specter of the military haunting these adoptions is not the U.S. military, as was the case with the more often studied transnational adoption pipeline from Korea and Vietnam (Brian 2012; Kim 2010; Pate 2014; Willing 2006). Instead, the specter of the military haunting these adoptions is the Russian military, and the imagined threat among adoptive parents of conscription upon return because of adoptees' dual citizenship.

Ideologies of Family

How people understand and enact "family" has changed over time. The nuclear families which U.S. adoptive parents in the 1990s and 2000s were forming with Russian adoptees can be understood as a culturally and historically specific way of ordering a household and conceiving of kinship. The rise of the nuclear family is a feature of a historical moment where family is very much circumscribed, and that specific family form puts particular pressures on adoptees and adopting parents.

Part of the context for doing family for adoptive families is the Western bias that has persisted since the nineteenth century toward biological, nuclear family, what anthropologist Signe Howell deems "biocentrism" (2009). Similar to the idea of biocentrism from anthropology,

Dorothy Smith's (1993) Standard North American Family (SNAF) is a well-established sociological understanding of hegemonic Western values of family that gives insight into the sorts of families U.S. adoptive parents aspire to form. Smith argues that SNAF, which she refers to as an ideological code, informs thinking about "the family," from the academic to the cultural. Smith lays out SNAF as

> a conception of the family as a legally married couple sharing a household. The adult male is in paid employment; his earnings provide the economic basis of the family-household. The adult female may also earn an income, but her primary responsibility is to the care of husband, household, and children. Adult male and female may be parents (in whatever legal sense) of children also resident in the household (1993:52).

Smith does not mention biological ties between parents and children as required elements of SNAF. The other elements of SNAF fit the typical mold of what adoptive families must conform to ideologically as well as to be granted permission to adopt, though with exceptions for women's employment and some adoptions by single people. (Single adopters, as I will discuss later in the chapter, were sometimes gay and lesbian but had to be straight-passing in order to get Russian court approval to adopt.) Russian adoptive families bent the SNAF mold, as child-centric and an independent economic unit and household, but did not break it, as adoptive parents became normative as child-rearing adult Americans (May 1988).

Broadly speaking, the families we live *by* are how Gillis (1996) suggests we think about the Western ideologies of families that inform the desire to have and raise children. Gillis contrasts this with the experience of actually raising children and actually growing up, which he calls the families we live *with*. While the families we live with are often impermanent and may fragment over time through divorce, incarceration, emancipation, or other kinds of separation,

estrangement, and dissolution, the families we live by are "constituted through myth, ritual, and image," imagined to be "forever nurturing and protective" (Gillis 1996:xv). This tension between the possibility of impermanence and imperfection in practice and permanence as the ideal is explicitly present for adoptive families.

The powerful rhetoric of "forever families" is challenged in critical adoption scholarship's scrutiny of adoption discontinuity (Kim 2021). In the 1990s and 2000s, 6 to 11% of adoptions were annually dissolved (severed after legalization) in the United States; the rate was 25% for those adoptions that involved older children, children who spent longer periods of time in institutions or foster care, or who experienced abuse and neglect (Coakley and Berrick 2008; Stryker 2016). Thus, while the overarching ideal is that families are permanent, many adoptive families in particular experience impermanence through dissolution as well as other informal relational ruptures not captured in these statistics.

Within the contemporary Western context of the ideal family being permanent as well as complete or recognizable only with the presence of children, both women and men face stigma for being voluntarily childless (Park 2002). The language typically used to describe couples without children is instructive: there is stigma in *remaining* childless. In other words, having children at some point is an expected stage in developing an intimate relationship and family life. This language invokes Glick's family life cycle (1947, 1988) as well as Powell et al.'s hunch (2010) that survey respondents in the U.S. acknowledged childless couples as families because they assumed the couples would eventually have children. "Childfree" couples reject this stigmatizing language and lay claim to the title of family because, they argue, they fulfill its primary functions through sharing a household, creating erotic and romantic bonds between

adults, and participating in the work of social reproduction despite the absence of children in their households (Blackstone 2014, 2019). These couples claim participation in social reproduction through their activities as extended family members, caring for nieces and nephews, or through paid work as counselors and teachers. Alternately, sharing care work of children and adults across households or in the absence of erotic relationships may be on the cutting edge of how people will create and maintain intimate relations in the twenty-first century (Kamin 2023; Roseneil and Budgeon 2004; Sheff 2015; Weston 1991), though it may be less innovative in that it may also reproduce or exacerbate existing equalities along lines of social class and race (Zang, Yang, and Calarco 2022). These framings of what it means to have children, or not, inform the identity work of adoptive parents and adoptive families. As they are doing family, adoptive parents are working to maintain their sense of self as good middle-class white Americans and competent parents.

"I'd Made the Cardinal Sin of Being on an Antidepressant at Some Point": Permission to Parent

Within the context of ideal families, SNAF or the families we live by, how do legal adoptive parents explain forming their families? How do they feel about the process? Sociological research reveals the widespread surveillance of poor families, families of color, and disabled parents in the U.S. that leads to disproportionate Child Protective Services investigations and family separation (Fong 2020; Frederick 2014, 2017). Fong suggests broadening the understanding of surveillance from the state monitoring public behavior to consider how "the state also gathers substantial information about domestic life" (2020:610). As

Dorothy Roberts, sociologist of race, gender and the law, writes, "What ties together the families involved in the child welfare system is that they are disenfranchised by some aspect of political inequality–whether race, gender, class, disability, or immigration status–and typically embody an intersection of these subordinated positions" (2022:87). Roberts proposes dispensing with the self-appointed labels of "child protection" or "child welfare" and instead critically appraising the "family-policing system" (2022:24), which is also active in separating immigrant parents and children through Border Patrol (Dickerson 2022).

This policing of marginalized parents contrasts with the expectations of enfranchisement, privacy and institutional support revealed in middle- and upper-class white adoptive parents' stories about being approved to adopt. These parents' expectations have been established within a national context where the median white family has forty-one times the wealth of the median Black family and twenty-two times the wealth of the median Latino family, and where the average white person lives in neighborhoods that are 80 percent white (Polletta 2020:1 Footnote1). With wealth and segregation come expectations of privacy (Vasquez-Tokos and Yamin 2021), respect, and positive interactions with institutions (Lareau 2011). These expectations inform adoptive parents' opinions of how they feel they should have been treated while going through the process of adoption if they had "bad" experiences. For those who made little of the adoption process in their retelling of their adoption story, I argue that those omissions are informed by the expectations of unimpeded access to having and raising children. Those who adopted children from Russia operated in a context both global and local of stratified reproduction (Colen 1995), whereby "some categories of people are empowered to nurture and reproduce, while others are disempowered" (Ginsburg et al. 1995:3). I argue that while some

adoptive parents felt belittled or burdened by the work of adopting, by and large these parents came to form adoptive families because they belonged to the "categories of people" hierarchically positioned to be "empowered to nurture and reproduce."

For example, adoptive father Richard didn't mind the bureaucratic process. He and his (now) husband had flexible work schedules, and they ate out as a way to reward themselves for completing each week's paperwork as they prepared to adopt. With social class privilege that included white-collar jobs, Richard felt a certain ease in navigating the process of getting legal permission to adopt across national borders:

> We did it on Fridays. Every Friday, we would take off that morning and do paperwork, or get fingerprinted, because – you know the process, basically it's a million tasks. So we would do a million tasks. It was actually kind of a wonderful time. And then we would have lunch somewhere.

With the tasks completed and a match made between Richard and a Russian child, Richard goes on to recount the experience of the adoption hearing in Russian court, where his permission to parent was easily granted, drawing on his social and financial capital:

> A lot of the procedure is simply you read out letters of recommendation. You know, 'And now we have a recommendation from this person,' 'And now we have a recommendation this–,' and now we're looking at the bank reports, we'll enter into the court records this, blah blah blah blah blah. All very perfunctory.

Once Richard finishes telling me about the adoption hearing and bringing his adopted son home, he explains what his husband was doing during that period back in the U.S. – "interviewing pediatricians" — another illustration of privilege and a middle-class habitus. These adoptive parents are usually the consumers, the ones with choices, the ones doing the evaluating, rather than being scrutinized themselves. Richard does not describe the process as invasive, despite it requiring "a million tasks" and sharing financial information.

Lesbian adoptive mom Carla explains the rigors of evaluation she went through to adopt succinctly. "I went through such a scrutiny, like, I had to go through so many different paper [...] so much background checks, so much money, so many things that I have to do." She echoes Richard's estimation of the "million tasks" of adopting. These adoptive parents display a particular middle-class comfort with navigating institutions, so that the requirements to adopt may be seen as somewhat onerous but not insurmountable.

Adoptive mother Sandra's experience confirms this idea that these adoptive parents are usually the consumers. While some adoptive parents talked about the hoops they had to jump through to adopt, they also spoke of how they were active in the matchmaking between themselves as prospective parents and children as prospective adoptees, since they could refuse referrals. "I did not accept my first referral; [my adopted son] was my second." She did not want her adopted children to be too close in age, she explained. Single adoptive mom Sandra was also blunt about her distaste for domestic adoption, which would dampen her power vis-a-vis an impoverished birth mother.

> If the birth parent decided they wanted their child back, they could get their child back. Because the court system thinks that giving birth to a child gives you more of a bond than raising a child. I think that's wrong. And I couldn't even comprehend adopting a child domestically with the risk of having that child pulled out from me at age 7, 8, 9. I just—I couldn't handle that. So I told my husband at the time that I would love to adopt, but it would have to be international. Because I didn't want that risk, and in an international adoption, the likelihood of that happening is pretty low. Because they're not in a financial position to support the child, which is often why they're making that decision. So if their financial position to then fight to get a child back is… really low-risk.[17]

Similar to Sandra's experience with refusing an initial referral of a child, other adoptive parents noted that they had control in the process of becoming a parent because they got to

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[17] Sandra's assessment of the financial position of birth mothers holds true today: Contemporary birth mothers in the U.S. "report living on low incomes and, when considered with other measures (e.g., employment, health insurance, homelessness), seem to lack the economic resources that would give them meaningful power over the options available to themselves and their children" (Sisson 2022).

choose the child with whom they were matched, according to various criteria important to them. Some prospective parents shared diagnostic video of initial referrals with Adoption Medicine Clinic physicians, and some went on to decline referrals for children who appeared to have fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASDs). "I don't really want her to hear this," whispered single adoptive mom Erica to me, since her adopted daughter was elsewhere in the house. "Got one referral–turned out to have FAS. Got another referral a couple months later, had FAS (*laughs*). So that was agony." The process of becoming a parent was not simply being scrutinized, but also being able to evaluate children prior to adopting, a privileged position.

In addition, Erica went on to explain her experience of the workers in the adoption industry commodifying kids as interchangeable, highlighting another way in which the adoptive parents were the ones with more power in matching with a child. "They were just like, 'Well, you can meet her and if it doesn't work, we'll find you another one.' I'm like, 'Are you kidding? Because, you know, I'm kind of attached to this one right now. Even though it's pictures, it's ... This is my kid. What are you talking about?' So that was really hard." Erica illuminates the paradox of legal adoption as partially about commodification, in that adoptive parents have the ability to select which child to adoption, as well as about providing care: early on, adopted parents and children become "attached" in an irreversible way.

Adopting internationally required submitting to cross-cultural examination once in the child's country of origin. Adoptive parents discussed how their own process of adopting included being scrutinized for their mental and physical health, substance use histories, and religious practices. Similarly, adoptive parents' stories of other prospective parents who were *denied* adoptions often centered on substance use histories or perceived sexuality. There were

cautionary notes sounded over prescriptions for medications to regulate mental health as well as

histories of alcoholism (in a secondhand account about someone whose adoption was denied)

and the need to appear heterosexual.

Adoptive parents Linda and Michael recounted that while being interviewed by adoption

officials in Russia, they faced questions about their religious affiliations and practices such as,

"Does [your Christian denomination] force children to pray?" As Michael explained, "So they're

worried about that, that crazy Americans are going to come over and grab kids for their cult."

With stereotypes and stories about adoptions gone awry circulating in both the U.S. and Russia,

it is little surprise that Russian adoption officials would scrutinize potential adoptive parents for

signs of religious fanaticism.

Erica, one of the single moms, talked about being evaluated while preparing to adopt.

"Yeah, it was a *really* hard process. […] I'd made the cardinal sin of being on an antidepressant

at some point, you know, like when I was trying to get pregnant and stuff [prior to deciding to

adopt], and ooh, they did not like that." She said that as a result of that history of taking

medication, the Russian court required her to do an evaluation with a psychiatrist just days

before she was to travel to Russia for the adoption. Erica referred to it as "ridiculousness" and "a

scam," communicating her skepticism about submitting to additional Russian-ordered scrutiny.

In this instance, the conversation shifted toward a critique of the Russian state's demands on

prospective adoptive parents. On the one hand this sort of denigration of the Russian state's

approach to adoption can serve to distance an adoptive parent from the stigma of mental illness

linked to perceived unfitness to parent. But this attitude can cut the other way, as beliefs about

corruption in Russia/post-Soviet countries led to legal judgments in the U.S. that undermined

adopters' attempts to file for wrongful adoptions. The tort of wrongful adoption, a civil wrong serving as grounds for a lawsuit, is the means by which adopters sue adoption agencies because a child has mental or physical health issues or developmental delays that do not match the information available to the adopters when the adoption was arranged. Hora (2001) found that in the case of U.S.-Russian adoptions, judges ruled in favor of the adoption agencies, essentially arguing that adoptive parents should have assumed that Russians would swindle them. The focus on Russian wrongdoing shifts the focus away from considering the best interest of the child, which both in Erica's case and in the cases Hora (2001) analyzed could have led to a different framing of the situation ("the sending countries is doing its best to ensure the accuracy of health information about both prospective parents and prospective adoptees") and, in the wrongful adoption cases, different material outcomes.

Pamela talked about the institutional interactions required to adopt a child from Russia as a nuisance, as she and her husband adopted a child from Russia in the early 1990s to raise alongside their own biological children. "We had a boatload of problems with paperwork on both ends. [...] The Embassy said, 'What are you idiots doing here without having your paperwork done?' I mean, if I was ever desperate, I would never go to a U.S. Embassy, 'cause they treated us like crap." Pamela's reflection communicates that the sort of state institutions, such as an embassy, that adoptive parents had to work with while adopting were not institutions they feared intervening in their lives in the future, unlike the moms investigated by CPS in Fong's (2020) research who were made more vulnerable by those initial encounters. Institutional representatives might be unpleasant, but once the adoptions were finalized, they did not represent a threat to adoptive parents' rights.

Parents who adopted internationally also felt a certain kind of power by not having to be "chosen" by a birth mother, as they would in domestic infant adoption. Rhonda and her husband adopted two children from Russia. She drew a contrast between the process of adopting internationally and domestically as one of who would have the power to decide whether she was fit to parent. "I'm not comfortable with a… 15-year-old deciding whether I'm good enough to be somebody's parent." Rhonda's dismissal of domestic adoption echoes Sandra's – international adoption gives the prospective parent more power. The U.S.-based institutions evaluating prospective parents' fitness in the case of international adoption are deemed to be legitimate, and the Russia-based institutions are to be endured for the sake of finalizing an adoption, even if for some they are experienced as capricious or intrusive.

Another experience of a surprise from Russian authorities came from Michael and Linda, who had a scare while in Russia to complete an adoption when the Russian judge demanded more medical documentation that Linda was healthy enough to parent after a previous illness. Michael explains that when they went back to court the day after the demand was made, "The judge was a completely different guy," speculating that the judge had been bribed. "It was just a slam-dunk and then you get your kid." Thus, Michael and Linda experienced the unevenness with which prospective parents were subjected to state scrutiny. With the idea that objections to prospective adopters' fitness to parent could simply be a means to procuring a bribe, adoptive parents could remain confident in their own position as fit to parent and their ability to navigate the process of forming a family through legal adoption as one in which they were being evaluated, but they were also backed by adoption agencies who could navigate the process of adoption.

Prior to traveling to Russia to complete an adoption, adoptive parents sometimes discussed how a social worker in the U.S. would evaluate their homes. These conversations highlighted the aesthetics and square footage that the homes of "fit" parents are imagined to measure up to, reiterating the class privilege required to adopt went beyond bank accounts and character assessments. Nancy and Beth, a lesbian couple, explained how they had to provide the court with the dimensions of their house and have it officially verified. To comply with this demand, a state representative made up a form for them, they said. Child neglect has typically been assessed on the grounds of perceived poverty, with housing footage and conditions part of that assessment, both in the U.S. as well as in Russia (Glaser 2023; Roberts 2022; Rockhill 2010).

While more marginalized BIPOC and poor parents are more likely to interact with the state through agencies such as Child Protective Services, international adoptive parents interacted with the state through senator's offices (Anon 2020), embassies, and the Department of State. Adoptive parents recounted a range of experiences, from feeling supported in eleventh hour maneuvers as they finalized adoptions to what they described as bureaucratic nightmares that made them eager to never interact with those offices again. As such, the "permission to parent" came from very different entities within the state for those surveilled by CPS than the more privileged adoptive parents I interviewed. Fong (2020) found that having a case opened with CPS would affect families in the future, instilling fear and a sense of increased vulnerability to state interventions. In contrast, adoptive parents were unconcerned by the follow-up visits required after adopting internationally and found their interactions with the state more of a hurdle to get over to be able to claim an adopted child rather than a harbinger of future challenges to

their fitness to parent. I argue that this social class- and citizenship-based discomfort at state

scrutiny while adopting is related to many international adopters' discomfort with the idea of

adopting domestically (Ortiz and Briggs 2003). As married heterosexual adoptive mom Linda

put it, "There were scary things about domestic adoption in that…the child was taken from the

mother at birth and kept for like 2 weeks while the mother could change their mind and,

and…you had already paid for their –" Linda's husband Michael chimed in, "Some of their

medical costs—" Linda continued, "You'd become attached to the thought that you're going to

have a child, and it could fall through, and then you'd be back in the [prospective parent] book

again. That seemed like a rollercoaster to us, that could get quite emotional. So, we decided to do

the overseas adoption."

While most of the adoptive parents I interviewed were middle- or upper-class, Carol, a

working-class single mom, shared how social class status shaped her experience of gaining

permission to parent. She was denied adopting one child because of her income, then bristled at

also having to redecorate and declutter her home before being allowed to adopt, which she

deemed as "such a joke," all part of "a stupid game."

> I know with [adopting my second child], I had a problem because my income was kind of
> low. I think it went down, so they were questioning – I accepted a referral on a child, a
> girl, and then …they denied it to me, they said, because my income was too low. And
> because if you went in my kitchen, because you have to take pictures of your house, I
> have all along–I have bottles, rows of two shelves above the upper cabinets of blue wine
> bottles. They didn't like that. I'm like, I didn't drink them all in a year or anything
> (*laughs*). You know what I'm saying? It's a decorative—so I had to redo my photos
> without the blue wine bottles. And I had to get a letter from my mom, saying if … you
> know, if she needs financial help, I'm here. So that was a thing. There was something
> else going on there too. Oh, they said my house was too cluttered, so I had to–it was
> funny, again, I had to redo all my photos. Again, I admit, I am kind of visually cluttered.
> So, I had to take everything off the walls and redo my pictures without everything
> around. It was just like a stupid game. I almost laughed. I said to the social worker at the
> time, I said, 'So let me get this straight, the penniless –' oh, and then I had this banner up
>
> in my bedroom, I don't know where I got it, like a profile of Lenin's head on it, that I

thought was kind of cool. So, I said, 'Oh yeah, you mean the penniless alcoholic Communists don't want me to adopt a child because I'm a penniless alcoholic communist.' You know. It was just like such a joke. It was funny. (*laughs*)

Carol's final remarks about poverty and alcohol use illustrate that even for her as a lower-class individual in the U.S., she still has a sense of cultural superiority vis-à-vis Russians.

Within ideologies of family are the related ideas of ideal homes and ideal mothers, as illustrated by the questions and expectations that prospective adoptive parents faced. Adoptive parents recounted variously how they had to pass as healthy, their use of alcohol as moderate, their homes as spacious and uncluttered, their churches as part of reasonable religions. These demands for fit families could lead adoptive parents to employ defensive discourses that denigrated Russians, Russia and the former Soviet Union (i.e., "penniless alcoholic Communists," judges whose objections to adoptions disappeared after receiving bribes) to highlight their sense of racialized national superiority as U.S. citizens. For gay and lesbian parents, there were additional demands on them to pass as heterosexual to gain permission to parent, a process unexplored in previous adoption research which has focused solely on heterosexual couples and mothers (Berebitsky 2000; Brian 2012; Jacobson 2008).

Obstacles Unique to Gay and Lesbian Adoptive Parents Forming and Performing Family

Gay and lesbian adopters were among the single adopters. Some of them were partnered when they went through the adoption process, but they could not share this information with Russian officials for fear of having their adoptions denied, nor could they have had their partnerships recognized as marriages throughout the U.S. before 2015. While they benefited from racial and social class privilege that made international adoption feasible and relatively

affordable for them, their sexuality had to be left unstated and undetectable for them to adopt successfully. These adoptive parents' experiences are typically only highlighted in research on queer family (Moore and Stambolis-Ruhstorfer 2013). Here, I bring gay and lesbian adoptive parents' experiences into the conversation on international adoption to make three points: first, they talked about avoiding domestic adoption for a different reason than their straight counterparts; second, they faced unique barriers in navigating family ambiguity in securing approval to adopt; and third, when considering return travel to Russia they also had to navigate homophobic laws in adopted children's country of origin. I address the first two issues below, with a discussion of return travel in the final section of this chapter.

Gay father and lesbian parents noted that one issue for them was in being allowed to adopt in the first place. Adoptive parents did not disclose their sexuality, so heterosexuality was assumed. Nonetheless, in Richard's case that still gave pause to the Russian judge who had to approve the adoption, according to his adoption facilitator, who told him, "The judge just told me that she was a little nervous about granting this adoption, because she was afraid that when you got married someday your wife may not like [the child]." The judge's imagined future was informed by heteronormativity, assuming that Richard was a heterosexual man and was someday likely to partner with a woman who would have to accept his adopted child as part of the package. Similarly, "they did make me swear in court, though, that I was heterosexual," lesbian adoptive mom Lorraine said. In addition, she said that the adoption agency made sure she passed as presentable: "I was following whatever they thought I should look like."

Katie, a single lesbian adoptive mom, went to an adoption agency that made it clear that they didn't facilitate adoption for gay families. "While I knew that to be true for the policies

internationally, I also felt that there's ways you work with that, I don't know, I was put out by that, because they were so adamant about it," she said. "Being an active consumer, I wanted to look at different opportunities with other agencies and weigh the pros and cons. [...] I went to [a different agency]." Katie's reflection makes clear the facet of adoption as an industry where adoptive parents can position themselves as clients or consumers, shopping around for who they will work with.

Lesbian adoptive moms Carla and Grace also discussed having to hide their relationship and thereby their sexuality. Carla adopted alone, saying that Grace was a roommate who was moving out. Carla recounted, "I was criticized by friends. 'Why did you lie?' Why not?" (*scoffs*) Grace added, "They don't give you any choice." If they had disclosed their relationship, their adoption petition would have been denied. Indeed, in more recent years Russia has cut off adoption exchanges with multiple nations with legalized same-sex marriage, broadly foreclosing that pathway to parenting.

While adoption may require matchmaking between children and adults who are privileged in some ways and marginalized in others, adoptive parents navigated this process strategically to meet their own ends. In the case of gay or lesbian prospective parents, part of what they had to ensure was their sexuality not being an obstacle to simply being allowed to adopt. In order to gain status as normative Americans, i.e., as parents, gay and lesbian adults also had to navigate homophobia when seeking to adopt internationally, whereas heterosexual adoptive couples or single people did not discuss their sexuality as a privilege or a barrier to adopting.

Defining New Family Boundaries in the Face of Ambiguity

In this section, after discussing the experiences of *forming* an adoptive family above, I consider how these adoptive families have *done* family. While above I highlighted the bureaucratic and interpersonal processes that parents had to go through to legally claim their children, here I consider how adoptees from Russia make adoptive parents into parents and by extension, form culturally legible families. How is this similar to and different from those who used assisted reproductive technology (ART) or surrogates? Thompson (2005) found that users of ART might source biological material for having a baby from surprising people, such as their own adult child, or use a sibling as a gestational surrogate. However, ART users in Thompson's research still stuck to narrow notions of kinship. Only the intended parents, the ones paying for the process and planning to raise the child, counted as parents. In other words, the central rules of SNAF still apply, with family being equal to parents plus children in a shared household. In contrast, Pande (2009) focused her research on ART not on intended parents but on the experiences of surrogate mothers in India, women who claimed kinship with the children they gave birth to, thereby challenging the exclusive claims of social parenthood by the intended parents and, by extension, the boundaries of the family in formation.

While these studies consider the claims to family and kinship that can be made by those participating in conception and gestation, the ambiguity of family boundaries in adoption is predicated on the possible existence of several other relationships: with birth parents as well as adoptive parents, and also sometimes with biological siblings when not all are adopted together. Who counts as family in these situations, and what do those relationships look like? I emphasize three processes through which adoptive parents define new family boundaries in the face of ambiguity. First, I discuss how adoptive parents come to see themselves as parents, exploring

how the transition from non-parent to parent can feel abrupt. Second, I examine practices of familialization which adoptive parents engaged in to nuclearize their adopted children who had previously lived in institutions. Finally, I look at how adoptive families navigate biological siblings adopted together as well as those who are separated from biological siblings who remained in Russia.

"It Still Felt like I Was Babysitting": Identifying/Being Identified as a Parent

Some adoptive parents recounted feeling disbelief and fear once they were home with their adopted children. They expressed this in terms of feeling as if they were caring for someone's else's children, or just questioning what they had done, while eventually coming to embrace the role of parent. Thus, recognizing themselves as parents was not an instantaneous transition for all. Adoptive dad Michael explained, "At the beginning it feels like they're not your kids, like you're babysitting." He added, "They don't teach you a lot about how grown-ups bond with kids." However, his sense of being a parent and ownership of his adopted children has grown over time. "Now they really feel like my kids," he said. His wife Linda chimed in, laughing, "I think it's a fairy tale, when people say, 'When I saw the photograph, I knew this child was mine!'" These two challenged the portrayal of the happily-ever-after, fairy tale narrative of adoption that would also include "love at first sight" on the part of adoptive parents seeing an adoptable child. "I think they [the kids and their adoptive mom Linda] bonded in like a year, and I think it took me two years," Michael says. "I mean, I wasn't hating them. I wasn't resenting them. It still felt like I was babysitting, like I was at someone's house babysitting. But I wasn't getting paid." Linda laughs, adding, "Really? I wouldn't say it was two years."

Single adoptive mom Erica similarly expressed a sense of uncertainty after bringing her

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adopted daughter to the U.S. "The day we came home, a bunch of people came over and welcomed us home and everything, and then my mom went, a friend of hers took her home, and the relatives went home and everything, and I was left at the door going, 'Oh my God, what have I done?'" she said, laughing.

> And it wasn't just a baby either, it was an almost mobile one year old. So… I had a couple months off. Part of my maternity leave was in Russia, but another two months when I got home. So I was never ... Like, I didn't do a lot of babysitting when I was a kid. I wasn't a real kid person, and so it was a culture shock of lying in bed in the morning going, "Oh my God, I've got this creature in there I don't know what to do with." And I'd kind of pop her in her little ... you know, that thing that has a seat in it and they can wheel around a little bit, give her some Cheerios and like, go take a shower, like, "Oh my God, what am I doing?" (*laughing*)

Both Michael and Erica laughed as they talked about their doubts, marking a distance from them temporally as well as in attitude. Now they regard their previous attitudes as funny and laughable, whereas at the time what they were incredulous about was the sudden transition from non-parent to parent.

In contrast, gay dad Richard talked about how he found the transition to being a parent easy, bringing home his adopted son shortly after his first birthday. The easy transition was notable to him since he had anticipated encountering more prejudice beyond an initial incident with a homophobic neighbor incredulous upon seeing him with his adopted son. "We never had any of the bonding issues a lot of adoptive parents have," he added.

An adoptee's age at the time of adoption also made a difference in how adoptive parents came to see themselves as parents. With adoptees who were older than toddlers when they came to the U.S., the strangeness of becoming a family could be felt both by the child and by the parent, as working-class mom Carol shared. "It was really hard at the beginning. I still remember

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this, it was sort of like, I was depressed," she said. "It's like that post-adoption depression thing, which I guess is a thing, so. 'Cause again, you build up your little fantasy of, 'Oh it's going to be, like, [I'll] braid [her] hair,' and – and she wouldn't let me do any of that stuff." Carol is ready to identify as a parent when she arrives home in the U.S. with her adopted daughter. However, the everyday acts of parenting a daughter that she has anticipated, such as braiding hair, depend not just on Carol's intentions but also on developing a relationship with this older child whose language she does not speak and who has just transitioned from living in another country in congregate care with other children to living alone with Carol, a brand-new person in her life. Thus, performing family with older adoptees is a negotiation, layered on top of possible post-adoption depression (Choudhury and Sunkara 2021; Payne et al. 2010), as Carol noted.

"It's like She Didn't Know How to Play": Familialization

Adoptees brought to the U.S. as toddlers or young children often underwent a process of "familialization" (Pate 2014) with their adoptive parents. To acculturate young adoptees to nuclear family life after their time in children's homes, adoptive parents talked about how they would diaper, rock, and bottle feed their adopted children, with an eye toward what was supposedly appropriate for infant and toddler development and children feeling nurtured by and connected to their caretakers. This process of establishing boundaries was less focused on who belonged in or out of the newly formed family and more on what were appropriate activities for a child and caretaker within a family (Stryker 2012).

Adoptive mom Grace said that their adopted daughter would self-soothe instead of cry, which they felt was a sign that she didn't feel cared for, and that the baby home staff had already potty trained her. "I suppose they had to," Grace said, thinking about the number of children

their daughter was being raised alongside. "So, we put her right back in diapers. They had taken her off the bottle, and we put her right back on the bottle." Grace's wife Carla added, "We used to rock her together, the two of us hold her, embrace her together and rock her together, hold her in the middle." Carla giggled. Grace confirmed, "Yeah, we had a couch that rocked. We felt like she needs to go back [to being a baby]."

Adoptive mom Andrea discussed transitioning a daughter (adopted at a slightly older age than Grace's child) from doing chores to playing, which she viewed as a more appropriate way to occupy a young child's time.

> It's kind of funny, because when they come home from the baby home, she followed me around and copied exactly what I did. It's like she didn't know how to play. She was much more focused on tasks. 'Cause I think they had them doing just a lot of little tasks to keep them busy. Cleaning up and things. And it was fun to kind of watch her lose that, and learn how to play. And learn how to play by herself.

Familializing adoptees from Russia entailed following a medicalized vision of what children need and what childhood should entail, so that adoptive parents in some cases were working with their adopted children to regularize new practices around relating to one's caretaker, how to feel secure, and how to spend time playing. These adoptive parents were contributing care effort that was predicated on knowledge typical of their social class in working with professional supports to try to remedy perceived earlier gaps in love and nurturing.

"Nobody Wanted to See Her": Biological Siblings Here and There

When white Americans decided to adopt Russian children, they had to decide how they would draw boundaries around who belonged in their new nuclear family. In addition to coming to recognize themselves as parents and familializing newly adopted children, white adoptive

parents also had to navigate expectations for the boundaries around a family and household specific to their social location in terms of race and class. White families were typically not multigenerational, and popular imaginings of adoption also envisioned adoptees as parentless orphans, in contrast with the reality of living parents who may have had multiple children who did not get adopted as a sibling group. In explaining this process of deciding who they would claim as part of their new family, adoptive parents gave accounts (Orbuch 1997; Scott and Lyman 1968) themselves as good people and parents. In these accounts, parents sometimes measured themselves favorably against birth mothers, in a form of hierarchical identity work: "an ongoing, interactional accomplishment formed through self-other relationships, and not as an attribute or essential property" of a person (Best 2011:910). What happens when there are biological siblings, as sometimes not all were adopted to the U.S.? How do adoptive parents explain who is in and who is out and by what logic?

Separating biological siblings is a complex issue. On the one hand, in the U.S. it is now considered best practice to keep siblings together in the context of in-country foster care placements and adoption. However, a recent review of research on sibling placements in foster care concluded that while placing siblings in the same foster or adoptive family now seems like a common-sense approach, "the research evidence does not consistently support the practice of placing siblings together" (DiGiovanni and Font 2021:105943). This disagreement stems from cases in which one sibling may pose a risk to another, rather than provide a positive connection or role model. With that perspective in mind, my aim is not to come to a normative conclusion about the views of adoptive parents regarding their obligations to sibling groups when adopting from Russia. Instead, I am interested in how adoptive parents explain their sense of an obligation

to "their" children when adopting one or more children from a group of siblings. Harkening back to the idea of adoption as matchmaking (Raleigh 2012), as discussed above, gatekeepers evaluated prospective parents and either granted or withheld permission to adopt. In turn, they sometimes judged birth parents when evaluating which child(ren) they will take responsibility for.

Overall, the rates of children in residential care remains high in the Russian Federation, with the latest UNICEF data table from December 2022 listing Russia with the highest rate in the world at 1,410 children per 100,000, though the data available from Russia was from 2010 (UNICEF n.d.). In discussing the issue of separating biological siblings in particular, it is useful to revisit the (post-)Soviet concept of "social orphanhood." Most of the children institutionalized in Russia are not technically orphans whose parents have died. Instead, they are *social* orphans, meaning their parent(s) have lost parental rights or their mothers have relinquished them (Rockhill 2010). Research suggests that Russian mothers typically relinquish a child because the child was born prematurely or because the mother is young, unmarried, or still lives with her family of origin (Issoupova 2012). Other research finds that only 10 percent of children go into state care because of their parents' death or disability, with other factors mostly accounting for social orphanhood. In addition, becoming a social orphan can stem from mothers'/parents' alcohol and drug use, imprisonment, and health-related inabilities to care for children (Annual Governmental Report 2001 and Dement'eva 2000, quoted in Fedulova et al. 2003:21). To give a sense of the scope of social orphanhood in Russia during the period in which adoption to the U.S. was possible prior to the 2012 adoption moratorium, UNICEF reported that there were more than 110,000 children placed into care annually in the first decade of the 2000s after their parents

were deprived of their parental rights (2010:16). In total, more than 330,000 children remained in residential care at the end of 2007 (UNICEF 2010:22). And recalling the emphasis in U.S. media accounts defending Americans adopting from Russia on account of the unspecified number of disabled children now leading "happy lives" analyzed in the previous chapter, more than 40 percent of those 330,000 children in residential care, or 142,000, were children with disabilities (UNICEF 2010:22, 28). Rather than being orphans alone in the world, then, tens of thousands of children enter into state care for reasons other than their parents' death. As such, many institutionalized children have biological full or half-siblings.

In some cases, adoptive parents adopted one or two children from a larger sibling group that was already separated, whether in different institutions by age, or with some children remaining with birth parents and others institutionalized. Michael and Linda learned that there was another biological sibling whom they did not adopt. Michael says, "[We] have talked about this brother. Just because this *mother* of, birth mother, keeps having children, it's not our responsibility to… to–" He laughs. Linda finishes the sentence: "--chase all these kids around. Like, maybe she had six kids." Michael continues, "Our responsibility is to our two children, to bring them up." A moment later, Linda adds that officials "said it would be OK for us to adopt these two kids because they hadn't even *seen* their brother." Michael and Linda's framing of their adoption story exemplifies stratified reproduction (Colen 1995; McCormack 2005), establishing them as proper parents. They invoke the trope of a poor woman's uncontrolled fertility, another country's spectral welfare mother. In their account, they're not obligated to adopt all of her children. They are, they explain, at capacity, already taking on two children simultaneously.

Abigail and Lorraine explained that their daughter adopted from Russia had older biological siblings. They recounted that her documents included the information that nobody from her family came to visit her in the hospital after she was born or in the baby home. "Nobody wanted to see her," they said. Her biological siblings were already adopted or were in the process of being adopted within Russia. Under these circumstances where the kids were already being raised separately, Abigail and Lorraine felt no need to justify not adopting the older siblings.

In conclusion, considering the variety of adoptive parents' and, by extension, adoptees' relationships to biological siblings makes clear that adoptive parents practice a circumscribed "claiming" of adoptees. What does this mean for the discourse of international adoption as "child rescue"? Anthropologist Kristen Cheney critiques how childhood vulnerability has been constructed: "Focusing on enumerating the numbers of individual vulnerable children in this context becomes a way to avoid tackling the bigger issues of poverty and structural violence that affects entire populations" (2010:6). Through forming adoptive families, U.S. citizens are able to selectively extend their sense of connection to children in Russia, drawing on age-based, gendered, and racialized discourses of vulnerability and deserving/undeserving poor to justify their choices. Adoptive parents are not alone in this, of course: the field of options they select from has been constructed by the adoption industry. And to turn again to thinking through adoption alongside forming families with ART, such as in vitro fertilization (IVF) using donor gametes (i.e. sperm and/or egg), intended parents using IVF have consumer choice of the source of their kid's genes. Similarly, adoptive parents have consumer choice related to which child(ren) they take on. With IVF using donor gametes, there are usually relationships with half-

siblings which parents must consider (Hertz and Nelson 2019). These donor half-siblings, or "diblings," are another similarity between children conceived through ART and adoptees with biological siblings being raised elsewhere. But in contrast to the social and spatial divides between siblings being raised in the U.S. and Russia, half-siblings connected through IVF typically belong to similarly privileged families in terms of social class, race, and nationality.

The Pressure to Be a Good Mom: Making and Unmaking Mothers

Adopting children from Russia made moms out of many women who were unable to or uninterested in having biological children[18]. In some cases, adopting was something of an *un*doing for women who thought they were or would be good parents. Confronting what they saw as the particular needs of their children adopted from Russia, they grappled with where to place responsibility for behavior they found surprising or distressing. Mothers face internal and external judgments of whether they are 'good' mothers, whether their children are biological or adopted. When it is taboo to talk about regret and exhaustion related to one's biological children (Donath 2015; Hubert and Aujoulat 2018; Moore and Abetz 2019), it is doubly unacceptable for parents who have formed their family through legal adoption to express remorse. The reasoning is that adoptive families must be formed intentionally, so adoptive parents ought to know what they are getting themselves into. At the same time, Russophobic sentiments and moralizing and medicalized explanations for adoptees' behavior are available to them as blame-release valves should their efforts to raise 'successful' adopted children fall short.

Beth, who along with her husband Frank adopted several unrelated children from Russia, talked about the importance of Frank supporting her through exhaustion, as well as why she met with other adoptive moms throughout the years.

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[18] As well as some women who already had biological or domestically adopted children.

If I was struggling, he just jumped in just best he could, whereas for a lot of men that's really threatening. 'If mom's not succeeding, what in the world am I gonna do to make it better?' And they tend to just want to hide from it. So either they downplay what she's saying as if, 'Nah, they're just kids.' You know, or… they just work, they immerse themselves in work so they're not around as much. The majority of the dads just didn't get it either. So yeah, the moms just needed either women who could tell them, no, you're not crazy, it's not you, you're not a horrible person… You will make it (laughs). It's hard on marriages.

Beth later discussed her anxieties about the pervasiveness of fetal alcohol spectrum disorder among adoptees from Russia. She was responding to the case of Artyem Salyev whose U.S. adoptive mother and grandmother sent him back to Moscow on a plane, unaccompanied:

> I may be changing my mind – you know, five years ago, I was like, 'What good is it doing bringing 'em here?,' except we're bringing all these issues into, you know, and fetal alcohol is… it just multiples because those babies' brains – all my kids drink except one, and most of 'em drink way too much. And so, it's just gonna get passed on from generation to generation, and it's just gonna explode, and we're gonna have a society of – and that was my fear. And it still could be, a society full of fetal alcohol people, and we're just gonna fall apart. (*laughs*) So I think, just keep 'em in Russia! But– So now, I don't know if I completely agree with that, but at the same time, I think it just forced Russia to really get some things in place. You know, they need to step up to the plate and learn some things about fetal alcohol, [...] they need to invest some resources in seeing what they can do. Because so many of those kids aren't going to get adopted anyway.

While Beth's fears of a fetal alcohol "explosion" in American society can be read as xenophobic, Russophobic, and eugenicist, her analysis provides an out for mothers who feel they have failed to raise conventionally successful children. She pushes back against the idea that it's all a mother's responsibility how a child turns out, or, as she put it in her own reminiscence about her initial naivete, "You know, you go in thinking that, 'Oh, I've got a good supportive church, and I've got a good supportive family,' – yeah, that's not enough." When explaining what they were looking for when they decided which children to adopt, Beth noted that their kids weren't

much like her and Frank, attributing it to the time they had spent living in Russia at the start of their lives:

> I think initially we wanted younger kids, you know you (*laughs*) that's funny, you want them as young as possible so you have as much time to try to build into their lives and put influence in there, but … I don't think that much matters, you know, frankly, because … they had so much influence from Russia, you know, and they all spent their formative years there, [...] they really weren't going to be little Larsons. We have a very good relationship with all of them right now, but they're definitely not little Larsons (*laughs*).

In response to the general American cultural pressure to be a good mom as well as Russia's repeated emphasis on adoptees who experienced neglect and abuse in the U.S., I found it difficult to talk about children's contribution to their adoptive families through intimate labor, one of my original research interests. In response to my questioning about their adopted daughter's contribution to their family, whether through chores or emotional support of her parents, her mom Andrea responded, "We're not slave-drivers." "Speak for yourself," her husband John joked.

It is a challenge to be vulnerable in discussing parenting slipups in American culture, even more so in the face of scrutiny of adoptive parents who function in a biocentrist culture where adoption still has the lingering association of "not quite as good as having your own" (Fisher 2003). This is further exacerbated by the ideological code of SNAF, mothering as a vocation, and white supremacy culture including being thin-skinned in the face of any sort of scrutiny (Okun and Jones 2000). Andrea adds later, "It's constant practice, you're not always calm, you know? Sometimes you're kind of a jerk and you have to remind yourself you could've done a better job for next time." Andrea's subsequent comment demonstrates how discussing one's shortcomings can be mitigated by pointing toward previous (professional) experience:

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"Sometimes I'm very zen. But I've worked with kids my whole life, too. So, that helps."

Ideologies of intensive mothering have pervaded U.S. society, and these shape adoptive mothers' experience of their own parenting of adopted children. Being adoptive moms gave them some leeway in taking credit, or not for their children's accomplishments and shortcomings, navigating whether to attribute their child's behaviors to nurture or nature. With most of the women I interviewed having social class privilege, they had a variety of resources to draw on to support their parenting, whether it was household income or comfort navigating institutions.

Coda. Coming to America and Doing Family: No Return

In interviews, parents who adopted from Russia tended to say that they found it scary to think about returning to Russia with their adopted children while they're still minors. Thus, doing family for them does not typically involve return travel to the adoptee's country of origin. Instead, "culture-keeping" (Jacobson 2008) is typically restricted to activities that are deemed comfortable for these white adoptive parents, such as occasional special occasion meals at local Russian restaurants or shopping at a Russian grocery store. Visible culture keeping was *not* a priority for the majority of these families, in keeping with Jacobson's finding about white adoptive parents with Russian children that "[t]he class and race privilege enjoyed by these [parents] allow for a particular kind of culture keeping: one based largely on commodities and consumerism" (2008:173). With race-matching between white American adoptive parents and light-skinned adoptees from Russia, these families can appear to outsiders to share a common racial and perhaps even ethnic background, which allows them to enjoy what Jacobson termed "quasi-biological privilege" (2008:171). Among the adoptive parents I talked with, some did continue to prioritize socializing a few times a year with other families who adopted from the

same city or with other adoptive mothers, but connecting to the Russian or post-Soviet diaspora locally "across ethnicity, immigrant status, or class" (Jacobson 2008:170) was uncommon. Among those adoptive parents I talked to, a few families did have their adopted children participate in Russian and other East European cultural groups including folk singing and dancing, which did give them time with Russian immigrant families. However, it was a minority of the adoptees who had joined these cultural groups, and most were ceasing participation by adoptees' pre-teen years.

Some adoptees spoke about an interest in visiting Russia again, but none of the families or adult adoptees had done so. Explaining that she had watched the Jessica Long story during the Sochi Paralympics when Long traveled to Siberia to meet her birth family, teenager Vera said, "My mom says that when I turn 18 or 20, I'm going to get the choice to go with her to Russia and find my parents.[…] I think that I might have siblings that I never met before, even though I'm an only child." The most-cited reason for avoiding return travel that many U.S. adoptive parents mentioned was the worry that a dual citizen adoptee would be conscripted into the military on a return visit to Russia. This fear is unsubstantiated; none of the parents knew anyone who had experienced this and none of the online sources which discuss this concern cite an actual incident of an adoptee being detained within Russia. In interviews, one family had traveled back with their first Russian-adopted daughter to collect their second, without incident (granted, she, as a minor, was both the wrong age and gender to be detained for military service). The fear of being fed into the Russian military is a prevalent discourse, however. This is one common narrative of how adoptive families are deterred from and justify not engaging deeply with Russian culture in general or traveling back to Russia in particular.

In investigating these claims about possible adoptee conscription, I found that both the U.S. and Russia have discourses about adoptees-as-military-fodder circulating. Russian fears about children being adopted for the purpose of serving in the U.S. military are mentioned in a *New York Times* article after Russia's adoption ban (Herszenhorn 2013). From the other side, the U.S. anxieties about adoptees being detained upon return to Russia appeared on websites and blogs for adoptive parents and from the School of Russian and Asian Studies (SRAS n.d.). This fear highlights how institutionalized children and adoptees are seen as liminal, without deep rootedness in either culture, and therefore vulnerable to being exploited for national purposes on both sides. Historically, this imagining of adoptees as desirable for national labor purposes resonates with the early U.S. practice of fostering older youth as a means of providing farmhands in the Midwest via the orphan train in the 1800s (Carp 2000; Hubinette 2006).

For gay and lesbian adoptive parents, having to adopt as a single person without being able to come out as gay or lesbian or claim their partners added to the trepidation over return travel. An additional layer dissuading them from visiting Russia with their adopted children is the 2013 anti-gay law, "For the Purpose of Protecting Children from Information Advocating a Denial of Traditional Family Values." Gay adoptive father Richard explains"

> We were always afraid to do it. [...N]ow, I guess, I'm more afraid to do it now. Because, because it was…a not quite honest adoption. I was 'single man adopting.' (*pause*) I was always nervous about any question – when he was little, I didn't want to have to be looking up the word for 'repo man' in Russian. As he got older, things in Russia started to get scary. And the homophobia kind of burst out.

In the broader contemporary context of transnational adoption to the U.S., it is notable that stories of adoptees being detained in their countries of origin have not surfaced, but stories

of deporting adoptees from the U.S. whose citizenship was not formalized upon adoption *have*.

The most high-profile example might be adoptee Adam Crapser, who was deported to South

Korea in 2016 (Kim and Park Nelson 2019).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I argued that in forming and performing their family through adopting a

child or children from Russia, adoptive parents in the U.S. engage in symbolic boundary-making

informed by their experiences of class privilege, gendered parenting expectations, and either

normative or marginalized sexual identities. In so doing, they must define the boundaries of their

new family in the face of ambiguities about which children they are now obligated to care for

and how far those obligations extend both geographically and over the life course. Based on my

analysis, I echo Brian (2012) in tempering Modell's claim that "adoption struts boldly across the

stage of American culture" (2002:1). Gay and lesbian adoptive parents seeking children from

Russia had to move strategically, sometimes downplaying their own identities and partnerships,

in order to secure permission to parent. Heterosexual parents and single straight women, in

contrast, have an easier time laying claim to adopted children but still must surmount

bureaucratic hurdles. And when considering social class-stratified access to privacy, the majority

of the families I interviewed enjoy more privilege than those families dealing with CPS

investigations studied by Fong (2020).

In terms of how these adoptive families do family, I find a reluctance to undertake return

travel to Russia as foreclosing a means of culture-keeping for adoptees and a way to connect

with their culture and country of origin. While this reluctance is often justified in terms of fear of

Russian reclamation of adoptees for military service, it also aligns with the "clean break" that

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many adoptive parents sought by pursuing international rather than domestic adoption, which would have necessitate navigating the terms of an open or semi-open adoption or dealing with their worries about birth mothers' ability to reclaim their children.

Contrary to popular perceptions, my research demonstrates that adopting from Russia is not always intended, or able, to flawlessly replicate the ideological code of SNAF as a middle-class, nuclear biological family. Such an ideology of family remains widespread— sharing a household, having children, and mothers socializing children. But this ideology is complicated by how people live as well as by queer theorists and feminist scholars who question the centrality of children and biological relatedness in claiming the mantle of family. At the same time, compulsory parenting has spread to same-sex couples along with the right to marry, to adopt, and to use the fertility industry to become pregnant. In whatever ways the ideal of family has transformed, parenting continues to be portrayed as a promise of fulfillment and fitting in, a promise to which transnational adopters respond (Anagnost 2000).

Invisibility as an adoptive family is not assured. Interviews with adoptees and adoptive parents indicate that despite the privilege the majority of adoptive parents enjoy from their whiteness and high levels of education and income, the factors that drove some of them to choose Russia—advanced parental age, non-heterosexuality limiting their ability to adopt domestically or from other countries—mean that their families often fail to pass as biological. Thus, even "same-race" adoptions from Russia are not necessarily invisible, as other adoption scholars have argued (Yngvesson 2010).

Ch. 5. Bringing in Adoptee Voices

I asked interview participants to reflect on Russia's decision to end adoption to the US and brainstorm about best-case scenarios for Russian children in state care. As this severing of the Russia-U.S. adoption pipeline meant adoptees' own route to the U.S. was no longer available to other children, this interview prompt created a channel for adoptees to voice their own experiences of being adopted and opinions of what constitutes a "good" childhood in the context of international adoption. Because discourse provides people with a way of seeing a situation and processing our own life stories, the hegemonic discourse of transnational adoption as rescue subjectifies adoptees into a specific script which many tell in the same way, especially for those adoptees who were only a year or two old when they were adopted and removed from the material situation in their own memory. Yet other adoptees voice counterhegemonic narratives in their positive recollections of communal living in Russia and the challenges of becoming a family in relationship with adoptive parents in the U.S.

Impossible/Bad Childhoods in Russia, Good Childhoods in the U.S.

The idea that adoptees only access a good childhood through transnational adoption to the U.S. or other rich industrialized countries focuses on emotional bonds as well as material foundations. The popular portrayal in the U.S. of birth parents and orphanages abroad is negative. Specifically, a bad childhood—or no childhood at all, if childhood is imagined to be a carefree and innocent time of being cared for by parents—is often depicted as what adoptees endured while in Russia in the care of birth parents. Then there is the space of the children's home, which is also widely understood as a space of material deprivation, as well as an

incomplete site of care provision. These understanding of children's homes are rooted in American popular culture icons like Little Orphan Annie, as well as more contemporary portrayals of children's homes in TV shows like 20/20's "Shame of a Nation," the major U.S. network portrayal of Romanian orphanages in 1990, which *The Washington Post* said was "sure to send distraught viewers rushing for their checkbooks or even their passports in hope of rescuing the thousands of children who are prisoners of Romania's hellish state orphanage system" (Battiata 1990). As recently as 2021, the landing page for the website of the University of Minnesota's Adoption Medicine Clinic continued to critique institutional life with the statement, "For every child adopted out of an orphanage or impermanent care situation, millions more languish there." In my interviews, adoptive parents and adoptees sometimes echoed and sometimes parried with these negative portrayals of birth families and children's lives in institutions.

The discourse of transnational adoption as rescue (King 2009) or that it is in the best interest of the child (Howell 2006; Lindgren 2015) relies heavily on the material advantages and stability promised in coming to the U.S. Transnational adoption is inextricably tied to global discourses about which countries are in need of assistance and which countries are benefactors. Theorizing adoption from countries like South Korea helps contextualize understandings of transnational adoption as rescue of needy children from unfortunate fates, "a dimension of development discourse (Escobar 1995) in a postcolonial world in which child adoption operated in conjunction with other forms of aid" (Yngvesson 2002:233). While Russia's relationship with the U.S. differs from that of other sending countries like Korea and Vietnam whose adoption exchanges were prompted by U.S. military presence, nonetheless development aid and the

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international adoption industry did both become part of post-Soviet Russian life in the 1990s.

In contrast to the idea that institutionalized children are best off in adoptive families in rich

industrialized countries, by thinking *with* children/adoptees I employ a child-centered lens to

shift the emphasis from the micro-level focus on how adults have a putative right to parent and

the macro-level focus of how certain countries "rescue" children through adoption, to instead

consider how children themselves value and construct relatedness and care relationships. For

example, Johnson (2011) delves into how institutionalized children think about their

relationships with their peers and how they may consider them family. Similarly, Fournier et al.

(2014) illuminate the benefit of children's relationships with each other, noting how children

understood living in a group home as something which gave them a sense of belonging. Finally,

thinking about other ways of family formation not through adoption but through new

reproductive technologies allows us to understood adoptees alongside children conceived

through sperm donation, who think about family partially in terms of other children of the same

sperm donor (Hertz and Nelson 2019). While these ties are biologically based, the creation of

kinship among donor children is a social process among peers, much like the relationships

fostered among children in institutional care. Among all these children, understandings of

family, kinship, and belonging are not limited to a shared familial household.

In mainstream U.S. culture, the typical story of good care relationships for children is

narrower: a good childhood for institutionalized children takes place within a family and ideally

in the U.S. One recent example of the rescue framing for transnational adoption comes from

KARE 11, a Minneapolis television news station, with a human-interest story looking back at a

Russian adoption from the early 2000s. The subheading reads, "Months after 7-year-old Jamie

passed away, her mother flew to Russia to adopt. She didn't fully understand yet that she was saving another child's life" (Haavik 2020). This story emphasizes U.S.-provided medical care as one aspect of the "good life" Russian adoptee Christiana Faith was brought into through adoption. And even though Christiana was 16 years old at the time of publication, she is not a quoted source in the story, but instead an object of interest whose story is narrated by her adoptive mother and grandfather. Her visions of family and what constitutes a good childhood are not solicited, allowing the dominant discourse voiced by her adoptive family to be the only narrative provided.

Similar to the KARE 11 story, Googling "adoption from Russia" yields similar representation of children in need of rescue. An ad for Children's Hope uses the phrase "orphan children waiting for homes"; an ad for the nonprofit site Compassion.com, which markets itself as "Releasing children from poverty in Jesus's name" is headlined "Kids Waiting for You: Thousands of Kids Are Waiting for a Sponsor. Become a Sponsor! Help Children Heal"; finally, Families-for-Orphans.org sports the tagline "Join with us today to help orphans who have no chance for adoption! Christian ministry." The sites reference orphans and a large-scale problem of "thousands of" waiting children, tinged with hopelessness and urgency in the framing that they "have no chance for adoption." Transnational adoption as rescue here is revealed in its overtly Christian variants, similar to the adoption organizations featured in the journalistic book *The Child Catchers* (Joyce 2013), in which children are rescued into the U.S. on multiple levels: to the U.S. as a Christian nation, by the particular nonprofit as a Christian organization, and into a Christian household.

One final example of the dominant discourse of transnational adoption from Eastern

Europe to the U.S. as a form of rescue: three years after Russia put the U.S. adoption ban in place, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty produced a 3 ½ minute video which quoted various Russians, including multiple adoptive mothers, who argued against the ban and in favor of every child having parents (Bachina 2015). The adoptive mothers' stories affirmed the idea that children's homes were no place for children: one mother relayed a story her adoptive daughter had told her, that spilled milk would be mopped up, the rag wrung out into the child's cup, and the child made to drink; another adoptive mother described her adopted daughter as a listless 11-month-old when she first met her, who would sit or lie unmoving, staring into space, wherever she was placed. The footage in the short video was from a baby home, rather than showing school-aged children, with towheaded toddlers pottying in a line, playing, or standing along a crib railing in matching onesies. The reporter voiceover questioned the Russian state's claims that there were fewer children now in children's home, citing those who argue that children could simply be reclassified as "temporarily" in state care, rather than the decrease in official numbers signaling that those children either were being adopted domestically or that fewer children were being claimed by the state and that, by extension, the nation was better supporting Russian birth parents. One of the Russian adoptive mothers interviewed argued that even if only 50 children would have been adopted by American families were it not for the ban, it would have been good for those children. She quoted an apparent Russian aphorism: "One child's tears are more important than the whole world." This story didn't deny that good childhoods could take place in Russia, but nevertheless reiterated that a happy childhood took place within a family and that the U.S. had been a reliable source of parents for these sorts of institutionalized children. In the adoption-as-rescue narrative then, as exemplified by these news stories and adoption-

promoting organizations' websites, the family is the location of a "good childhood" because it is envisioned as the site of proper care *and* material stability – a place of love and also the provision of the basics of food, shelter, as well as, in the U.S., the extras of a good (read: middle-class) contemporary childhood—abundant toys, enrollment in activities, appointments with medical professionals, and help with schoolwork.

In telling their adoption stories in interviews, some adoptees provide an explanation for why their birth mothers relinquished them by hinting at the specter of a bad childhood. These renditions provide the foil to a "good childhood" in the US, sketching out the situation they were putatively being saved from.

James, a preteen boy who was adopted along with a younger sister, answers my initial interview prompt to tell his adoption story with a coherent, if very brief, narrative. "[My other parents] in Russia, they couldn't – they didn't have enough *money* to take care of us, so they *had* [*voice rises*] to put us in an orphanage." It sounds like a memorized, often repeated refrain – as though he is repeating something back his adoptive parents have said to him about being adopted. His explanation of being adopted touches on a core idea: that his birth family relinquished him (and his sister) because they lacked the material means to support their children. He also frames it in the simple language that makes sense for his age (Brodzinsky 2011), speaking directly to the issue of "enough *money*" to provide care for children, a privatized and costly endeavor in neoliberal societies with pronounced wealth inequality like post-socialist Russia as well as the U.S.

James' adoptive parents, whom I also interviewed, are both working professionals. In the U.S. James was adopted into a middle-class family—that which is imagined to provide a good

childhood. One glimpse of this material foundation of the good life comes toward the end of our conversation. James tells me about his martial arts training, showing off the colors of belts he has earned. These personal items communicate that his adoptive family is one in which he is able to participate in fee-based extracurricular activities, a hallmark of contemporary childhood in the U.S. Participating in martial arts provides James with an opportunity to compete and a sense of individual achievement, key components of a child's experience of a good (neoliberal) childhood in the U.S. (Friedman 2013; Manning 2019).

While James provided a succinct material justification for his birth family's inability to provide him with a good childhood, another adoptee, Lara, voiced a dominant discourse about the shortcomings of institutional care for children, the other major imagined counterpoint to U.S. adoptive family care. When I asked Lara about her vision of the best-case scenario for youth who are still in children's homes in Russia, she responded,

> For them to get well-nourished and for them to get the amount of love that any parent would [give]. They should have more staff there. […] To go around to every kid. 'Cause I remember when I was in Russia, I didn't get enough love, or care, so to speak, as you're supposed to. And I think that's why I'm short, 'cause I said that how babies grow, is to of course eat, and be loved. I guess that didn't happen.

Lara paints a picture of a good childhood here in the U.S., one which did not come soon enough to leave her physically unaffected, as she tells it: "I think that's why I'm short." In Lara's telling, a good childhood is one in which a child is nourished both physically and emotionally by caretakers who can focus on a select few children, rather than spreading their caring attention among a group. This critique of insufficient group care resonates with the Radio Liberty video visual: a row of toddlers sharing a single crib, all in matching onesies.

Lara's statement is a more developed and nuanced extension of the discourse which

James invoked. While James simply stated his birth mother didn't have the money to care for him, Lara's discussion implies that care takes money *and* attention, for children to be "well nourished" with proper food and also "to get the amount of love that any parent would [give]." Her emphasis on parental love takes for granted the superiority of a family setting as a place of providing care, in contrast to the children's home.

It is worth noting, too, that Lara's criticism of institutional versus family care is a generic echo of a dominant discourse. She was adopted at a young age, so her assertions about her experience in the children's home are likely mediated by retellings from her adoptive parents and exposure to U.S. media criticism of Russian and other foreign orphanages. Lara's statement also alludes to the pervasive idea that adoptees ought to consider themselves "lucky" and be grateful for having been brought into their adoptive family to enjoy better material conditions and to be properly loved, a gratitude not demanded of biological children. That Lara absorbed the mainstream U.S. understanding of orphanages as places of insufficient care matters because it is a clear contrast with those adoptees who were adopted at older ages, who can tell more specific stories about their time in Russian children's homes—both good and bad.

James narrates his story through the dominant discourse of poverty displacing a child from a family of origin into the adoption system where "rescue" (displacement) through transnational adoption becomes possible. Lara extends this storyline through her critique of life in an institution, imagined as universally short on the material and emotional resources needed to provide adequate care. Extending the vision to a third stage—from natal family, to institutionalization, to the transition to adulthood, Lara raises the specter of what happens to institutionalized children if they are *not* adopted. Teenager Lara said she does think about being

adopted with some frequency because of people's questions:

> Yeah, 'cause some of my friends are like, 'Well, what if you weren't? What if you weren't adopted by your parents?' Well, most of the girls, if they aren't adopted, they are, like, prostitutes or something. Or that's what I read and heard.

Lara invokes another way in which adoptees are repeatedly reminded of having been rescued, this time not from the poverty of their birth parents but from their own portended bleak future life chances in their society of origin. That is, the imagined future for institutionalized children and youth released to independent life is ending up on the street, a haunting vision that serves as a temporal extension of the discourse of international adoption framed as the rescue of vulnerable children. Lara has absorbed the gendered discourse about the probable fate of institutionalized girls in Russia: without the support of natal family or meaningful support from the state, young women aging out of the state-run system of children's homes in Russia are imagined to enter into sex work to survive. This trope extends beyond the realm of children's institutions, adhering to the bodies of women from East European countries as they travel to Western Europe and the U.S. (Durisin 2017; Parvulescu 2014). It resonates with older fears about a "white slave trade" that is echoed in contemporary media about sex trafficking (Baker 2014). Thus, being adopted to the U.S. grants Lara a "good childhood," in this case meaning that it reroutes her imagined trajectory into adulthood from a marginalized future (sex work) to an adolescence in which she spends her high school time studying science and agriculture. She participates in a middle-class American adolescence in which education, extracurriculars, and casual dating occupy her time and attention.

Boris, a 20-something adoptee, echoed Lara in his use of the disaster discourse of

foreclosed futures back in Russia for institutionalized youth. Boris deemed Russia's decision to end further adoptions to the U.S. "sad":

> I think kids in the orphanages in Russia would have a better chance at life here and have a better chance of getting adopted. […] I have a feeling that a lot of them are just gonna end up in horrible spots in their life, either dead or in prostitution or whatnot.

He adds, "I'm sad about it, though, you know? That they won't get a chance to experience what I've experienced. Get a second chance at life." Elsewhere in our conversation he talks about his transition to adulthood—his pride in graduating from high school, the jobs he's held, the Russian girlfriend he had, going through rehab to get off drugs. These are all pieces of his adult life as an adoptee in the U.S. "Overall, it's very difficult, but the opportunities that we [adoptees] get is worth it, I guess." While not a streamlined story of the American dream, Boris's life as an adult Russian adoptee in the U.S. is one he perceives to be more successful than if he had stayed in Russia. In the U.S., Boris became an adoptee with a family including siblings, and also a high school diploma. Had he stayed in Russia, Boris perceives the options to be threefold for youth like him transitioning out of care: military service, sex work, or death.

Boris, Lara, and James understand their good – middle-class, American, white – childhoods and ensuing smooth(ed) transitions to adulthood as the result of having been adopted into families in the U.S. They echo narratives of international adoption as rescue which is accomplished largely on the basis of an imagined U.S. national superiority, as well as the "common sense" value that children only thrive with parents' care, whether biological or adoptive, not in institutions.

Loving Relationships in Russian Children's Homes

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For those adopted as infants or toddlers, comments about their connections to caregivers or their peers in the children's homes were more likely to emerge in interviews with adoptive parents or have been fostered as part of an adoptee's story through narratives captured through media coverage of their own adoption or videos and photos their parents had of them in their children's home. In contrast to the dominant discourse of international adoption as rescue of vulnerable children into loving families, as illustrated by James and Lara, adoptees also voiced counterhegemonic narratives of positive relationships in children's homes which they grieved leaving behind. I find that adoptees who came to the U.S. as older children, who had more time in their country of origin, voice more complex considerations of what being adopted meant to them personally and what good being adopted does for children in general. Some of these older adoptees commented on their experiences of loving relationships in Russia, as well as the challenge of creating relationships with adoptive parents.

These reflections on loving relationships "over there" challenge the dominant discourse of transnational adoption as rescue. Transnational adoption is typically nationalistically defended in the press as rescue from deprivation, recently exemplified in Romanian adoptee Izidor's story, told for the umpteenth time in a summer 2020 issue of *The Atlantic* (Greene 2020) and previously on NPR, in the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Washington Post*. The dominant discourse holds that rescue overwhelmingly results in happy endings, though the proliferation of narratives about adoption dissolution have challenged that sanguine story. But in contrast to the linear narrative of adoptees' migration as a happy homecoming to loving "forever families," or even troubled times once adoptive families try to live together that dominate in public discourse, I find that interviews elicited adoptee reflections on care and interconnection they experienced *in*

Russia while in children's homes, not only in families in the U.S. Their comments on loving

relationships existing here and there, both in institutions and in family settings, complicate the

simplistic narrative that U.S.-based family care is the only or best space in which these children

could thrive.

Rachel, an adult adoptee who participated in an interview when she was home on break

from college, was adopted in middle childhood, and so was able to recount her feelings about her

time in a children's home in Russia. She contrasted her fond recollections of growing up there

with the negative stereotypes about orphanages she confronted in the U.S., both in conversations

and in media depictions:

> I grew up in an orphanage. A lot of people give [you] crap about orphanage[s] and you always see those movies, horror movies and whatnot, but this one, the one I was in, was really nice. I feel like it was an education part. You had to play. We really were a small family. I would say it was a really good orphanage and I feel like I grew up pretty well and then when I got adopted, came here.

> […] We were all friends. It was like a boarding school, kind of, where you live at school. We did arts and crafts. We ate together. There was a lot of tea. […] We'd all sleep in this huge room with beds. We all lived there, and then there was a bathroom with multiple stalls and whatnot. We literally did everything together, so it was exactly like family. Some of them you didn't like. Some of them you loved and whatnot, so it turned into the full family aspect.

Rachel did not talk about her birth family at all in telling me her pre-adoption story.

Rachel had no comparison between her adoptive family and a natal family's care, having been

relinquished as an infant. Instead, she compared her sense of the strangeness of relationship

building in the U.S. with her experience of closeness with her peers in the children's home in

Russia, where she lived until she was adopted ("We were all friends […] Some of them you

didn't like. Some of them you loved"). The children's home was a place in which she played, was educated, and enjoyed being part of "a small family" in which she judged that she "grew up pretty well." Notably, Rachel shifted the framing of a children's home away from the culturally denigrated and suspect vision of "an orphanage" to reasoning, "It was like a boarding school." Boarding schools, in contrast to orphanages, conjure up images of good (expensive) education and care.

She had a lot to say about her initial dislike of being adopted to the U.S. When I asked Rachel what it was like to meet her adoptive mother, she shared her original sense of ambivalence about having to leave her life in Russia at the children's home and come to live with a stranger in the U.S. where she "had no idea what was going on, really":

> It was weird. I mean, I really had no idea what was going on, but everybody would call me "the American kid" or whatever, and I think they figured out sooner than I did, which is funny, but I mean, it was cool. At first, I thought the visits were cool, but I don't think it hit me that I was actually leaving and living in America until the last visit and that was scary, but it was exciting, too.

Regarding her adoptive mother, Rachel said pointedly, "I didn't really like her at first. It's funny, but I really just didn't like it here at all." (Rachel's adoptive mother said the same when I interviewed her, that Rachel didn't like her at first, but they both agreed they soon developed a good relationship and enjoyed a good relationship at the time of their interviews.) Rachel clarified that it wasn't something wrong with her adoptive mother; rather, she missed the loving relationships she left behind, particularly living in a community:

> I think it was more the fact that I missed everybody from Russia, like all my friends, so being thrown into a place where it's just me and my adopted mom and not much else, it was a hard adjustment.

Additionally, Rachel explained that from her lived experience, a household that consisted

of a family was what she and her peers considered strange: "I also didn't really understand, like, living in an orphanage, everybody you lived with has the same circumstance as you, so having parents and whatnot was not the norm for us. We were all just used to living together."

Adopted at age 11 along with an older brother, Tanya also discussed her loving relationships in the children's home and the sadness of leaving. Like Rachel, she speaks about the challenge of adjusting to life in the U.S. as an older child who was already accustomed to the positives and negatives of life in a Russian institution – the language, the routines, the care from the workers or friendship with other children, the scarcity of various consumer goods. "Orphanage life wasn't—for me personally it wasn't *terrible*," she said. "You hear *so* many stories about the terrible life orphans have. There are plenty of those orphanages, but I don't know—I feel like our orphanage was pretty good." Tanya clarified the emotions that accompany her recollections of life in the children's home: "I mean, there's definitely a lot of sadness when I think about [the] orphanage, but that's because I was taken from my family. But the orphanage became my family." One of the orphanage workers had even offered to parent her, Tanya said. "She really fell in love with me and wanted to adopt me," Tanya recounted, but since the woman would not also take in Tanya's older brother, Tanya refused.

After being adopted to the U.S., Tanya recounted missing the kids she had lived with in the children's home in Russia. "A few of my friends wrote me letters from the orphanage," Tanya said. "So that was nice. But every time there was a letter it was just hard. It was like heartbreak again, you know." This longing for her former friends helps contextualize how she characterizes the process of being adopted, her perception that the adoption process happened too quickly. "Everything for us…was *really* fast. We were, like, introduced to our parents one day,

and I think, like, a week later, we were gone." So rather than retelling her adoption story as one in which she was unequivocally thrilled to gain parents and come to the U.S., Tanya reveals the ambivalence that could accompany the process for some older adoptees, as they left behind caretakers who prized them enough to offer adoption and friends who continued to write them letters after they went overseas.

Nor were the new relationships adoptees had to forge with adoptive parents easily created or the broader culture without its contrasts to everyday life in Russia. Tanya struggled to adjust to the U.S., framing the communication challenge not as it is commonly understood—adoptees with no knowledge of English—but as an issue of her adoptive parents not speaking Russian ("I mean, they *barely* spoke Russian"). Tanya was measured in her criticism, acknowledging the pros and cons of having been adopted: "Even though [coming to America] is a good thing, you know, it's very, very traumatic. It takes a long time to […] adjust to the new culture and…the way of life here." She went on to directly challenge the idea of adoption as a fairy tale ending or rescue from a uniformly miserable situation:

> It was very, very hard. People think adoption is so great and wonderful, and, you know, you're offering this wonderful chance for a life to this child, which is all true…but there is just so much grief that the child is going through, that…I don't think is ever portrayed, you know?

Tanya names grief directly, invoking the ideas of ambiguous loss for those involved in adoption (Bailey 2015; Pauline and Boss 2009), the idea that adoptees are left with many unanswered questions in addition to their physical distance from their early caregivers. Tanya also echoed Rachel in the idea that it's "strange" for adoptees to transition "to call[ing] these *people* (laughs) we didn't know 'mom' and 'dad.' […] And it was *hard*, you know, because you

kind of feel like you're…replacing your real [*sic*] parents, you know?" Tanya talked about both the sadness of leaving loved ones behind and the ways in which older adoptees must purposefully learn to be in relation with adoptive parents. Rather than feeling rescued and relieved at getting to experience childhood in the U.S., Tanya grappled with the complexity of grief and loss as a result of her adoptive migration to the U.S.

Tanya highlighted all the seemingly minute differences in the cultures of childhood between Russia and the U.S. Her recounting included how the staple of schoolchildren's diets in the U.S., peanut butter, was a foreign taste for her, one she adjusted to slowly. More substantially, Tanya emphasized that the children's home not only was a place in which she experienced loving relationships, but also an institution where she learned skills she appreciated—gardening, sewing, music and performance.

Tanya's interview went against the dominant narrative that being transnationally adopted is *rescue*. Instead, her words conveyed how being adopted seemed fast and was thus disorienting for her as a child, how she missed her friends once she was in the U.S., how she found American food strange and unpalatable at first, and how her starry-eyed dreams of the U.S. were met with her reality of being adopted to a state that didn't have palm trees and streets paved with gold, but rather featured winters that stretched through April much like in the region of Russia where she was raised. In reality, her adoptive family wasn't an affluent family inhabiting a beachside McMansion in the style of *Santa Barbara*, an American soap opera which fueled fantasies of what life looked like in the U.S. as they were broadcast in post-socialist countries in the 1990s (Iossel 2017; Prosorov 2001).

As Elena Prokhorova explained about 1990s Russian TV series, "It was cheaper and

easier to buy *Santa Barbara, The X-Files, NYPD Blue,* or a Latin American *telenovela* than to find a sponsor for a native show. Consequently, until the mid-1990s, Russians vicariously lived the dream lives of the rich, the yuppies, and the elite FBI agents" (2003:516). So instead of coming to the U.S to enjoy palm trees and a life of ease, Tanya went to live with a homeschooling, church-going Christian couple who drove a modest van--a van filled with multiple unrelated children they had adopted from Russia. Tanya offered a tempered critique, not discounting the advantages she enjoyed from coming to the U.S., but also not suppressing the sense of being estranged from her country of origin: "We did get offered a better life here, but it's like, your roots are in Russia still. It's hard."

Tanya's experience, then, was not one that I interpret as "rescue" but rather as a break in her life, a rupture. Being adopted was being claimed, as Mark Jerng theorizes transnational adoption (2010), to go to a new place—a new nation-state with new ways of attaining and practicing citizenship, a new dominant culture, and a new way of ordering social reproduction that differed markedly in some ways from her time in the orphanage and in other ways, with the mix of adopted kids, didn't differ as much as she had expected upon being adopted. As Jerng emphasizes, adoption as a lived experience of being claimed involves "negotiations over attachment, belonging, possession, and dependence within these kinship practices" (2010:xiii). Tanya's interview shines some light on these sorts of negotiations, from the mundane to the substantial, in terms of adjusting to Americans dietary norms and fostering a sense of closeness with non-Russian speaking adoptive parents. Her interview also highlights adoption-as-rupture in terms of sense of belonging and love lost, as she had lived reasonably well in the children's home and was comfortable with its rhythms and beloved enough by caretakers to have had an

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adoption offer from one of the children's home workers.

Boris was also adopted as a young child, and he, too, speaks of close relationships with peers in the children's home from which he was adopted, including one other little boy with whom he had hoped to be adopted. "The hardest part was the transitioning to America," Boris said. "It was a very emotional day, 'cause I was leaving a lot of my friends." He adds later, "It was very hard for me to move from Russia over to here. […] You leave a lot. It's like you grow up, it's like a huge family. I mean, I was happy [to be adopted], but then I was sad. Transitioning when I got here was, it was quite a[n] experience."

In contrast to Boris' affection for his friends and the other boy he had once hoped to be adopted with, his view of the orphanage itself was dim, what he alluded to as a traumatizing *Lord of the Flies* experience in which children's aggression against each other went unchecked. "And even right now, I'm working with my therapist to work through the PTSD that I've experienced in the orphanage. It's not a place for kids, it really isn't," Boris asserted. Later in the interview Boris added, "Orphanage life is pretty much 'kill or be killed,' is how you would put it. It's like survival of the fittest." He compares what Russians refer to as a "baby home" for toddlers and preschool-aged children, the first kind of institution in which he lived, with the orphanage from which he was adopted, a "children's home" which houses older children until adoption or emancipation in their later teens. Boris explained that for him, the baby home felt more nurturing:

> It felt like the employees or the workers there actually cared for the kids, compared to the second orphanage where the workers just seemed like, 'No, I'm gonna come here, work, and be done. I'm not gonna put an effort into disciplining the kids or whatnot.' It's literally just kids who run the orphanage. It's pretty much like a prison. It's how people say the prisoners are the ones that run the prison, not the government. A lot goes on in an orphanage that not many people think does.

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Boris's painful recollections about life in his particular children's home can also be seen in how he frames the moment of learning he would be adopted: "From my point of view, it was just more special, like, 'Yes, I get to get out of this hellhole and actually have people that actually care about me. And actually have siblings." However, Boris's story defies a simple "happily ever after" narrative in that while he was excited to escape the orphanage "hellhole […] and actually have siblings," his experience of belonging in his adoptive family has been complicated:

> For the most part, I'm to myself. And that's been really hard for [my adoptive parents], 'cause they're so used to their kids telling them everything blah blah, and I'm more like, 'No, I'm gonna keep everything to myself. I can handle it.' I survived the orphanage; I can survive here.

Boris' description of all the spaces he has called home in the U.S. and Russia communicates his sense of the need to hold himself somewhat apart and care for himself. He also suggests that adoptive parents who don't speak an adoptee's language pose a challenge to communication in establishing an intimate familial relationship. "They didn't speak my language. I didn't speak theirs," Boris said. His sense of alienation from his adoptive family continues into adulthood, beyond a simple language barrier:

> I also feel like, as though I'm a guest here. Like I would have thoughts like, 'OK. Yeah. I'm adopted, and I'm in this family,' but I would have the sensation that I'm just like a guest until I leave, until I have my own family and whatnot and then I'll be done with this family. That's how it feels sometimes.

Later he adds, "As an adoptee I can't speak for everyone, but I can assume that a lot of people would feel the same: it's hard to interact as a family when you weren't raised by a mother

or by a dad."

Natasha, an adult adoptee who had come to the U.S. with her biological brother, spoke about her perception of the harshness of orphanage life:

> There's a lot of abuse that happens. I learned how to fight (*laughs*) in the orphanage. You fight for survival. It's literally Darwin's survival of the fittest. If you are not able to stand up for yourself, people will abuse you, so I became really, really hard because I had my brother. No one could touch my brother without my permission.

Stories like Natasha's resonate more with the dominant discourse of adoption as rescue, portraying a children's home as a place where a good childhood cannot take place. Yet even within Natasha's story there remains a kernel of the same story of loving relationships in Russian children's homes, just focused more narrowly on Natasha's protective relationships with her biological brother. So, similar in part to Rachel, Natasha's emphasis is on relationships of care between peers, among the children.

Against Happy Endings

As the interview data discussed above indicates, coming to the U.S. is not a universally happy ending for adoptees, for myriad reasons. At the extreme, some adoptees experience adoption termination. Others endure neglect or abuse, as Russian media has trumpeted as a mark against the U.S., and as adoption researchers have noted, providing empirical evidence to push back against the discourse of rescue and "lucky" or "chosen" adoptees (Pine 2014). It is also the case that the cause of marginalization for institutionalized children in Russia may still be cause for marginalization in the U.S.—or that coming to the U.S. would create new layers of difference and disadvantage for adoptees. Take, for example, Dennis, who had a college degree but was unable to find work in his field:

I mean I live with my parents. I don't have a choice, which is unfortunate. I don't like my position in life right now. Being 26 and living at home without a job is not the most ideal thing for anyone. Finding a relationship is not easy, uh, so yeah.

In the interview with Dennis's adoptive parents, they reflected on the challenges he has had since being adopted:

Mom: Well, we knew there would be some challenges because he had a disability.
Dad: Yes.
Mom: We found for a long time, that his – what we considered to be his disability, was his language. Not [the physical disability he was born with]. He was…slow to learn language. And challenged by it. […]I think a lot of it is just from lack of brain development when he was little, that he didn't get talked to, and nurtured. […T]he language thing was a challenge, I think particularly for us because we're such, [husband] and I are such verbal people. That um…we… we struggled with how to help him with that.

In talking with this family, they all variously reflect on how Dennis hasn't achieved the American dream as a result of coming to the U.S. as an adoptee. Dennis's story adds complexity to the media narrative that adoptees, "even those" with disabilities, enjoy happy lives after being adopted to the U.S. Beyond his congenital physical disability, Dennis's struggle with speaking and understanding the English language was a surprise challenge to his adoptive parents, and something that they also posited as affecting how people perceive him in social interactions. Dennis, perhaps because he was adopted at a younger age, does not have the same critical perspective that some other adoptees shared, that of the language barrier being imposed upon them by the monolingual adults who adopted them.

When I asked his adoptive parents what their vision of success was for Dennis, his mother replied, "That he would be independent, financially independent, and that he would find meaningful relationships." His adoptive father chimed in, "That's it, yep (*laughs*)." Dennis and

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his adoptive parents voiced the same basic vision of adult success and independence, with "meaningful relationships" a key ingredient, nodding toward close friendships as well as romantic partnership. This vision was not yet realized. Dennis noted this as a challenge as someone in his mid-20s, when there is a cultural expectation that these various pieces of the puzzle that is 21st century adulthood in the U.S. will somehow have fallen into place. This adoptive family's reflection on Dennis' stalled transition to adulthood resonates with larger patterns of de-standardized transitions to adulthood in rich industrialized countries (EGRIS 2001; Fussell, Gauthier, and Evans 2007; Nico 2014). Yet their telling of his story reveals the challenge that so many individuals face in zooming out from Dennis as an individual, from Dennis as a transnational adoptee, to find explanations of what conditions make it difficult to ascend to the societally sanctioned peak of adulthood—education, job (ideally "career"), independent housing, romantic relationship, and perhaps children.

In addition to individual adoptees' own lived challenges achieving all the benchmarks of adulthood in the U.S., some adoptees also discussed larger societal trends of a lack of support or opportunity for those in America. Boris, in addition to critiquing for imposing a language barrier between adoptees and their caretakers by bringing them to the U.S. where neither adoptive families nor teachers typically speak Russian, also has country-level critiques of the U.S. He calls these shortcomings the country's "shady stuff." Asked to give an example, Boris said, "What I see most is the unfairness. […] One good example I can give is how the veterans being mistreated. I mean, they give up their lives to protect this country and yet America doesn't, it seems like they, excuse my language, but it doesn't seem like they give two fucks about them." In a critical view on the country he was supposedly rescued *to*, Boris challenged the idea that the

U.S. is simply the land of opportunity and instead highlighted the ways in which the U.S. falls

short in providing care for veterans.

Similarly, teenage adoptee Kristen critiques racism in the U.S. during our interview over

Martin Luther King Junior holiday weekend. During our interview, I asked Kristen what she

would ask if she were the one conducting the interview with other adoptees. After a pause and a

bit of laughter, she suggested the question, "How do you feel your life would've been, if you

would've stayed there? Or … like… is America everything you'd hoped it to be?" She

continued, "Honestly, there's been times where I think like maybe like, Ru— or, America's just

as bad as Russia. You know. Just, like, the government here isn't as great as I'd like it to be.

There's still a lot of discrimination."

Kristen later on expanded on what she meant by discrimination:

There's so much gun violence with police officers and Black people, which isn't fair,
because – and then the whole Martin Luther King Day, there's this Vine on Snapchat,
you know – you know what snapchat is? – well, there was all these people, they were
like, well, I have a dream that Martin Luther King's will come true, because – it's still not
true. People like to say that it is, but it's technically not. And it's not gonna be true until
everyone can feel safe. In their own skin. Whether that's the color of your skin, or your
sexuality or your internal race, because I mean, no one would really guess that I'm
Russian, but you know – and I don't think he was just talking about black people. He
said, *everyone* is equal. And that means everybody. (*grinning*) And that's definitely not
happened yet.

While police brutality and homophobia are not dangers which Kristen herself talks about

facing, she is highlighting the broader inequalities in American society which belie the vision of

the U.S. as the land of opportunity to which adoptees are rescued. Issues of safety are established

in terms of those in the U.S. who face racism and homophobia; nonetheless, Kristen seeks

common cause with those who are marginalized, invoking her Russianness as "internal race," as

an ethnic identity or sense of origin which sets her apart and sometimes causes her discomfort in the U.S. In this way, Kristen challenges the idea that being adopted granted her a happy ending and instead goes so far as to hint at the possibility of solidarity among the marginalized which her identity as an adoptee grants her.

Conclusion

Through the above discussion, I challenge the discourse of rescue and happiness as possible (only) through adoption to the U.S., a discourse that was promulgated in the media coverage of Russia's U.S. adoption ban. This discourse echoed the usual ethnocentric and nationalistic defense, or even lauding, of transnational adoption more generally. Drawing on interviews with adoptees, I highlight a counterhegemonic discourse, that of some adoptees' *ambivalence* in coming to the U.S., or simply the strangeness they experience of establishing familial relationships between unrelated adults and children who originate from different countries and speak different languages. These children may be most familiar with communal living with other children and caregivers who share their culture and language. They may have preferred this form of communal living. This is not to dismiss the possibility that their life chances may have been dramatically curtailed were they to have stayed in institutional care and then had to have made their way as adults in Russia without familial or meaningful state supports. However, employing a childhood studies perspective means taking seriously children both as "beings" during their childhood, as well as "becomings" aimed at adulthood. These retrospective interviews with both child and adult adoptees are particularly well suited to think about these multiple time periods toward which children and childhood are oriented.

My findings about adoptee ambivalence toward being adopted, their adoptive parents,

and their adopted nation resonate with the findings of other critical social scientists who find a disjuncture between adoptee experiences and adoptive family/nation's aspirations of easeful transition and connection. Anthropologist Rachel Stryker interviewed adopted children who described their adoptions as "scary," "lonely," and something they "just accepted" (Stryker 2010). In this chapter, I demonstrated how attending to adoptees' ambivalence adds to childhood studies' emphasis on children's agency. It invites us to ask what it means to be "child centered." As with the ethnographic studies in children's homes discussed at the start of this chapter, I find that formerly institutionalized children sometimes had what they considered close, family-like relationships in institutions. In addition, adult adoptees who chose to temporarily or permanently relocate or repatriate to Korea demonstrate alternate visions of where adoptees envision their best lives to take place (Condit-Shrestha 2018; Kim 2007, 2012).

In analyzing these interviews, it is important to note that these statements are being mediated through adoptees' memories and their interaction with me as the interviewer. Nonetheless, including adoptees' own reflections is an importance corrective to a lopsided focus on adoptive parent and adoptive nation perspectives that continues to dominate discussion of transnational adoption from Russia in the mainstream media and, to a lesser extent, academic research.

In conclusion, adoptees provide a range of perspectives on where they found loving relationships during their childhoods, indicating that both in Russia and in the U.S. they had experiences which they might qualify as exemplifying good childhoods. With this heterogeneity in mind, it is important to continue to ask how adoptees can be invited to participate as decision-makers in their own lives, defining family and care for themselves and having meaningful

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opportunities to connect to as well as critique their countries and cultures of origin and adoption alike.

Ch. 6. Conclusion: Becoming Radically Child-Centered

It's time to create language that values justice over innocence. The most important question we can ask about children ... Are they hungry? Do they have adequate health care? Are they free from police brutality? Are they threatened by a poisoned and volatile environment? Are they growing up in a securely democratic nation?

All children deserve equal protection under the law not because they're innocent, but because they're people.

-Robin Bernstein, "Let Black Kids Just Be Kids" New York Times, 2017

In *Post-Soviet Americans*, I have demonstrated that the struggle over the image of and actual treatment of Russia's social orphans and Russian adoptees in the U.S. has allowed both the U.S. and Russia to make claims about their superior ability to provide care and protection for children. When paying particular attention to the life chances of children with disabilities, the arguments typically lean toward the U.S. being the better country for them to grow up in, according to both an array of Russian sources as well as most of the pro-adoption voices in the U.S. Yet adoptees themselves suggest that their sense of belonging in the U.S. has sometimes been tempered by their previous sense of connection and care in Russia, whether in their birth families or in children's homes, as well as by encountering Russophobia in the U.S.

By constructing social orphans' belonging and care as being best delivered in a familial setting in the U.S., adults in both countries practiced being child-centered through instrumentalizing children, rather than acting in solidarity with children and adoptees. Adults emphasize the value of these children as priceless, as Viviana Zelizer (1985) has established, but they don't fully consider children's own *values*. As such, and considering the specific focus on children with disabilities in this case, I suggest we dispense with the phrase "special needs," and

instead employ childhood studies, disability justice, and reproductive justice frameworks to invite children and adoptees to be co-conspirators in counterhegemonic world-making. These frameworks invite us to question what would shift by asking how adoptees can belong not only as children to adoptive parents but also to biological parents and siblings as well as among their peers in disability, immigrant, and diaspora communities. How could children and adoptees participate in the process of imagining the conditions for institutionalized and formerly institutionalized children to thrive, as well as participate in the public conversations about Russia's adoption ban and the future of international adoption more broadly? Julie Hemment's participatory action research in Russia with women (2007) and youth (2015) can serve as a model for future ethnographic projects that might answer these questions, should political conditions again allow such international collaborations between Americans and Russians.

I also want to consider historian Robin Bernstein's recommendation that the best starting point for working to ensure children's welfare going forward is by recognizing children as people rather than as innocent dependents and by pursuing conditions under which people of all ages can flourish. Critical adoption research in social work suggests one good starting point is employing trauma-informed parenting within adoptive families (Kim 2021), to support adoptees in processing feelings of ambivalence and grief like those shared by some of the adult Russian adoptees I spoke with. However, parents can be particularly paternalistic and infantilizing toward disabled children. The challenges of parental paternalism toward children and youth with disabilities and the frustrations of forced dependency were recently discussed more widely in the U.S. with the 2020 release of the Netflix documentary *Crip Camp*. Camp Jened, where many of those disabled activists featured in the film first met and recognized themselves as part of a

capable disabled collective, was a model of radical inclusion, disability community, and cross-disability solidarity as well as a space of youth participation and decision-making. The value of interdependence shone particularly bright in the recounting of the 504 Sit-in in San Francisco, interdependence among people with a variety of disabilities and also between the disabled activists and other liberation movement organizations, such as the Black Panthers. But the disability community is nowhere to be seen in the U.S. and Russian media's defense of adoption as allowing children, particularly those with disabilities, to lead happy lives. Adoptees' happy lives are assumed to be accomplished through their adoptive parents and the state. There is no mention of how these adoptees' lives might be shaped by relationships with other disabled people or by U.S. disability policy like the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act (ADAAA). Further, by ignoring disability activism, the media coverage allows the U.S. to assume the moral high ground without grappling with the fact that this country still has not ratified the 2006 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), just as it has not ratified the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Arguments that the U.S. is the best place for Russian adoptees to grow up ought also to address how, and for which groups of people, such "happy lives" are ensured when the U.S. does not abide by these international agreements.

Though children and adoptees continue to be manipulated for political ends, critical scholars, activists, and artists are pushing back in myriad ways. Critiquing the use of children to uphold white supremacy in the U.S., Dorothy Roberts (2022) argues for the dismantling of the family policing system that disproportionately funnels Black and other marginalized children into foster care. Roberts suggests investments instead in the upstream solutions of poverty and

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violence prevention. This vision is part of a broader push for reproductive justice, here focused

on allowing people to parent their existing children in safe, well-resourced communities.

Modeling how children and adoptees can participate in the process of imagining the conditions

for institutionalized and formerly institutionalized children to thrive, Smith (2017) interviews

former foster youth in the U.S. and finds they are able to assert themselves in a way that

separates them from disaster discourses about the grim futures awaiting them, similar to those

that Russian adoptees in the current study grapple with. Critiquing foster care and adoption's

disproportionate harm to Black and Indigenous children and youth in the U.S. has also been the

focus of satire, including in an episode of the television show *Reservation Dogs* ("Stay Gold

Cheesy Boy"), and with a reimagining of the tragic adoption history of the Hart family murders

in the show *Atlanta* ("Three Slaps") during the shows' 2022 seasons. When right-wing attacks on

trans kids in the U.S. come under cover of the rhetoric of "parental rights" (Contorno 2023;

Karni 2023), queer youth activists respond by promoting their own autonomy and joy (Summers

2023). Politically active Korean adoptees in the U.S. grapple with how to claim agency without

being discounted as angry killjoys and how to be in coalition with Korean birth mothers, as

Eleana Kim (2010) analyzes in her ethnographic work. And in Russia's war on Ukraine,

Ukrainian children have been taken from war zones to be adopted by Russian citizens, prompting

the International Criminal Court to issue arrest warrants for Russian President Vladimir Putin

and his Commissioner for Children's Rights for such unlawful deportations and transfers to

Russia (El Deeb, Shvets, and Tilna 2022; Esveld 2023; Kuzio 2023). In all of these cases, we

should continue to ask how the reproductive justice principle of supporting parents to raise their

existing children safely can be observed, where children themselves see themselves as belonging

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and thriving, and to also consider in global as well as national context how Bernstein's questions about children's well-being prompt us to raise broader questions about children's ability to enjoy food sovereignty, health care, environmental justice, and participatory political regimes. By focusing on those broader conditions, we shift our attention to the contexts which precipitate family dissolutions in the first place.

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Appendices (Interview Schedules)

1. To start, I invite you to tell me your adoption story
    A. Deciding to adopt, choosing an agency, choosing a country, choosing a child.
        Why did you decide to become parents?

    B. What was your child's pre-adoption story?

    C. How was child similar to you? Different? (language, ethnicity/race…)

    D. What were the resources required to go through process of adopting? (financial, emotional, social networks…knowledge of Russia(n)?)

2. Becoming a family
    A. Expectations v. experiences of parenting
        i. How did you talk to your child about being adopted as they grew up?

    B. Expectations v. experiences of child's participation in family (expressions of affection, chores, affirmation of you as a parent)

    C. As a whole, what is your family like?

    D. How do you self-identify as a family? (Prompts: American, Russian-American, bicultural, adoptive…)

3. Relationship to Russia, Russian culture
    A. (Relates to choosing country/child) – What were your prior ties to Russia(n culture), completing adoption, post-adoption relationship to Russia(n culture): cultural activities, language, connection to other Russian immigrants locally or around U.S.

    B. Does your child identify as Russian? American? Racial/ethnic identity?

4. Relationship to adoption community
    A. Do you participate in events or groups? (weekly/monthly/annual/one-time)
    Connection to domestic, international adopters, Russian adopters

    B. Does your child participate in events/groups?
ii. In your child's social world now, who are your children's friends/peers? Which children are

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like yours? [connections to other adoptees; kids with mental health diagnoses like autism, similar disabilities; kids in neighborhood; kids with same hobbies]

5. Thoughts on politics of adoption from Russia
    A. Russia's adoption moratorium in 2012-2013;
Adoptions in the news: boy from Tennessee sent back to Russia; new campaign by a Russian adoptive mom with the hashtag #comeonmisterputin

    B. What is your opinion: What is the best-case scenario for children in Russia without parental care? (What was the best case scenario for your child?)

6. Anything else you would like to add? Suggest I ask other adoptive parents and adoptees in future interviews?

1. Tell me your adoption story
   Life before being adopted, growing up in Russia (if adopted after age 5), learning of and meeting adoptive parent(s). How was adoptive parent similar to you? Different?
   Relationships left behind

2. Becoming a family
   Expectations v. experiences of participating in an American family: relationship with adoptive parents, siblings, school, clothes/toys, having friends over

3. Relationship to Russia
   Post-adoption relationship to Russia(n culture): cultural activities, language, other Russian immigrants
   ASK: Have you ever…participated in Russian cultural activities? Studied the Russian language? Spent time with other people from Russia (adoptees or immigrants/diaspora)?
   Can you tell me more about that?
   Do you currently participate in any of these things?

4. Relationship to adoption community: ASK: Have you ever…?   // Do you now?
   Participated in events or groups (weekly/monthly/annual/one-time)
   Connection to domestic, international adoptees, Russian adoptees
   Interest in becoming an adoptive parent?

5. Thoughts on politics of adoption from Russia
Opinion: What is best case scenario for children in Russia without parental care?

Was it better to grow up/be raised in the United States? Why or why not?
6. Anything you want to add or change?
7. Anything you would ask if you were doing the interviews yourself?

ADULT ADOPTEES: If respondent has gone through other life course transitions, check in:
- Moved away from home—Living independently
- Attended post-secondary education (completed college?)
- Started job
- Got married, had children