

Orphan Sunday: Narratives of Salvation in Transnational Adoption

By Sandra Patton-Imani

Abstract: The article is a critical analysis of public narratives about transnational adoption that equate adoption with the salvation of “orphans.” The stories I weave together from in-depth interviews, social science and humanities research, law and policy, and public dialogues make visible the scaffolding of power that shapes families’ lives. I tell a specific story about Korean American adoption that speaks to the power inequalities shaping the transnational transfer of children from developing countries all over the world. These stories reframe the circumstances of adoptees’ births and relinquishments as issues of social inequality rather than as individual choice.

Key Terms: transnational adoption, orphan, Korea, birth mothers, racial identity, white privilege

We would ask all of you who are Christians to pray to God that He will give us the wisdom and strength and the power to deliver his little children from the cold and misery and darkness of Korea into the warmth and love of our homes.

—Form letter promoting adoption from Korea, written by Harry Holt, founder of the Holt International Adoption Agency, 1955–1957

As a continuation of Orphan Sunday, around 30 students signed up to do a vow of silence for those who have no voice. We are starting this event at 12 am and it will go until 6 pm. We’ll be wearing t-shirts that have statistics and Bible verses about orphans and the fatherless. Thank you for the initiative of the Orphan Sunday! We hope to continue hosting events . . . through the years!

—Announcement posted July 30, 2012, on the website of the Christian Alliance for Orphans

Transnational Adoption

Transnational adoption from Asia began in the 1950s from Korea, following the Korean War. The earliest adoptees to enter the United States were “war orphans” that farmers and adoptive parents Harry and Bertha Holt took it upon themselves to “save” through the Holt International Adoption Agency, a rescue mission they founded in the 1950s. The Holts, along with others advocating Korean American adoption in the 1950s, rallied what historian Arissa Oh calls Christian Americanism: “Coupling a diluted form of Christianity with values identified as particularly American,” they narrated a public story that equated the salvation of orphans with Christian family values and patriotic citizenship in the Cold War era.¹ This salvation narrative has continued to frame public understandings of transnational adoption to the

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United States from Korea, as well as locations around the globe.

The second quote above is not from the 1950s. The salvation of orphans continues to be a popular cause. Who can deny that children everywhere should have food, shelter, and families? The story, however, is much more complex. The purpose of Orphan Sunday, an annual orphan-education day held at participating Christian churches, is “to defend the fatherless . . . to care for the child that has no family . . . to visit orphans in their distress.”² Promotional videos on the website represent the emotionally charged images of children, primarily of color, obviously living in poverty, familiar to most people in the U.S. from “Save the Children” campaigns. This is a powerful story of children in need that triggers a familiar emotional current, in part because it is so deeply embedded in U.S. public narratives.

Children throughout the world living in poverty and unsafe conditions are indeed in need of more resources. However, as a scholar of adoption and an adoptee myself, I am concerned with what is typically left out of the public narrative, and further, what this simplified story diverts from public attention. I am continually disturbed to see adoption put forth as the solution to global problems that could, in my view, be prevented by macro-level social changes, along with changes in the ways we understand gender, race, and family in a global capitalist context. My concern in this article is with public narratives and representations of transnational adoption that depict children available for adoption in developing countries as “orphans” in need of salvation through adoption to western capitalist countries. I would like to suggest that narratives of orphan salvation through adoption silence the voices and lives of the women who give birth in poverty and oppressive circumstances throughout the world. Salvation narratives obscure attention to the role of state power in shaping the circumstances that lead to child relinquishment in countries with high poverty rates, and adoption by primarily white middle-class married couples in the United States and other western countries.

Problematic Orphan Narratives

The well-intentioned participants of Orphan Sunday who “signed up to do a vow of silence for those who have no voice” presumably focus on “the orphans and the fatherless” as those in need of their “One Day. One Voice. One Purpose.” campaign. Their concern is not only for orphans, but also “the fatherless”—children of single mothers. Within this mythology birth mothers are silenced and made invisible, while their children are narratively transformed into orphans through the sealed records of closed adoptions. The “one voice” raised for orphans drowns out the stories, and even the existence, of their often living mothers.

The emphasis on “protecting the fatherless” reveals the conflation of orphans with the children of single mothers commonly made in public discussions of adoption in the United States. It also reveals that one of the underlying functions of the contemporary U.S. adoption system is to regulate family “legitimacy” by enforcing policies that facilitate the dismantling of single mother families, and construct white patriarchal middle-class nuclear families. In this widely embraced story, international “orphans” are “saved” from the imagined horrors of poverty, war, oppression, and single motherhood by the promise of freedom and prosperity through adoption by two-parent heterosexual Christian families in the United States.

Mythologies of Adoption

Mythologies of adoption in the U.S. explain the absence of birth mothers’ stories through two intersecting narratives. One story casts adoptees as orphans in need of salvation. The other assumes that birth mothers unproblematically “choose” to relinquish their children. These assumptions about how babies become available for adoption appear in popular culture and other forms of public discourse, and more importantly, are codified legally for the purposes of adoption and immigration in

the U.S. State Department's definition of an orphan:

A child may be considered an orphan because of the death or disappearance of, abandonment or desertion by, or separation or loss from, both parents. The child of an unwed mother or surviving parent may be considered an orphan if that parent is unable to care for the child properly and has, in writing, irrevocably released the child for emigration and adoption.³

Under The Child Citizenship Act of 2000, foreign-born children adopted by United States citizens must meet the legal definition of an orphan in order to become U.S. citizens immediately upon entry to the country.⁴ U.S. immigration law builds on the rich mythology surrounding orphans and expands the definition to include children of single parents who choose to relinquish them for adoption. Even in the early years of Korean American adoption following the Korea War, most children were not literally war orphans, but rather the children of Korean women and U.S. soldiers.⁵ Their biracial identities marked them as outsiders in Korea, a country where even same-race adoption carries profound stigma. The intersection of the legal definition of who counts as an orphan with popular mythologies about orphans has profound implications: *many of the "orphans" adopted from developing countries around the world have mothers and/or fathers who are alive.* There is a disturbing gap between the legal and public understandings of which children are orphans, and the social and individual circumstances under which children become available for adoption.

Several important elements frequently are missing from public discussions of adoption in the U.S. The first aspect of adoption that is crucial to public understanding, but too rarely present, is the language of those whose lives are touched by the issue; the voices of birth mothers constitute a palpable absence in public narratives about transnational adoption. The second element necessary for a critical understanding of transnational adoption is a structural analysis—attention to the laws, public policies, and social institutions that define some women as fit mothers and some as unfit moth-

ers, that define married heterosexual middle-class parents as "legitimate" families and single mother parents as "illegitimate." The third analytical frame that is essential for an adequate understanding is attention to the intersections of gender, race, ethnicity, culture, socioeconomic status, and national context. The shape of the story changes when we include attention to social structure, the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, class, and nation, and the voices of those whose stories are silenced by the regulatory practices of adoption.⁶

Academic discussions of narrative and representation may seem removed from the lives of mothers and children living in poverty. But the stakes in these rhetorical tales are high. The efficacy of strategies for solving social problems is dependent upon how we, as individuals, communities, and nations, understand and define the problem. The emphasis in public dialogues on the salvation of orphans through adoption is an attempt to solve a large-scale social problem through individual actions.⁷ If we consider the level of individual action and experience only, adopting children seems like a practical solution to the orphan "problem." However, if we broaden our scope to consider how children and their mothers in countries all over the world become imperiled, we will have a much better chance of understanding what strategies and efforts might be most effective at *empowering* rather than *saving*. Children would not be endangered if their mothers had the economic and social resources necessary to raise them.

Making the Hidden Visible

I tell a set of interwoven stories here about Korean American adoption that makes visible what is typically hidden in public narratives. The stories I weave together from in-depth interviews, social science and humanities research, law and policy, and public dialogues make visible the scaffolding of power that shapes families' lives. I tell a specific story about Korean American adoption that speaks to the power inequalities shaping the transnational transfer of children from developing countries all over the world. Korea is the country with the

longest and most consistent history of sending children to the U.S. (and other western developed countries). The details and specificity of this story are important for understanding how power relations regulate women's reproductive lives in Korea, yet these narratives, analyzed in social context, also contribute to public and academic understandings of the politics of transnational adoption more broadly.

While I focus attention in this essay on Korea, my analysis is informed by more than twenty years of qualitative research with adoptees, adoptive parents, birth mothers, and social workers, as well as a lifetime of involvement in adoption-related social organizations. In the United States I have interviewed white adoptive parents with children from China, Guatemala, Haiti, Africa, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Russia.⁸ I have interviewed white adoptive parents of multiracial and African American adoptees, social workers involved in transracial adoption, and adult transracial adoptees.⁹ In this essay I draw on ethnographic life history interviews I conducted with birth mothers at Ae Ran Wan Maternity Home in Seoul, Korea, in 2002, as well as with adult Korean American adoptees. The women with whom I conducted in-depth interviews had stayed at the Christian maternity home while pregnant, and had relinquished their children for adoption to the United States in the 1990s. My interdisciplinary research draws on cultural anthropology, sociology, American studies, and multiracial feminist scholarship to consider the complex social issue of transnational adoption. I begin with a discussion of the lives of Korean birth mothers, the women from whom metaphorical orphans are to be rescued. I then consider the salvation side of the story, and how it is intimately connected to the politics of gender, race, family, and labor.

Mothers of Korean “Orphans” Speak

In 1990, when Mrs. Lee became pregnant at age 23, her boyfriend of several years denied the child was his. She had never been with another man. They had been planning to get married. She did

not know what to do. Abortion was illegal in Korea, though she knew that she could have procured one had she wanted to. She felt she could not abort her child. She worked in a lingerie shop at the time, and did not earn enough to support a child on her own. She knew that when her employer found out she was pregnant and unmarried, she would lose her job and have no legal recourse for this discrimination. In 1990 there was no social welfare program for unmarried mothers in Korea.¹⁰ The stigma of illegitimacy in Korea is so profound that it is very difficult for single mothers to find employment and maintain their families.

Mrs. Lee found her way to Ae Ran Won, a maternity home in Seoul, where she stayed for the duration of her pregnancy. She did not want to relinquish her child for adoption, but *she felt she had no choice*. She felt her only choice was between adoption in Korea and adoption in the United States. Though she thought her son would have a difficult time in the United States because of his racial-ethnic identity, she decided on the United States over Korea because adoption carries such a profound stigma in Korean society that adoptees are not seen as “real” family members. Twelve years later Mrs. Lee is happily married and has three other children. She is content with her life. But, like all of the Korean birth mothers I interviewed, she is haunted by the choice she felt she was forced to make, by the shame she feels about relinquishing her baby, and by the absence of her child. Indeed, in many ways, her emotional life is structured around the impassioned hope that someday she will see her son again. She says, sadly, tears streaming down her face, “There is no way to find my child. I just wait.”

Ae Ran Won

It was not easy securing permission to interview birth mothers at Ae Ran Won. Even after my visit had been set up by the Children's Home Society of Saint Paul, Minnesota, I had to convince Mrs. Han, the director of the maternity home in Seoul, that I am a trustworthy interviewer. The fact that I was adopted was the most important element in her decision to speak with me and to

recruit birth mothers to tell me their stories. Being a member of the adoption “triad,” as it is often referred to in the U.S., seemed to provide a safeguard against misunderstanding or exploitation of these women’s stories. The shame and stigma associated with unwed pregnancy in Korea is so profound that it was difficult to find women who were willing to speak on video camera. Indeed, almost all of the women requested that their faces be blurred on the tape before anyone else viewed the interviews.

Mrs. Han, the Director of Ae Ran Won Maternity Home, discusses the intersections of family pressure, traditional Korean culture, and *ka bu jang je*—the patriarchal system—in shaping unwed pregnant women’s options. Trenchant gender oppression enforced by patriarchy, Confucianism, and Christian morality contributes to a profound sense of social stigma for unmarried pregnant women:

A family without a father or husband, they are not accepted. And also, when a woman has children without a husband, it’s a kind of stigma in the past. But now it is changing day-by-day. But in the past, it’s a kind of stigma. Because Korean society is dominated by the man and also managed by the man’s power—strong man’s power.

Indeed, Korean anthropologist Choong Soon Kim explains, “The patriarchal rules are closely related to the position of women in the Korean family system in particular and in Korean society in general, and they set the tone of sexual discrimination in that society.”¹¹

Most of the women I spoke with told a similar story. They had each been in a serious relationship, several of them engaged to be married, when they became pregnant. In each instance the men left them when they found out about the pregnancy; several of them denied the children were theirs. According to these women and Mrs. Han, this is a very common response to unwed pregnancy.

Social Constraints in Korea

Miss Park’s story demonstrates the social constraints facing unwed mothers in Korea. At the time of our

interview it had been two years since she had relinquished her son for adoption. Like most of the women I interviewed, her boyfriend broke up with her when he found out she was pregnant. She was so deeply distraught over being pregnant and single that she attempted suicide several times. While depression is most commonly framed through an individual, psychological lens in the U.S., it can also be read as a response to social disapproval, stigma, and oppression. Depression occurs in a social context, and in my view, is best understood as part of the *interaction* between individuals and society. Stigma, oppression, limited options for the future—all of these *social* circumstances can, and often do, lead to depression, anger, and a sense of worthlessness. The very concept of human worth is deeply embedded in the consumer-capitalist system of meaning.

Miss Park’s original decision was to keep her baby. Here she discusses the obstacles she faced:

I raised my baby almost three months. But as time went by I had trouble living with my baby because I had to finish my school first and also I don’t have enough money to raise my baby. And the most important thing, the Korean peoples’ way of thinking. In our society, any lady who lives with child, it’s a bad, bad thing. It’s not an easy thing to live with children in Korea.

The sense of stigma Miss Park discusses was shared by all of the mothers I interviewed. Miss Park continued, “So I just wanted to stay with my baby, but the circumstances couldn’t allow me to live with my child. . . . (sigh) My heart was tortured when I left my child. But also because of the circumstances, I had to do it. It was a very hard time for me.”

Jinsil, another young birth mother, articulated a similar perspective: “I thought about raising my child. There are some reasons. I don’t have much money to raise my child and secondly, as I told you before, I was supposed to work in China. All Korean people are usually conservative and it is not easy to raise a child alone.”

Financial barriers, along with social stigma, were among the most common factors women discussed in their deliberations about whether to

relinquish their children for adoption. Anthropologist Eleana Kim emphasizes the effects of patriarchy on Korean birth mothers: “Birth mothers—often working-class women, teen mothers, abandoned single mothers, sex workers, and victims of rape—represent the most subordinated groups in an entrenched patriarchy and misogynistic state welfare system.”¹²

In fact, poverty and patriarchy are the two most common factors shaping the separation of mothers from their children worldwide. Ae Ran Wan has kept records and conducted a survey of a sample of the birth mothers it has worked with over the years. The survey demonstrates that it is not poverty *prior to* pregnancy that shapes relinquishment, but rather, the grim economic and social prospects the women would face as unwed mothers. Mrs. Han reported, “They are poor here after they deliver the baby because the family members and the Korean people think you have to have a husband. I think they are very depressed and frustrated. According to the survey in 2000, I think that all young mothers didn’t have any hope.”

This lack of hope is rooted in the discrimination unwed mothers face in Korea. Mrs. Han discussed the confluence of factors leading to adoption for most single mothers: “It is very difficult to raise their children up here. Many of the mothers are fed up with raising their children because there is no help or support for them. In Korean society, someone who has a husband, there is no problem to raise the children up . . . Korean people have their own way of thinking—it’s a stigma in Korea.”

Stigma and Shame

This stigma is not only the shame of having had sex outside of marriage, shaped by Korean and U.S. Christian beliefs about women’s chastity and their place within the patriarchal family. The stigma is also about deviating from the male-centered lineage and Confucian family structure. When a woman marries she is removed from her father’s family line and added to the registry of her husband.¹³ Sociologist Sara Dorow explains: “When a child

has no legal father, a fact easily discerned from the all-important family register, both birth mother and child face social discrimination throughout their lives. In most cases they risk losing family ties and thus a social and financial safety net. They may also sacrifice prospects for marriage or a sustainable livelihood.”¹⁴ “Legitimacy” is strictly enforced through the *hoju*, the Korean national family registry, and its status as a public document.

Most public narratives of adoption in the U.S. discuss the circumstances of birth and relinquishment of adoptees through the frame of individual choices and rarely consider larger social forces that shape the options available to pregnant women in particular cultural contexts, political circumstances, national locations, and historical moments. Korean single mothers’ relinquishment decisions must be understood in Korean cultural and social contexts that are shaped by specific power relations, including Confucian principles, traditional Korean celebration of patrilineal bloodlines and definitions of family legitimacy, Christian beliefs about women’s sexuality and morality, capitalism and the limited economic options for single mothers, and *ka bu jang je*—the patriarchal political system in Korea. Women’s decisions to relinquish their children for adoption to the United States, in particular, were influenced by the stigma of adoption in Korea, by the history of international adoption from South Korea to the U.S., and by the history of political relations between the two countries.

Narratives of Loss

The stories Korean birth mothers told me are not stories of *choosing* to relinquish their children. They are wrenching narratives of loss. They are stories about men they thought they loved, who left when they became pregnant. They are stories of being disowned by family. Some stories emphasize coercion or rape. Several of the women I interviewed lost their jobs when their employers discovered their unwed pregnancy. Two elements were consistent throughout the life histories of the Korean birth mothers I interviewed: each of them longed

to keep her child, but found herself shamed and stigmatized by her unwed pregnancy, and the social laws, policies, and conventions of South Korea made it nearly impossible for her to support her child financially. These inequalities challenge public narratives in the U.S. regarding the “choices” birth mothers make to relinquish their children, by putting individual actions and decisions in the context of social practices, cultural meaning systems, and law.¹⁵ These stories reframe the circumstances of adoptees’ births and relinquishments as issues of *social inequality* rather than *individual choice*.

The White Woman’s Burden (to Save Brown Babies)

The orphan salvation narrative must be considered critically on the *saving* side as well. The roots of this tale run deep in western narrative tradition.¹⁶ I have written in other contexts about transracial adoption as a modern, feminized version of the “white man’s burden” narrative.¹⁷ The intersecting histories of colonialism and Christian missionary work inform this rescue and socialization project. Salvation narratives are bound up in assumptions about race and ethnicity that are rarely acknowledged, and implicitly encoded in the practices of American adoption agencies designed to “save” Korean “orphans.” Many of these organizations espouse a Christian mission, drawing explicitly on the history of missionaries “saving” Third World “natives” through conversion to Christianity.

In the western world this history of representations designates whites as capable of saving and “civilizing,” while people of color have historically been constructed as “savages” in need of civilization. The civilizing imperative of colonialism was a racial-economic dominance project focused on “reeducating” the natives through western knowledge and/or Christian beliefs. In the gendered adoption version, “fit motherhood” is vital to the future of the nation.¹⁸ In this story adoptive mothers civilize their children through socialization and enculturation into future productive American (read

assimilated) citizens. The versions of this fable vary widely from fully secular to deeply religious, yet the consistent factors in most contemporary versions are stories of fit versus unfit mothers discussed without attention to oppression and power, and the denial of white privilege.

Most Korean children adopted by U.S. citizens become members of white middle-class, two-parent, heterosexual families.¹⁹ My own research with Korean American adoptees, as well as African American and multiracial adoptees, is consistent with the personal narratives and the research available in demonstrating that racial-ethnic identity construction is typically a deeply felt struggle for transracial adoptees. One of the challenges many of the adoptees I interviewed articulate is that most of them were raised with an unconscious sense of white privilege that they internalized from their white parents. In their families, “colorblindness” was often the explicit intent, and at home, this was often not much of an issue. The challenges to their senses of self often came when they left home and went out into the world expecting to be treated the way white people are treated.

Identity and Blindness

Lily, a Korean American adoptee I interviewed, felt for most of her life that being adopted was not a big issue for her. She was accepted in her predominantly white town in rural Illinois as an exception, someone who was considered symbolically white because of her family. I interviewed her in January of her first year of college, when racial-ethnic difference became an issue for her. “I hit the wall—like ‘Wow. I’m not white,’” she said. She cried as she discussed her feeling that she had gone through eighteen years of life thinking she “knew something” and then realized that she did not. She thought she knew who she was and how she fit into society. She began experiencing a sense of difference socially, and began noticing that she was treated differently than her white friends. She found that she had limited skills for understanding or addressing racism, prejudice, or subtle forms of “othering.”

The colorblind answer—that race doesn't matter—did not work for her as a survival skill when she was faced with racism. Lily's experience is not uncommon among transracial adoptees.

There is a great deal of literature available that addresses questions of racial identity in adoption. I raise this particular point because it connects to the structural reproduction of white privilege. There has been a great deal of attention given in recent years in the U.S. to the importance of exposing transracial adoptees to their "cultures of origin" in order to provide them with a sense of history, identity, and appreciation of cultural diversity. Adoptive parents respond to such urgings in various ways, including language-immersion schools, culture camps, roots/motherland tours, living in racially diverse communities, and/or ignoring such admonitions. Lily's parents dressed her in a traditional Korean *hanbock* for her first birthday, and tried to introduce her to Korean foods and traditions as she was growing up. Her story demonstrates that even in a social context of heightened attention to racial-ethnic identity, white privilege is reproduced and maintained through everyday social interaction.

In my view, colorblindness is more accurately called privilege-blindness.²⁰ In U.S. mainstream public narratives, colorblindness is presented as a social goal—a worldview in which race does not matter. There are multiple and competing systems of meaning in the U.S. and the world for understanding race, ethnicity, and identity.²¹ The strategy implicit in colorblindness is to deny the salience of race. People of color, however, often experience this as a denial of the validity of their life experiences. Colorblindness can be read as an assimilationist project that also denies the existence of white privilege, in favor of viewing whiteness as a sort of generic humanness.

Family Construction

An aspect of white privilege built into transracial adoption concerns the construction and maintenance, through child and family welfare policies, of the western patriarchal nuclear middle class family

structure. In public dialogues this family form is often held up nostalgically as the "traditional" family. Historians and sociologists make it clear that it is more accurately referred to as the "modern" family, in light of its recent development alongside the growth of urban industrial economies.²² This family form is reproduced through screening policies for prospective adopters that privilege high income, home ownership, and college education. In racially stratified western societies like the United States, people of color historically have been discriminated against in the education, housing, and labor market, and thus have significantly lower levels of both income and wealth. I have discussed the ways the life stories of Korean birth mothers challenge key tenets of the orphan salvation narrative. This mythology also is challenged by a critical consideration of the history of adoption as a process of family construction and regulation that is deeply intertwined with racial and economic privilege, and the regulation of women's reproductive labor.

The mythology of adoption emphasizing the salvation of orphans obscures the history of adoption in the U.S. that demonstrates that the "needs" of infertile, white, middle-class, married prospective adoptive parents—not the needs of children—have guided the structure of the post-World War II adoption system in the U.S.²³ As L. Anne Babb articulates, "Though entering a new century, America's piecemeal adoption system continues to be driven by the demands of the majority of prospective adopters, usually infertile Caucasians."²⁴ Tobias Hubinette argues, "Since its beginning after World War II, international adoption has been the last resort to have a child for infertile middle-class couples, and is widely perceived by Western societies as a way of rescuing a non-White child from the miseries of the so-called Third world which includes Korea."²⁵

A renewed public emphasis on nuclear middle-class family normality emerged in the U.S. immediately following World War II, contributing to a dramatic increase in the number of applications for adoption.²⁶ The U.S. public adoption system, as it currently exists, was largely developed in this era. In this historical and cultural context infertility was seen as a tragedy to be quietly remedied through

a closed adoption. “Blue ribbon babies”—healthy white infants—were the prize most sought after, and a new crop of teenage girls “caught” experimenting with sex, and funneled through maternity homes, provided the babies that were to slip seamlessly into homogenized 1950s suburban families.²⁷ As the quote above suggests, there was a social tension going on: public narratives emphasized saving orphans, but the unspoken details were more like a market transaction. This capitalist tension has accelerated in recent decades, with people paying vast sums of money to adopt children from developing countries all over the world. As the practice has increased in numbers, narratives about orphan salvation have intensified with the need to divert attention from the crass consumerism and traffic in children the global adoption system has become.

Immigration

Like the mythic American immigrant, transnational adoptees are said to arrive in the United States unencumbered by the past and by their cultures of origin. They are the quintessential “self-made” Americans—their identities are quite literally reconstructed upon entry to the U.S., and under the Child Citizenship Act of 2000, they are automatically granted American citizenship. This is one of the concrete ways that American adoptive parents are privileged in immigration policy; transnational adoptees sail through the immigration process attached to white privilege.

The history of Asians immigrating to the United States includes exclusionary laws and legislation that allow entry based on American industries’ labor needs.²⁸ Beneath American narratives celebrating a land of immigrants that come to these shores for liberty and unbridled opportunity is an exclusionary history of immigration law that has had profound consequences for women of color and their families. This celebratory “American Dream” narrative obscures the fact that, as sociologist Bonnie Thornton Dill makes clear,

Racial-ethnics were brought to this country to meet the need for a cheap and exploitable labor force. Little attention was given to

their family and community life except as it related to their economic productivity. Labor, and not the existence or maintenance of families, was the critical aspect of their role in building the nation. Thus they were denied the social structural supports necessary to make *their* families a vital element in the social order.²⁹

While the lives of white middle-class women in the U.S. historically have been regulated through patriarchal family norms, they and their families have been supported, valued, and reproduced through labor and family policy because they are seen as vital to the future of the nation.³⁰ In the United States racial-ethnic immigrants historically have experienced assaults on their families that were enforced through immigration, labor, and family policy.³¹ The Child Citizenship Act of 2000 is part of this apparatus of immigration laws that privileges white adoptive families, and strictly regulates the labor and family relations of other immigrants.

Social Narratives and Power

The Orphan Sunday folks have one thing right: there are people whose voices have been silenced, and they need to be part of the public story. As I have discussed, adoption in the United States largely has been structured around the reproduction of heterosexual, married, white, middle-class families, and the maintenance of their privilege. Adoptive parents have been vocal and have been heard. Adoptees’ stories too, have more recently become part of public discussions of adoption. Birth parents’ stories rarely have been included in public narratives and policy discussions. Yet another absence in public stories is power. I have told stories here that attempt to include power, in its many forms, as a character in the narrative.

I have shared a series of interwoven stories that broaden and deepen public and academic understandings of transnational adoption. I have argued for the importance of considering interactions between individuals, culture, society, and world—a micro-macro framework—when considering the

issue of transnational adoption. Public narratives are one of the ways individuals and societies interact; stories help us make sense of the world. Explaining adoption primarily at the level of individual actions diverts attention from the oppression and inequality, on one hand, and the structured privilege on the other, at the core of the system of transnational adoption. The concept of individual choice is relatively meaningless when not considered in the structural context of what options are socially, culturally, and economically available to citizens in different social locations. In a macro-micro framework of analysis, choice is a *relational, interactive process* between the micro level of individual action and the macro level of social power, expressed in laws and policies, that function as a means of regulating gender, race, family, and economy. Under conditions of oppression—be it gender, race, sexuality, or economics—the options and resources available for non-privileged citizens shrink exponentially. In other words, having no viable options is a *measure of oppression*; it isn't a *true* choice if it is the *only* choice. These contextualized stories force us to acknowledge the existence and full humanity of birth mothers and the oppressive circumstances that circumscribe their lives. Indeed, my research reframes transnational adoption as a story of *social inequality* and *privilege* rather than one of *choice* and *salvation*.

Endnotes

1. Arissa H. Oh, "From War Waif to Ideal Immigrant: The Cold War Transformation of the Korean Orphan," *Journal of American Ethnic History* (Summer 2012): 43.
2. I do not raise this issue to be critical of this particular organization, but rather, as an example of how public narratives of adoption are entwined in power relations. See <http://www.christianalliancefororphans.org/2012/07/30/more-orphan-sunday-ideas-from-2011-events/> (accessed August 13, 2012).
3. See United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, "Orphan," <http://www.uscis.gov/portal/site/uscis/menuitem.5af9bb95919f35e66f61-4176543f6d1a/?vgnnextoid=0bff136d2035f010VgnVCM100000ecd190a-RCRD&vgnnextchannel=b328194d3e88d010VgnVCM10000048f3d6a1-RCRD> (accessed September 7, 2012).
4. See U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Fact Sheet, October 25, 2004, "The Child Citizenship Act of 2000," http://www.uscis.gov/files/pressrelease/CCA_102504.pdf (accessed August 30, 2012).
5. Cheri Register, *Are Those Kids Yours?: American Families with Children Adopted from Other Countries* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 2.
6. Sandra Patton-Imani, "Redefining the Ethics of Adoption, Race, Class, and Gender," *Law and Society Review* 36, no. 4 (December 2002): 813–862.
7. For an analysis of how this has functioned historically in U.S. reproductive politics, see Rickie Solinger, *Pregnancy and Power: A Short History of Reproductive Politics in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).
8. Most of the interviews with parents who adopted transnationally are part of a research project on lesbian-headed families that will result in the forthcoming book, *Sophie Has Five Mothers: Lesbians, Family, and Law*, and a forthcoming documentary, *Red Light, Green Light: Family Values, Family Pride*, created collaboratively with Melanie Patton-Imani.
9. Sandra Patton, *BirthMarks: Transracial Adoption in Contemporary America* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).
10. In 1994 South Korea enacted its first social welfare program in support of single mothers.
11. Choong Soon Kim, *Faithful Endurance: An Ethnography of Korean Dispersal* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1988), 39.
12. Eleana Kim, "Wedding Citizenship and Culture: Korean Adoptees and the Global Family of Korea," in *Cultures of Transnational Adoption*, by Toby Alice Volkman (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005), 72–3.
13. See U.N. Refugee Agency, Refworld, "Korea: The family registration system ("hoju"); who has access to the system and whether or not individuals can access information on other families," <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/topic,4565c22514,4565c25f1df,47d6545fc,0,,KOR.html> (accessed August 13, 2012).
14. Sara K. Dorow, ed., *I Wish for You a Beautiful Life: Letters from the Korean Birth Mothers of Ae Ran Won to Their Children* (St. Paul: Yeong & Yeong Book Company, 1999), 15.
15. See Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997); and Rickie Solinger, *Beggars and Choosers: How the Politics of Choice Shapes Adoption, Abortion, and Welfare in the United States* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001).
16. See Marianne Novy, *Reading Adoption: Family and Difference in Fiction and Drama* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007).
17. Patton, *BirthMarks*.
18. For a history of motherhood, immigration, and the state in the U.S., see Gwendolyn Mink, *The Wages of Motherhood: Inequality in the Welfare State, 1917–1942* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1995).
19. Korea has a strict set of requirements for adoptive parents, including a middle-class income level and marriage. While people of any race may adopt children from Korea, the majority of adopters are white. See Register, "Are Those Kids Yours?"
20. Anthropologist Ruth Frankenberg argues that colorblindness is color-evasiveness.
21. See Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s* (New York: Routledge, 1995).
22. See Judith Stacey, *In the Name of the Family: Rethinking Family Values in the Postmodern Age* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).
23. See Joyce A. Ladner, *Mixed Families: Adopting Across Racial Boundaries* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1977); Elizabeth S. Cole and Kathryn S. Donley, "History, Values, and Placement Policy Issues in Adoption," in *The Psychology of Adoption*, ed. David M. Brodzinsky and Marshall D. Schechter (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Rickie Solinger, *Wake Up Little Susie: Single Pregnancy and Race Before Roe v. Wade* (New York: Routledge, 1992); and Patton, *BirthMarks*.

24. L. Anne Babb, *Ethics in American Adoption* (Westport, Conn.: Bergin and Garvey, 1999), 60.
25. Tobias Hubinette, "The Adopted Koreans: Diaspora Politics and the Construction of an Ethnic Identity" (paper presented at the First World Conference of Korean Studies, Academy of Korean Studies, Seongnam, Korea, July 18–20), 5.
26. See Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 2008).
27. See Solinger, *Wake Up Little Susie*; and Christine Gailey, *Blue Ribbon Babies and Labors of Love: Race, Class, and Gender in U.S. Adoption Practice* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010).
28. See Bonnie Thornton Dill, "Our Mothers' Grief: Racial Ethnic Women and the Maintenance of Families," *Journal of Family History* 13, no. 4 (1988): 415–431; Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996); and Evelyn Nakano Glenn, "Split Household, Small Producer, and Dual Wage Earner: An Analysis of Chinese-American Family Strategies" in *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency*, ed. Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Grace Chang, and Linda Rennie Forcey (New York: Routledge, 1994).
29. Dill, "Our Mothers' Grief."
30. See Dill, "Our Mothers' Grief"; and Maxine Baca Zinn and Bonnie Thornton Dill, eds., *Women of Color in U.S. Society* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).
31. See Maxine Baca Zinn, "Feminist Rethinking from Racial-Ethnic Families," in Zinn and Dill, *Women of Color in U.S. Society*.