

Prologue

IT WAS A BITTERLY COLD and bright day in the middle of 2014's Polar Vortex. Stella and I piled into her little car and headed off to a far north suburb of Chicago to visit Dawn, a new expectant mother. Stella hunched over the steering wheel, squinting. A thick blanket of fresh snow reflected the midday sun, and despite it being December, I regretted not grabbing a pair of sunglasses on my way out of the house. The drive up was a little over an hour, and Dawn texted Stella—the “birth mother worker” at First Steps—several times along the way. We followed the turn-by-turn directions issuing forth from Stella's smartphone, and finally turned down Dawn's street, pulling up to a beige two-story, a large unassuming house that had been converted into smaller apartments.

Stella texted Dawn that we had arrived, to which Dawn responded, also via text message, that she was “using the washroom” and would be “out in one second.” Shortly thereafter, a smiling and visibly pregnant brown-skinned woman emerged, and Stella—accustomed to chronic difficulties in locating expectant mothers—was noticeably relieved to see her. In her mid-twenties, Dawn wore a puffy black coat, black pants, and navy Nike sneakers, her hair pinned up into a crown of black and gold twists. She approached us with a swaying gait typical of the third trimester, crunching a trail of small footprints into the snow, an ephemeral tether between her swollen frame and the front door of the house.

Like so many pregnant women approaching First Steps—the small private adoption agency where I conducted fieldwork—for adoption services, Dawn struggled economically. Stella and I had arrived to take her grocery shopping and deliver money for rent and laundry. Dawn had two children who were not currently living with her, and she told Stella that she could not afford to

care for another child. The couple she had chosen to adopt her baby was helping with everyday expenses. The prospective adoptive mother had armed Stella and me with a cooler of premade meals, to help ensure Dawn and the infant she carried were receiving adequate sustenance.

Stella introduced me, and Dawn and I exchanged smiles and hellos before I scrambled clumsily into the backseat of the two-door hatchback, wriggling into an uncomfortable yet familiar folding of my nearly six-foot frame. When Stella drove expectant mothers somewhere (usually to the doctor, to the store, and so on) I always sat in the backseat—a mix of politeness and respect, and a feeble attempt to minimize my own power. On this particular day I reflected on buses and black folks and the simultaneous strangeness and normalcy of young women of color being chauffeured around by an older white female social worker. I sat in the back silently, listening as Stella made small talk with Dawn. Stella mentioned that I was a student, opening up a space for me to briefly describe my research project and collect verbal consent from Dawn for the observation. I gazed out over Dawn's shoulder at the frosty path unfolding before us, and thought about my own birth mother.

“The personal is theoretical,” writes Sara Ahmed (2017: 10). It is also methodological. I did not simply choose this project; I was born into it, in a sense. And Dawn was gestating it. Our relative positions within the adoption triad meant that we shared intimate kinship connections with people who aligned with important aspects of each of our own subjectivities. Dawn was on the verge of making the same decision that the woman who once carried me had made, a decision that a minuscule fraction of American women make every year. A decision that drastically alters individual trajectories. In my fieldwork, I struggled to understand the implications of these decisions without influencing them. The classic anthropological conundrum of how much to observe, how much to participate.

As we rumbled along, Stella, trying to be helpful, suddenly asked me to tell Dawn about my schooling.¹ Caught off-guard, I felt constrained, somewhat reluctantly desiring to establish my institutional authority as a researcher but more urgently wanting to minimize it. How could I humanize our interaction? I wasn't sure. We were there for support, yes. (Even lumping Stella and me together into an institutional “we” is a move that reflects a complex positionality.) But we were really there for the baby. In her ethnography of life among addicted, pregnant, poor women in San Francisco's daily rent hotels, Kelly Ray Knight (2015) has described the vulture-like tendencies

of anthropologists.² I was a buzzard in the backseat. Though well intentioned, at times the social workers appeared predatory as well.

But these dynamics were more complicated. In Dawn's presence, I suddenly felt like a child, awkward and afraid, and my brain buzzed trying to figure out how to articulate my overprivileged, overachieving, degree-laden trajectory from Stanford to the University of Chicago. What was I even doing there? *But I attended an underfunded rural public high school before all that*, I thought to myself, self-consciously grasping for something—anything—that might help to level our experiences. The gap between us felt simultaneously vast and nonexistent. Our subjectivities aligned in a few socially important ways (young women of color, members of the adoption triad) while diverging sharply in others (capital of all kinds). There were probably only fifteen seconds of silence, but it felt like three hours. Suddenly, Stella interrupted her own question to ask Dawn about directions to the grocery store. They started chatting about something else. There was a levity that felt out of sync with the gravity of our visit's purpose. And I felt a sense of relief, as though I had been forgotten in the backseat. Neither in their line of sight nor on their minds. Something akin to “ethnographic countertransference” had crashed through the little car like a wrecking ball.³ Our closeness in age was suddenly irrelevant; in the same way that I had often become a promising image of an expectant mother's own future-relinquished child, Dawn became my own birth mother, and the notion of alienating her or offering myself up for her potential rejection was debilitating. And it didn't matter that she had already agreed cheerfully to be observed for my project. There she was in the front, and there I was in the back, and despite the power imbalance between us, all I could feel was a discouraging sense of unease, an acute case of what John Jackson (2005) has termed ethnophobia.⁴

I noticed that later, when we were in the grocery store, I struggled to meet Dawn's gaze, and my awareness of this horrified me. *I can't see you because when I see your pain—your resourcelessness, your powerlessness—I am in pain*. This is not an uncommon refrain within the context of social work practice, in which practitioners often experience trauma vicariously through their clients and develop coping mechanisms to ease their own suffering.⁵ But I wasn't even a social worker in that moment; I needed something from Dawn and I had nothing to offer in return. I didn't know what to say. We had just met, so personal questions about her experience as a prospective birth mother and the circumstances that prompted her adoption plan felt grossly inappropriate. Stella, as the “proper” social worker, seemed in a better position to

ask them. I felt chilled, like the wintered world outside. Dawn quietly added items to the cart as the three of us moved slowly down the frozen food aisle, its walls lined with chrome-trimmed and fluorescent-lit glass boxes of cold.

After dropping Dawn off at her house, as we drove down the alley toward the GPS's highlighted route home, Stella asked, as she always did after an expectant mother visit, "What do you think? Think she'll place?" Even after decades of experience, she was always uncertain. As was I. In an effort to assess whether Dawn would follow through with the adoption plan, Stella reemphasized the nature of expectant mothers' situations, which, she reasoned, often led to the necessary development of circumspect tactics, a sort of "hidden transcript" (Scott 1990): "She's just used to asking people for help and getting help and needing help. Her house looked empty enough. I just feel like there's a whole lot she's not saying." *Perhaps*, I thought to myself, *because she is participating in a process in which she is structurally silenced*. The food in her belly was literally contingent upon her continued interactions with Stella.

The sun sat low on the horizon as Stella and I made our way back to the freeway, the northern suburbs fading into the rearview mirror. We did not really know Dawn any better on the drive back than we did on the drive up. My own troubling inability to see Dawn suddenly rendered visible other ways in which she was being erased. Neither Stella nor I—nor the prospective adoptive couple—heard from or saw Dawn again after that day. The adoption fell through.

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end, n. A piece broken, cut off, or left; a fragment, remnant.⁶

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Introduction

TO SPECULATE INTIMATELY

Had a baby girl on the 10th. 8lbs 7oz beautiful. named her CLEO. can you please tell robert and william I send them my deepest apology? one look at her and And I just culdnt bring myself to giving her away.

—Text message from Selene to Stella, September 2010

THIS IS A BOOK ABOUT the contingency of kinship. The above text message from a new mother to her adoption social worker illustrates a phenomenon known among adoption professionals as a “fall-through.” In the summer of 2010, social workers at First Steps—a small private nonprofit adoption agency just outside of Chicago—were growing increasingly exasperated by a sharp uptick in fall-throughs, which sometimes occurred when a pregnant woman initiated an adoption plan with the agency, often early in her third trimester, and progressed to the stage at which social workers “matched” her with a waiting prospective adoptive family. This match was nonbinding, and an adoption was considered a fall-through if, at any point beyond this match, the expectant mother decided to parent—rather than place—her baby, effectively terminating the adoption plan and foreclosing the possibility of adoptive kinship. The language is not neutral; to refer to this scenario as a fall-through gestured toward a particular desired end, an outcome aligned with a specific set of interests.

Fall-throughs were emotionally distressing to social workers and prospective adoptive parents for a variety of reasons. But at the start of my fieldwork,

these emotional losses were increasingly complicated by financial losses in the form of “legally allowable birth parent expenses,” which were paid to the expectant mother by the prospective adoptive family. This investment—which included money for food, clothing, shelter, and any necessary legal fees—was irrecoverable in the case of a fall-through. In the years following the financial crisis of 2008, prospective adoptive parents were sometimes experiencing multiple fall-throughs and losing hundreds and thousands of dollars. Social workers openly wondered if the increase in fall-throughs was due in part to the economic downturn, which had hit low-income communities of color—where the majority of expectant mothers resided—the hardest. Suspicions arose that economically desperate mothers-to-be were “gaming the system” with no intention of placing their babies. One thing was clear: investments of multiple kinds were being made, and lost, in these unborn children. A multivalent adoption economy determined the futures of children, parents, and social workers alike. Money changed hands, but this adoption economy could not be reduced to market forces or some preexisting and overarching economic “logic.”¹ For adoption also encompasses a range of other economies: moral, affective, visual, and temporal. That is to say, adoption is a site of messy circulations and investments in which valuable entities as disparate as dollars, kin ties, hours and years, gazes, and imagined children are produced and exchanged by parents and social workers. Adoption at First Steps constituted an elaborate traffic in imagined futures. Depending on a number of factors, this traffic at various times resulted in the creation, dissolution, and preservation of both adoptive and biological kinship, connections that were, as a result, highly contingent.

For decades—perhaps more than a century—American adoption has been haunted by anxieties about origins, background, and history. The fight for access to birth records, efforts toward search and reunion, and concerns with confidentiality, secrecy, and illegitimacy all reveal an anxiety about roots. Questions of racial / ethnic identity, heritage, belonging, and culture-keeping point backwards. Where do adoptees come from? How are their divergent biological and cultural histories incorporated into new adoptive family formations? Departing from this trend, *Contingent Kinship* takes up the *process* of private agency adoption, revealing an equally profound emphasis on the future, produced through complex modes of circulation, investment, and affective engagement.² Examining the adoption process entails a shift in focus from the adoptee or the adoptive family as its seemingly logical outcome. Rather than focusing on a singular result, this ethnography traces adoption

to various possible ends, attending to the practices and processes that produce those ends. These processes coalesce into what I term *intimate speculation*: a set of practices mobilized by adoption professionals (social workers, clinicians, educators, attorneys), prospective adoptive parents, and expectant mothers that involves differential investment in an imagined future child.

This ethnography identifies and explores three different speculative modes within adoption, based on the following tripartite definition of the term speculation:³

The conjectural anticipation of something.

The exercise of the faculty of sight; the action, or an act, of seeing, viewing, or looking on or at; examination or observation.

Engagement in any business enterprise or transaction of a venturesome or risky nature, but offering the chance of great or unusual gain.⁴

Within the context of adoption in the United States, and perhaps much more broadly, intimate speculation is a theoretical concept that knits together modes of anticipation, observation, and risky investment. Adoption is a particularly potent site in which to interrogate how the production and dissolution of kinship in America fluctuate alongside larger economic and affective shifts, and within pervasive and enduring structures of uncertainty and inequality.

Intimate speculation in turn produces a form of contingent kinship.⁵ Contingency is an uncertainty about what the future holds, with risk a close cousin.⁶ Indeed, risk might be said to arise from contingency, with uncertainty through risk stemming from an outcome's dependence upon the decisions of others.⁷ Through this lens, infant adoption represents the epitome of risk, the entire process hinging on the decision of an expectant mother (at times considered "at risk" herself), and involving the circulation of personal knowledge and information.⁸ However, this risk was not the calculable sort.⁹ For many prospective adoptive parents, the possibility of a fallen-through adoption—which often resulted from a potential birth mother's decision to parent—constituted one of the most anxiety-provoking future outcomes, as it foreclosed the possibility of adoptive kinship and necessitated a starting over. Throughout the adoption process, actors attempted to engineer a particular sort of happening; when I describe adoptive kinship as contingent, I am pointing to the ways that it hangs in the balance of a complex web of risks, decisions, events, and pressures. Contingency, by its very nature, complicates the predictability of ends, often disrupting imagined futures.

Thus, the practice of adoption offers a powerful lens through which to consider the question of who can have a future in the United States, and who cannot, wherein child and future become synonymous in particular ways. This question reverberates broadly beyond the issue of adoption, with implications for how we think about the figure of the child and the family, as well as the intersection of race, class, intimacy, and violence at the neoliberal, post-welfare dawning of the twenty-first century. The story of adoption in the United States is a story of blood and biology, choice and abandonment, family and intimacy. It is a story about power, but also, relative powerlessness. As much as it is a story about family formation, it is also—and necessarily—a story about familial dissolution.¹⁰

THE STRUCTURE OF AN AGENCY

An adoption agency is a particularly good vantage point from which to witness the simultaneous production of contingency and kinship.¹¹ This ethnography investigates the adoption process from within a small nonprofit private adoption agency—First Steps—located on the periphery of Chicago between an affluent and progressive suburb and one of the city’s low-income and predominantly African American neighborhoods. Bordered on the east by Lake Michigan and to the north, south, and west by sprawling suburbs, Chicago is a complex space of race and class inequalities. According to the U. S. Census and the American Community Survey, during my fieldwork, 18.6% of families and 22.6% of individuals in Chicago experienced everyday life below the poverty line.¹² In addition, across the United States, 48.5% of black children were living in poverty, more than three times the number of white children.¹³ In 2010, one-third of Chicago’s total population was African American, and those inhabitants were overwhelmingly represented in the city’s poorest neighborhoods, effectively segregated from the more affluent white population.¹⁴ Chicago, in fact, ranked fifth on a list of most segregated U. S. cities with respect to African Americans and whites.¹⁵ Perhaps predictably then, Chicago is also home to some of the most racially segregated public schools in the country, with white students comprising only 9% of the city’s total public school population in 2015.¹⁶ Moreover, in 2013–14, 85% of students enrolled in Chicago public schools were designated low-income, and low-income students consistently score lower on average on reading assessments than their higher-income counterparts.¹⁷

The physical location of First Steps illustrated the inadequacy of a stark distinction between city and suburb, and reflected the spatial dynamics of domestic adoption in a highly segregated metropolitan area. The village of River Glen is technically a suburb.¹⁸ The adoption agency, however, was located on River Glen's edge, just a few blocks' walking distance from the Chicago city limits, and was served by one of Chicago's elevated CTA rail lines, as well as several city buses. First Steps' physical position in a borderland—an anomalous space between city and suburb—was mirrored by its conceptual location as a space of mediation between prospective adoptive parents and expectant parents, the former often residing in the suburbs and the latter usually residing in the city. The agency thus functioned as a boundary place: “a privileged material and spatial setting in which worlds that are incompatible in other settings become temporarily—and at least partially—compatible” (Koster 2014: 128). This spatial arrangement relocated the center of the adoption exchange to the physical periphery of Chicago.¹⁹ It also reified the role of social workers as the mediators and brokers of adoption transactions. This mediator role is reflected in the ways that communication between expectant mothers and prospective adopters was routed and filtered through social workers at the agency, illustrated sharply by Selene's text message to Stella.

Specializing in the adoption of African American and biracial children, First Steps was founded in 1992 by a white adoptive mother and social worker, Dotty, and had a completely white staff of mostly women. The agency was born in the midst of a sea of shifting priorities among adoption professionals concerning the best interests of black children. In the United States, transracial adoptions increased following the Civil Rights Movement, before declining sharply after a fierce condemnation of the practice by the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) in 1972, essentially equating the adoption of black children by white parents with cultural genocide.²⁰ This condemnation prompted many social workers to turn to race-matching. In the early 1990s, adopting across racial lines was still somewhat taboo. In 1994, in response to concerns that race-matching practices were delaying the placement of certain children, the Multiethnic Placement Act was passed and later amended and strengthened by the Interethnic Placement Act in 1996, prohibiting the use of race in placement decisions by federally funded agencies (Fogg-Davis 2002: 10). When First Steps was founded, many agencies either avoided transracial adoption or literally devalued black children by charging higher adoption fees for white babies than black babies. A point of

pride for Dotty, up until the closing of the agency, was that First Steps never altered its fee structure based on the race or health conditions of the child.²¹

From its inception until its closing more than two decades later, First Steps facilitated the movement of children from predominantly low-income, African American neighborhoods on the South and West Sides of Chicago to mostly white middle- and upper-middle-class families residing in whiter neighborhoods within the city, as well as the suburbs and out of state. The vast majority of First Steps' domestic placements were newborns.²² During my time at the agency, First Steps also participated in a number of fleeting international programs—often in an attempt to “save” the struggling non-profit in the face of dwindling domestic numbers.²³

This book is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted at First Steps between 2009 and 2016, including approximately a year and a half of sustained participant-observation, and many more months of peripheral or intermittent involvement during seven years spent living and studying in Chicago. In addition to my involvement at First Steps, I also carried out research at a number of auxiliary sites, including several large national adoption conferences, prospective adoptive parent training sessions, an adoption clinic, and a suburban “culture camp” for children adopted transracially and internationally. The latter proved a fruitful source of three dozen narratives from adoptive parents with some distance from the adoption process, as those in the midst of the process were sometimes more difficult to access. Although the project is quite local and grounded in the particular, it is situated within the context of a broader adoption landscape.

There is no view from nowhere. My perspective—and thus this book—springs from an embodied and subjective experience of my time in the field: of being a woman of “child-bearing age,” of being brown and somewhat ambiguously raced, of having white parents, of being adopted, of being classed in particular ways, of being trained as a clinical social worker as well as a cultural anthropologist, of being a transplant from the Pacific Northwest rather than a Chicago native, of being literally haunted by my object of study.²⁴ Indeed there are reflexive issues inherent in the very mode of research, which required me to serve as an observer, and in which my own visibility was highly conditioned by gender, race, and visible markers of social and economic capital. As somewhat of a native *and* nonnative anthropologist, throughout my fieldwork I certainly felt parts of myself—to use Kirin Narayan's (1993: 673) language—both “tugged into the open” and “stuffed out of sight” (often through no effort of my own), and herein I have strived, consciously, to attend to instances in

which these tuggings and stuffings have become ethnographically generative while actively resisting the temptation to “delete” myself from the text.²⁵

During my time at the agency, particularly in the early years, I filled the native role of social work intern. Later into my fieldwork, that positioning became a more natural—though not wholly comfortable—fit, as I completed professional graduate training in social work in 2013.²⁶ I answered phones, organized placement files, and helped plan agency functions. I spent hundreds of hours in the agency office, accompanied social workers on home visits and other various errands, attended staff meetings and agency fundraisers, sat in on trainings and conference presentations, observed home study interviews, and participated in outreach efforts. I took detailed field notes and audio-recorded as many events and interactions as possible. I also gained insights from critical analysis of online content, official and unofficial adoption documentation, adoptive family profiles, promotional materials, and various state and government documents, including bureaucratic forms and policies, legislation, and reports. In addition, I spoke with adoption professionals (including social workers, agency board members, medical personnel, and the two attorneys who worked with the agency), prospective and adoptive parents, and a few expectant mothers.

Much of my time at First Steps was spent in the agency office, which was located in an old building a short walk from River Glen’s downtown. Once buzzed in on the ground floor, staff and applicants ascended a narrow flight of carpeted stairs to a suite of offices on the second floor. The space was shared with a realty office, and was downsized twice during my fieldwork: the first time in 2009 when a wall was constructed in the middle of the large existing office space, and again a couple of years later when the whole operation moved down the hall into a small cluster of rooms including a small office for Stella—then the director—a multipurpose room (the only room with a window), a copy room, and a long, narrow office for the other staff. The staff office occupied approximately two hundred square feet, and housed four desks (one for Jenny, the business manager; one for Holly, the director of international adoptions; and two more for rotating staff and interns), and an imposing band of no less than seventeen filing cabinets. The lights were fluorescent, the walls an innocuous shade of beige. The ceiling sloped along the length of both long walls, increasing the space’s cramped quality. A large framed print of a series of African masks adorned a far wall.

When I was not in the office, I was often in the car or out in the city with Stella, who had been the director of domestic adoptions when I began my

fieldwork and was promoted to agency director a couple of years before the agency closed. Dotty, the agency's founder and director before Stella, retired during my fieldwork. The full-time staff consisted of Stella and Dotty (until her retirement). Jenny and Holly, in the above-mentioned roles, worked part-time, and the small staff was supplemented by a handful of contract social workers and social work interns from nearby graduate schools.

In the United States, adoption policy is determined at the state level, but the process of private agency adoption—to be distinguished from foster care and private non-agency-assisted adoption—is fairly similar across state contexts.²⁷ When I arrived at First Steps in 2009, a domestic adoption took about one-and-a-half to two years from start to finish, with the wait time increasing to two-and-a-half years by 2015. First Steps was not religiously affiliated, and prided itself on radical inclusiveness; social workers worked with any individual who could demonstrate parental fitness. Historically, within the context of American adoption, the parameters (both explicit and implicit) for parental fitness have been fairly narrow: white, middle- or upper-class, heterosexual, two-parent households. First Steps, however, had a long track record of placing children with single parents, considered itself minority- and LGBT-“friendly,” and even worked with terminally ill parents. First Steps was equally inclusive of parents wishing to relinquish, and would “never turn away a birth mother.”

Dotty, the agency's founder, often told prospective parents, with a mix of pride and sadness, that First Steps was sometimes considered the “agency of last resort” by social workers at other agencies. Early on, she would receive calls from these social workers referring expectant mothers with severe mental illness, or children they found “hard to place,” such as African American children or children with medical or developmental special needs. When speaking with new prospective parents, Dotty often recounted a story about the placement of a baby with no arms and no legs: it had apparently only taken her one phone call to find willing adopters. In more than two decades of operation, First Steps boasted the successful placement of over 800 children, including more than 70 who were HIV+. However, these placements were not evenly distributed across the life of the agency.

In the spring of 2015, First Steps closed permanently. An amalgam of factors led to this outcome: a decrease in domestic adoption numbers at the agency, and likely more broadly; precarious and unstable international programs (such as one in Liberia that buckled in the midst of the 2014 Ebola outbreak); and, further back in the agency's history, a difficult shift from

for-profit to nonprofit status following a 2005 Illinois adoption reform law that required an expensive buyout of the original business and crippled the agency with debt. These factors converged to produce a devastating lack of funds and the assessment by staff that it would be irresponsible to continue to accept new applicants when the future was so uncertain. The private agency always operated as a fee-for-service organization and subsisted on fees from adoptive parents and donations rather than public or private grants. In its final years, there was constant anxiety about whether or not the monthly income would exceed the accrued debt and payroll expenses. The margin simply grew smaller and smaller, until the only choice was to shutter, rendering First Steps a casualty of economic pressures produced by the Recession and changing trends in adoption more broadly. In a way, this closure was the institutional version of a fall-through.

The agency was small, and this contributed both to its perpetual financial precarity and the personal level of attention its employees were able to offer clients. As one board member opined after the closing, “What people really appreciated about First Steps was personal contact, consistency of personnel, an intimate kind of relationship.” Holly insisted, “You had to have gone with us because you didn’t like the big, the companies and the this and the that, like, you liked that you knew me by name and knew my kids and my cell number, you know what I mean? That’s why people went with us.” She explicitly positioned First Steps in opposition to “companies,” an index for larger neoliberal forces seen to be encroaching on the intimate territory of family-building. Regardless of First Steps’ status as small and nonprofit, however, its adoption process was neither immune to nor protected from the forces of economic exchange. In fact, particular economic logics were *generated* by the very structure of the adoption process, and vice versa. My ethnographic positioning within the agency helped to elucidate these structures and processes.

The accounts herein are based on the experiences of a group of staff and agency clients, which dwindled before being cut off abruptly at the end of my formal fieldwork when First Steps closed. When I began my research in 2009, I reached out to several agencies, large and small, in the Chicago area. Doty was the only agency director to respond, perhaps because her pride in the agency’s work made her eager to share it with others. Later in my fieldwork, I reached out again in the hopes of being able to offer a comparative perspective, and was generally met with silence. One agency responded that although my dissertation sounded “both very interesting as well as an important piece of research,” due to a rebranding and some upcoming projects, the agency

“would not be a good match for you as an agency able to take on a researcher” and “would not be able to provide the attention to adequately support you.” Similarly, in 2016, when I reached out to the agency that took the bulk of First Steps’ in-process cases after the closure, I did not receive a response. Despite my multifaceted insider status, access was a recurring challenge in this project.

As a result, this book tells the story of what adoption looks like from inside a single agency, but my time in the adoption community leads me to believe that little about the overall adoption process was unique to First Steps. Because of the nature of my fieldwork, my position at the agency, and my overarching concern with charting the process of adoption, the loudest voices in this ethnography are those of adoption professionals. While I always operated under the approval of a human subjects review board that set the minimum ethical standards for my work, certain of my own—and others’—sensitivities and concerns around access, privacy, confidentiality, and the emotional intensity of the adoption process limited my gathering of certain types of data (narratives from expectant mothers in the midst of the adoption process, for example, or discussions with prospective adopters in the wake of a fall-through). All names of individuals and private institutions have been replaced by pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.²⁸ Adoption work and work on adoption are both sensitive undertakings, and the ethnography to follow is greatly shaped by concerns about privacy, exposure, inequality, morality, and emotionally charged decision-making. The result is a story about the futures that hung in the balance. In advancing a theory of the imagined child as a highly contingent future, the story of First Steps is linked intimately to larger American discourses of the child as a future in—and of—the United States.

CLIENT AS CHILD, CHILD AS FUTURE

One evening in the fall of 2013, Barbara—First Steps’ most senior contract social worker—interviewed a prospective adoptive mother, as was customary in the beginning phase of the adoption process. Early in the three-hour interview, Barbara veered away from questions about the hopeful adoptive mother-to-be’s motivations to adopt and desires for a child, and instead offered a digression on the problem of the client in adoption social work—namely the question: “Who is the social worker’s client in an adoption?” This is an important and fraught question, since the two parties engaged in the