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“Where’s Your Man?”: Intersectionality in the Adoption Stories of Two Black, Single, Female Sociologists

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Abstract
Although there is a small, but growing literature on Single Mothers by Choice (SMC) and adoption, sociological research on adoption by single Black middle-class women remains sparse. In this paper, we, as single, Black, female sociologists, offer an insider view of our journeys through the state and private adoption systems. This paper has three purposes: to (1) draw awareness to the raced, classed, and gendered aspects of the adoption experience, (2) explore the emotional challenges inherent in forming a family through adoption, and (3) examine social notions of “family” and how and why some families are systemically (de)valued within the U.S. It is our hope that the layers of our experience as Black single adoptive mothers by choice will help inform conversations about changing family dynamics in the U.S.

Keywords: adoption, foster care, single mothers by choice, Black families

Introduction
Since the arrival of Africans in the United States, the country has been involved in a racial project (Omi & Winant, 1994) designed to undermine and/or dismantle Black families. Through enslavement, reconstruction, Jim Crow, and post-modern society, a set of social, economic, and political policies have made it exceedingly difficult to form Black families, keep them intact, and help them flourish. Whether it has been selling children away from parents during slavery,
fathers having to leave women and children to seek work in the North during industrialization, welfare reform targeting poor single mothers in the 1990s, or the ever-thriving prison industrial complex, Black families in every conceivable configuration (e.g., dual-parent families, single parent families, grandparent-headed families, foster families, and adoptive families) have struggled against these policies and practices for the well-being of the children involved (Hattery & Smith, 2007; Hill 2005; Hine, Hine, & Harold, 2006).

The structural undermining of Black families has left many women – both biological mothers and “othermothers” (Collins, 2000) – to raise children on their own. Sometimes this has been by choice but often it has been by necessity. In 2011, there were over four million families headed by Black women (Vespa, Lewis, & Kreider, 2013). In a White patriarchal society, this pattern among Blacks has led to the demonization of poor single Black mothers, in particular, as evidenced by the Moynihan Report (Moynihan, 1965; see also discussions from Collins, 2000; Dill-Thornton, Zinn, & Patton, 2009; Roberts, 1999) and discussions over absentee fathers (Bock, 2000). Yet, increasingly, Black women are deciding to become Single Mothers by Choice (SMCs), or women who choose to create families on their own through reproductive technology or adoption (Bock, 2000; Hertz, 2006a; Mattes, 1997).

As Black feminists and inequality scholars, we are a part of the group of women who have decided to adopt and not let constraints related to partner availability dictate our ability to build families. Despite our doctorates in sociology and the related privileges of being middle-class professionals with cultural and social capital – resources unavailable to many Black women – we found that structure still played a key and problematic role in shaping our families. Specifically, the racialized, gendered, and classed aspects of our respective processes merited deeper consideration, which prompted us to take on the task of sociologically analyzing our experiences through an intersectional lens. The purpose of this paper is three-fold: to (1) draw awareness to the raced, classed, and gendered aspects of the adoption experience, (2) explore the emotional challenges inherent in forming a family through adoption, and (3) examine social notions of “family” and how and why some families are systemically (de)valued within the U.S.. Through scholarly examination of these factors, we hope to shed light on a burgeoning social phenomenon and its implications for Black women and children. First, we begin with a review of the literature, starting with the marriage and fertility squeeze that exists for Black middle-class women.

**Literature Review**

**The Marriage and Fertility Squeeze**

The numerical disparity between available Black male and female partners has led to a marriage squeeze for heterosexual Black women. According to a 2012 National Health Statistics Report measuring the 2006-2010 marital status of women and men ages 15-44 (the age range in which 99.7% of all births occur), 55 percent of Black women have never been married, compared to 34 percent of White women (Copen, Daniels, Vespa, & Mosher, 2012; see also Crowder &
Tolnay, 2000; Ford, 2012; Keels, 2014; Packer-Williams, 2009). In large part, this is due to the structural absence of Black men, which is primarily a product of high incarceration rates, high unemployment rates, lower life expectancies, and a disparate wage and educational gap between Black men and Black women (Banks, 2011; Ford, 2012; Mouzon, 2015). With respect to education, Banks (2011) finds that the ratio of Black female to male college graduates is two to one, which means that more Black women appear to be reaching middle-class status than men. In essence, educational mismatch, or gendered disparities in college graduation rates, significantly impact partner selection and marriage rates (Bulcroft & Bulcroft, 1993; Collins, 2005; Dixon, 2009; Ford, 2012; Keels, 2014; Packer-Williams, 2009).

Indeed, the Black middle-class is increasingly composed of Blacks who are single and living alone or SALAs (Marsh, Darity Jr., Cohen, Casper, & Salters, 2007). Yet, the SALA phenomenon exists alongside a desire by many Black women to marry and have children (Keels, 2014; Packer-Williams, 2009). A recent Washington Post (2012) survey, for instance, found that 42% of Black women rate marriage as “very important to them” and 62% rate having children as “very important.” Similarly, research from Clarke’s Inequalities of Love: College-Educated Black Women and the Barriers to Romance and Family (2011) suggests that degreed Black women often value getting married before having children. As such, a potential marriage squeeze leads to what we refer to as a fertility squeeze where Black middle-class women who desire children must either remain childless or find alternatives to traditional childbearing.

**Single Mothers by Choice (SMC)**

Approximately 50,000 women each year respond to a lack of partnership opportunities by becoming Single Mothers by Choice (SMCs) through either Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART) or adoption (Bock, 2000; Hertz, 2006a; Keels, 2014; Mattes, 1997). Perhaps the seminal sociological work in this area is Hertz’s *Single by Chance, Mothers by Choice: How Women are Choosing Parenthood without Marriage and Creating the New American Family* (2006a). In it, Hertz documents the decision-making process of women who become SMCs and the social and psychological issues that they negotiate in order to form their families. Of the 50 participants in Hertz’s (2006a) study, most were White middle-class women while six identified as Black, and of that number, three would qualify as Black middle-class by virtue of income or occupation (see Higginbotham & Weber, 1992; Lacy, 2007; Pattillo-McCoy, 1999). In addition, only one of the three Black middle-class women in the study adopted, while the others used reproductive technology. Although a significant contribution to the field, Hertz’s book does not fully grapple with the unique structural factors experienced by Black middle-class SMCs who adopt. Anecdotal evidence suggests that even the decision-making process to become an adoptive SMC can be daunting for Black women who must also consider the ways in which their potential families will encounter a raced, classed, and gendered world. For example, Caryn, a blogger for adoptionvoices.com, conveyed the following about becoming a Black SMC via adoption:

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Basically, I simply pine away at the thought of adopting. I feel an added obligation to be responsible in my decision making and choices because I am single, I am in my 20's and let's face it because I am Black. Once I adopt my AA [African-American] baby, few people will know he is adopted unless I tell them. They will just assume that I am another single Black female with a child and all the stigma that goes along with this. (I feel like there actually might be more support out there for single women who are transracially adopting, than a Black woman adopting a Black child). Being raised in a very Christian home with two parents who have been together almost 35 years I feel this innate pressure to be an above board adoptive parent to justify my choice to my community and the outside world (adoptionvoices.com, 2011).

Caryn's statement reveals the multitude of factors that Black middle-class women must consider, including the stigma of being a Black single mother. Her statement also reflects the structural implications of race, class, gender, and the ways in which the sexuality and mothering options of Black women are patrolled and surveilled (Collins, 2005). These concerns aside, some Black single women nonetheless pursue adoption (Hertz, 2006a), which is noteworthy given the large number of Black children in need of adoption.

**Foster Care Adoption and Private Adoption of Black Children**

Preliminary data from The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) indicates that in 2015, there were 427,910 children in foster care. Of that number, 43% were White, 24% were Black, 21% were Latino, 7% were multiracial, 2% were American Indian, 2% were of unknown race, and 1% were Asian (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). As compared to White children, Black children are somewhat overrepresented in the system. In 2015, out of 37,928,067 non-Hispanic White children in the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017), 182,711 or 0.5% were in foster care; that same year, out of 10,156,335 non-Hispanic Black children in the U.S., approximately 103,376 (1%) were in the foster care system (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). Put differently, while non-Hispanic White children were 68% of the population of children in the U.S. in 2015, 43% of children in foster care that year were White, as compared to Black children who were 18% of the population of children, yet 24% of those in foster care. Although the data reporting system for private agencies differs based on state guidelines, according to the 2007 National Survey of Adoptive Parents, 50% of private adoptions involved White children and 25% involved Black children (Vandivere, Malm, & Radel, 2009).

Unfortunately, the systematic undermining of Black families has led to a proliferation of Black children in the foster care system and others in the private adoption system (Fisher, 2003; Roberts, 2002, 2005; Sweeney, 2012). A variety of factors, including poverty, physical or mental health challenges, or the inability to ensure a child’s physical or emotional well-being often contribute to parents or the state deciding a child should be placed for adoption. It is important to note the

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underlying structural aspects of these factors: Black birth parents might not have had children in need of adoption if they had access to better employment and educational opportunities, affordable and effective health care, and intergenerational wealth.

While single women and men represent a sizable number of adoptive parents— in 2015, over a quarter of adoptions from foster care were by singles: 13,671 by women and 1,623 by men (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016); see also Gailey, 2006— there is little research on how singles adopting through the state or private agencies experience and make meaning of the adoption process. Moreover, in the context of pro-life movements, discourses, and legislation that promote adoption as the solution for unwanted pregnancies, it is important to understand the challenges adoptive parents face in navigating systems designed to find homes for children in need. We hope that our analysis begins to fill these gaps by illustrating the ways in which the adoption process is difficult for singles— in this case, Black single women— largely due to social perceptions of what constitutes a “family” and the raced, classed, and gendered nature of the social world.

**Black Feminist Standpoint Theory**

As sociologists, our scholarly understanding of the factors that led up to Black children being placed for adoption weighed heavily upon us and was something we could not ignore in our journey as we negotiated our roles as inequality scholars with our desire to become mothers. As such, through a Black feminist lens (Collins, 2000), we explore the SMC option for Black middle-class women and how it is marked by race, class, and gender inequalities. Among other things, the framework seeks to: (1) illuminate the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality as interlocking systems of oppression, (2) combat that oppression where it exists, and (3) give voice to the everyday experiences of Black women with the understanding that their standpoints are unique and represent valuable sources of knowledge (Collins, 2000). As Collins (2000, p. 22) notes: "as a critical social theory, Black feminist thought aims to empower African-American women within the context of social injustice sustained by intersecting oppressions.” In the spirit of Collins’ work, we present our experiences as two case studies in adopting as single, Black middle-class women. In the next section, we discuss the case study approach.

**Methodology**

Hertz (2006b, p. 796) lauds the importance of case studies in family research, calling them “an important tradition in the social sciences, particularly when researchers believe that the object under study needs to be captured in vivo, in its own context, not inferred from outcomes.” Moreover, as Collins (2000, p. 24, emphasis added) suggests, "[t]he ties between what one does and what one thinks illustrated by individual Black women can also characterize Black women's experiences and ideas as a group." Thus, a collective wisdom may be borne out of these seemingly individual experiences that can offer sociological insights into how families are defined and constructed in the face of structural constraints.
while also empowering Black women who may feel disempowered by their marital and mothering options.

We also draw heavily upon Burawoy’s (1991) notion of the extended case method, which focuses on how larger social processes determine everyday life (p. 271). As Burawoy (1991, p. 282) claims, “The extended case method . . . seeks to uncover the macro foundations of a microsociology. It takes the social situation as the point of empirical examination and works with given general concepts and laws about states, economies, legal orders, and the like to understand how those micro situations are shaped by wider structures.” In this article, we examine how the broader economic, political, and social forces impinge on us as Black single mothers by choice and the extent to which our interactions and reactions during the adoption process were driven by these larger dynamics. As such, our adoptions represent a terrain of struggle over these forces. According to Burawoy, the extended case method is particularly useful in analyzing sites of domination and resistance (p. 279). As we will argue in this article, both our decisions to adopt and our experiences throughout our respective processes were marked by aspects of domination and our resistance to these oppressive structures. Finally, the extended case method “seeks generalization through reconstructing existing generalizations” (p. 279). In the case of our adoptions as single Black women, we are contesting generalizations of adoption and alternative reproduction as the domain of White couples. For example, in *Killing the Black Body*, Roberts (1999, p. 246) states:

> Think about the snapshots that promote the new reproduction. They always show White people. And the baby produced often has blond hair and blue eyes—as if to emphasize her racial purity. The infertile suburban housewife’s agonizing attempts to become pregnant via IVF; the rosy-cheeked baby held up to television cameras as the precious product of a surrogacy arrangement; the complaint that there are not enough babies for all the middle class couples who desperately want to adopt; the fate of orphaned frozen embryos whose wealthy progenitors died in an airplane crash: all seem far removed from most Black people's lives.

As Roberts so eloquently claims, alternative reproductive processes are thoroughly shrouded in Whiteness and two-parent families. Thus, an extended case study of adoptive Black single mothers by choice is rare and can help illuminate how women like us respond to the social, political, and economic forces that have shaped our adoption experiences.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

This research collaboration began when we met at a sociology workshop on race; during our informal conversations, we discovered that we were both in the midst of adopting as single Black women. A month after our meeting, Kristie’s newborn girl was placed with her through a private agency. Soon afterwards, Cherise’s fourteen-month old girl was placed with her through an agency that works with the foster care system. Kristie’s adoption was finalized
when her daughter was nine-months old, while Cherise’s adoption was finalized when her daughter was just over two years old.

This happenstance meeting and the prompt placement of our children led to regular phone meetings to discuss the challenges of the adoption process and to provide support for one another. During these discussions, we realized that there were commonalities in our experience, which were informed by race, class, and gender dynamics. In addition, we noted some variations in the process that were likely a function of differing state and private agency procedures. Eventually, we decided that the themes that emerged from our reflections were worthy of more rigorous sociological analysis.

Through journal entries, field notes, and written correspondences over a course of approximately three years (2013-2015), we recorded the events described in the findings section of this paper as they occurred. Specifically, once we decided to create an adoption plan, we began taking notes on the logistical and emotional aspects of the process. This included documenting the particulars of the home study process, written and oral correspondence with social workers, verbal communications with birth families, and taking copious notes during online and in-person adoption courses. All written correspondences and notes were saved and notes from phone or in-person meetings were taken alongside those interactions whenever possible, or immediately afterwards. In total, the corpus of our collective data comprised approximately 100 pages of written documents.

Through an inductive analytical approach, we then exchanged notes, identified recurrent themes, unpacked core ideas, and wrote organizing memos to help frame our analysis. This process involved a constant assessment and reassessment of our adoption experiences. Ultimately, for the purposes of this article, we decided to include examples that we felt were some of the most difficult to negotiate as a single—namely those involving interactions with adoption personnel and those involving reactions from significant and generalized others. From those interactions, we focused on those that repeated in similar or different contexts for one or both of us and examined the extent to which these were a function of race, class, and/or gender. We decided to exclude any information that would significantly compromise our daughters’ privacy (e.g., detailed information about their biological families) or examples that represented the challenges all single parents face regardless of whether they have biological or adoptive children (e.g., finding emergency childcare, balancing work with family, stretching the family budget, etc.).

One key limitation of this research is that our reflections and subsequent analysis are based on an emotionally-charged period in our lives; we were simultaneously creating our families and dealing with numerous challenges along the way. While any study, including ours, is limited by researcher subjectivities (Berg & Lune, 2011), we believe that our positionality as both participants (i.e., adoptive parents) and observers (i.e., sociologists) in the process provides a unique vantage point worthy of consideration. Moreover, in an effort to be attentive to this limitation, reflexivity and debriefing sessions were used to remain attuned to potential biases in our interpretation of these data (Berg & Lune, 2011; Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Specifically, as we wrote this paper, we wanted
to be reflexive about how we documented the events during the emotionally laden adoption process and the ways our lens may have shifted (or not) now that our daughters’ adoptions are finalized. The debriefing meetings therefore allowed us to ask critical questions, challenge each other, and reconsider what parts of our stories we were more (or less) attached to and why. In the end, this process helped us to re-examine our investment in framing our narratives in a particular way and allowed us to refocus on the core sociological themes that emerged.

Findings

In this paper, we focus on three broad aspects of the process: (1) the reactions of friends, family, colleagues, and strangers to our decision to adopt as SMCs, (2) the home study process, and (3) post-placement and ongoing challenges. We chose to focus on these experiences because they were repeated in multiple contexts and represented the clearest examples of the raced, classed, and gendered aspects of this process. Moreover, they highlighted the emotional challenges of building a family through adoption, particularly as a single person. In addition, as two of these themes occurred at the beginning stages of the process, they represent how our adoption attempts could have been thwarted early on, thus preventing the creation of our families. Nevertheless, where applicable, we point out how our experiences are similar to other adoptive parents regardless of race, class, and gender—experiences that highlight the broader structural problems within the adoption process itself. In what follows, we illustrate a few of the obstacles we encountered, beginning with one of the preliminary steps for most adoptive families: sharing the decision to adopt with the people in our lives.

Sharing the News: Confronting the Biological Imperative and Controlling Images

Fisher’s (2003, p. 352) review of the adoption literature discusses the fairly negative public attitudes toward adoption. In 1997, for example, half of the respondents in a national study characterized adoption as “not quite as good as having your own child.” While he notes that attitudes are becoming more positive, behavior toward adoption is slow to change; it is still considered a last resort by infertile couples and is sometimes never considered (Baxter, Suter, Thomas, & Seurer, 2015). Thus, there seems to be a cultural preference, or “biologic bias” (Bartholet, 1999), for raising biological children and an underlying stigma associated with raising a non-relative child (Brakman & Scholz, 2006; Kressierer & Bryant, 1996; Suter, Reyes, & Ballard, 2010; Suter, Reyes, & Ballard, 2011; Wegar, 2000; Wegar, 2006).

Congruent with the literature, Cherise experienced the intractability of the biological narrative when she began sharing her decision with others. Several family members and friends immediately defaulted to biological notions of family, asking, “Why don’t you just freeze your eggs and wait for the right partner to come along?” Even though the question was posed rather emphatically, it was clear that they were not necessarily aware of how that process works. For instance, it is not recommended that a woman over the age of 35 freeze her eggs as successful outcomes drop considerably (Cohen, 2011). Cherise was past that...
age when she first decided to build a family as an SMC. Moreover, it appeared that some of these well-meaning individuals had not considered the physical strain nor economic costs of hormone therapy, donor sperm, insemination, and/or in-vitro fertilization. In addition, the suggestion that she freeze her eggs and wait for the right partner to come along didn’t take into account the aforementioned statistics on partner availability and marriage rates for Black women. In essence, there was a casualness with which friends and family immediately suggested physically, economically, and emotionally costly biological options and/or options that reflected dual-parent notions of family that weren’t necessarily feasible for a single Black middle-class woman with one income.

In Kristie’s case, people in her life directly expressed concerns about the child not being biological by saying things like “you never know what you will get” with an adopted child, in terms of developmental, physical, and/or other health related issues. This prompted reminders from Kristie that the same is also true with biological children. Yet, this remains one of the stigmas around adoption—that adopted children are too unknown a quantity to merit consideration and that perhaps a single woman with fewer resources should not consider adoption due to these potential challenges (Baxter et al., 2015; Fisher, 2003; Wegar, 2006). To be sure, many pre-adoptive families deal with these types of statements, but for Black single women who are also navigating a marriage and fertility squeeze, these questions can feel especially hurtful. As Wegar (2006, p. 6) states, adoptive families are confined by “hegemonic norms that presume a biological basis of kinship, identity, and parenthood” and thus must simultaneously work to “challenge such narrow biocentric definitions.” Change, however, can be slow; in the interim, the latent consequence of the biological narrative is also that (Black) children who need to be adopted may not be, thus depriving children and SMCs of the experience of becoming a family (Brakman & Scholz, 2006).

Perhaps more stunning than the reactions of friends and relatives were the raced, gendered, and classed reactions of non-significant others. For example, Kristie knew that she would have to contend with stereotypes and figure out how to respond to questions that emerged from well-meaning White people, such as: “Where is she from? Was she born drug addicted? I guess the biological mother did not know how to use birth control? How much is the birth mother getting paid to give up her child? And, how old is the biological mother?” This list of questions showcases how controlling images of Black women directly (or indirectly) affect people’s assumptions about adoption. More to the point, adopting a Black child evoked stereotypical images of a drug-addicted Black teenaged mother who abuses the system (Bock, 2000; Collins, 2005), when most women who create and follow-through on an adoption plan come from intact families with a higher socioeconomic status and educational aspirations (Stolley, 1993). Moreover, most young unwed mothers choose to parent (Stolley, 1993). Nevertheless, in Kristie’s case, some saw her adoption as a “noble” thing for her to do, thus positioning her as a “savior” who is “helping” a less-privileged family.

Given the socioeconomic class differences between many adoptive and birth families (Bock, 2000) and the assumed issues that might result in
birthparents pursuing adoption, the savior narrative is a commonly used and problematic storyline relative to adoption (Suter, Reyes, & Ballard, 2010; Valby, 2015). An article from Time magazine explains: “There’s an impulse in the adoption conversation to paint the [adoptive] parent as savior—propelled by biblical verse or humanitarian instinct—who swoops in and saves the child. Unfortunately, for this identity to stick, there needs to be someone in need of rescuing. That’s a lousy burden for a child” (Valby, 2015). Moreover, as Suter et al. (2010, p. 245) contend in their study on adoptive parents of international children, the savior theme often misrepresents the intention of adoptive parents, which is to build a family, not participate in “charity.” In essence, the notion of “saving” or “rescuing” a child is patronizing and paternalistic. This controlling image in adoption is often used in reference to White “saviors,” but in our cases was also applied to us as Black middle-class professionals who were presumably “helping” disadvantaged Black children in need. As such, Kristie found herself challenging overt raced, gendered, and classed stereotypes as well as more subtle comments that were intended as compliments.

Cherise also encountered similar troubling comments about her choice to adopt. The most egregious case of this occurred when she purposely had a crib delivered to her door because as a single person, there was no way to purchase a crib at the store and get it into and out of her car and up the stairs to her apartment. Instead of being delivered to the door, the crib arrived at the leasing office of her apartment complex, prompting the manager to call at 8:30 am demanding that it be picked up. When Cherise called and explained that she could not lift it by herself nor get it into her small car, the office manager said to the maintenance crew, “Could you guys deliver this to her apartment? She is hugely pregnant and can’t do it.” This comment then prompted Cherise to “out” her adoption plan to the manager because the crew would soon discover that she was not pregnant. When they finally arrived, one of the men who was Latino began asking a series of questions: “Where is your man? Why didn’t you get your man to do this for you?” The question suggested that perhaps her (Black) male partner was shirking his parental duties – a common stereotype of Black men (Collins, 2005). When she explained that she was doing this on her own and was also in fact adopting, the same worker said, “So, you can’t have your own children? You didn’t want your own children?”

As indicated by these intrusive questions, there were a series of suggestions that Cherise was creating a family in the “wrong” (i.e., non-biological) way, that she should be doing this with a man (a heterosexist assumption that again reifies the dual-parent imperative), and that she owed others an explanation for her reproductive choices. In a heteropatriarchal society, women are expected to be dependent on men (Reynolds & Taylor, 2005; Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003; Rich, 1980); women who choose to be single or are alone by circumstance are therefore devalued or stigmatized (Byrne & Carr, 2005; DePaolo, 2010; Reynolds, 2008; Sharp & Ganong, 2011). Moreover, women who decide to take control of their sexuality and reproductive lives, independent of patriarchal authority, receive a particular level of scrutiny or even ridicule (Collins, 2005; Faludi, 1991). Cherise found this to be a very disturbing pattern
and one that happened more than once. At the end of the above interaction, after
the men felt like their questions had been sufficiently answered, they employed
the aforementioned “savior” narrative by congratulating her on such a “selfless”
act and said, “God bless you.”

As these examples suggest, the heterosexual, dual-parent imperative
persists despite changing definitions of family (Hamilton, Cheng, & Powell,
2007; Jones & Hackett, 2011). This was a running theme in both of our journeys
where, in addition to the above examples, people would also say things like, “You
and your husband must be so excited!” or “Congratulations to you and your
husband!” In one particular instance, when Kristie mentioned to someone that she
was adopting, the response was: “Did I hear you right…you said I, not we?” The
frequent nature of these comments points to how strongly embedded
heteronormative constructions of the nuclear family are within U.S. culture and
how impervious that conceptualization is to change. Essentially, Black SMCs
challenge several commonly held notions: (1) social conceptualizations of
“family,” (2) that Black women should remain childless if they don’t find a
partner or marry in time to have children (see Clarke, 2011), and (3) the raced and
classed stereotype that all Black women unwillingly end up as single parents. By
making the choice to parent adopted children on our own, our families upend the
dictates of heteropatriarchy and structural racism. One of the first times we were
forced to confront and challenge these systems was during the gatekeeping
processes of the home study and adoption classes.

The Home Study and Adoption Classes: Gatekeeping in the Context of
Inequality

The home study is one of the first major steps in the adoption process and
is designed “to ensure both that adoption practices are ethical, and that
prospective adoptive parents are eligible and suited to adopt” (Crea, 2009, p. 674).
It functions as a gatekeeping process designed to discern who is a suitable parent
(Park, 2006). As Black motherhood, particularly single Black motherhood, has
historically endured much public scrutiny (e.g., Bock, 2000; Collins, 2000; Hill,
2005; Moynihan, 1965), the home study process is inherently raced, classed, and
gendered.

Cherise’s home study was conducted by a White, middle-class man. By
design, the process is incredibly intrusive as it asks questions about one’s personal
history, health history, relationship history, income, disciplinary style, and so on.
The fact that Cherise earned a PhD, which signified some level of socioeconomic
stability and cultural capital, helped counter at least some of the controlling
images associated with Black women, namely ones that cast all Black women as
poverty-stricken and uneducated. Nevertheless, Cherise still felt judged when he
inquired about why she did not own a house, which is perhaps an assumed
milestone for White middle-class adoptive parents. The racial disparities in Black
and White wealth, however, make homeownership more challenging for many
Black families (Oliver & Shapiro, 2006) and while Cherise had a down payment
on a home, she decided not to commit to a mortgage until she had a better sense
of her child-related expenses. Still, the social worker’s question felt like a
suggestion that perhaps she didn’t have the financial capability to raise a child on her own. While all adoptive parents face scrutiny over their finances, controlling images of Black women as impoverished and also as bad mothers (Collins, 2000) are narratives that can be difficult to counter. As a sociologist, Cherise was acutely aware of how this reality could potentially hurt her chances of becoming an adoptive parent.

Moreover, Cherise’s home study anxieties were only exacerbated when she had to simultaneously attend foster parent licensing classes at the agency. During the sessions, casual and somewhat callous comments were often made about poor people and, by extension, people of color. These comments suggested that parents with children in foster care were at fault for not being able to provide for their children or for having to live in impoverished and violent areas, which are deemed as legitimate reasons for a child to be “placed into care” (see also Roberts, 2005). Instances like these made foster care licensing particularly difficult for Cherise who, as an inequality scholar, struggled to listen to culture of poverty arguments (Moynihan, 1965), but as a prospective foster parent, couldn’t fully voice her objections without fear of reprisal.

Cherise’s fears proved somewhat warranted during one particular instance when the facilitators led a discussion on racial identity while using Toni Morrison’s classic text, *The Bluest Eye*, as a reference. The facilitators unexpectedly de-racialized the book and ignored how Pecola (the book’s protagonist) and other Black girls experience the intersection of race and gender within an oppressive system of patriarchal White supremacy. In fact, it was unclear whether other potential foster parents in the room understood that Pecola was Black. Given Cherise’s previous work on race and racial identity, she felt she couldn’t overlook this omission and began to give the class a brief synopsis of the book and how it illustrates the complexities of racial identity development. The facilitators responded by asking somewhat sarcastically if she wanted to lead the discussion on the book instead, prompting nervous laughter from the rest of the class. In that moment, Cherise became Collins’ (2005) “Educated Black Bitch,” a controlling image of Black middle-class women who among other things are (often) single, educated, and outspoken with little understanding of their “place.” Because foster parents are more likely to have lower income and educational levels as compared to parents who adopt privately or internationally (Vandivere, Malm, & Radel, 2009, p. 15-16), it is possible that the facilitators were not expecting Cherise (or the rest of the prospective foster parents) to be knowledgeable about *The Bluest Eye* and perhaps resented the interference. Furthermore, because this happened at the agency during the same time that the home study was being conducted, Cherise became fearful of being deemed a “difficult” Black woman and thus unsuitable as a foster-adopt parent.

Unlike Cherise’s experience with her licensing classes, during Kristie’s online adoption classes, she was pleasantly surprised that they covered, and even cited, sociological and psychological studies on race and racism. Based on their coverage of specific topical issues (e.g., celebrating cultural differences, colorblindness, and understanding White privilege), their target audience was clearly White middle-class parents who chose transracial adoption and may not
have considered the racial/culturalclassed implications. Shockingly, however, Kristie learned through this process that some White families choose to adopt Black children for two primary reasons: (1) they are more readily available – e.g., the wait time for a child is significantly shorter, and (2) some agencies charge substantially less money for a brown-skinned child than a White child (Sweeney, 2012). These factors raise questions about the intentions of some prospective White adoptive parents and the implications for the Black children involved if the focus is on parenting as quickly and cheaply as possible. Even though Kristie’s classes were more attuned to issues of race, ten hours of online education and follow-up quizzes are certainly not sufficient to prepare White adoptive parents for the realities of raising a child of color within a White-dominated, racist society.

That said, the fact that the private agency offered more education on race and culture than the state agency possibly suggests that more care is shown in private adoptions, which are perceived as permanent placements in a way that foster care is not. However, the average child spends four years waiting to be adopted from the child welfare system (Argys & Duncan, 2013), which means that racial/cultural education is just as important for foster-adopt families. The differences in these stories raise important questions about how prepared adoptive parents are to deal with race and culture in their children’s lives.

Kristie’s home study was then completed by a social worker who was a White middle-class woman. Similar to Cherise, this process involved providing access to a range of information (e.g., profiles, personal essays, financial records, job history, criminal record check, relationship history, medical records, references, etc.); she also inspected the home for cleanliness and safety. In addition to feeling exposed, which is a typical reaction to a home study, Kristie also experienced two moments that felt distinctly racialized.

First, given the similarities in their disciplinary backgrounds (i.e., sociology and social work), the caseworker tried to connect with Kristie by discussing race issues - sharing that she worked with low-income kids of color in the area. As the conversation evolved, Kristie became increasingly uncomfortable with her stereotypical remarks that reinforced a cultural deficit model, blaming communities and families for students’ underachievement. Given her sociological training, Kristie would typically challenge these comments; yet in this situation, she felt conflicted about if and how to do so given that the social worker was deciding her fate as an adoptive parent.

Second, after each visit, Kristie’s social worker was paid a fee to write a detailed report on her observations. Since this was her “side job” the report took substantially longer than the two-week turn-around period promised by the agency. (Cherise also encountered similar challenges regarding efficiency as the home study was part-time work for her social worker, as well. Like so many other parts of our story, this raises questions about the adoption system as a whole when critical processes are allocated to part-time workers rather than employing those workers full-time.) Then, when the report finally arrived in draft form, it was filled with mistakes – from misspelling her name and the names of family members (information that was correctly written on her completed application), to...
an excessive amount of grammatical errors and incoherent sentences, to basically re-working the essays Kristie had already written and making them her own. Kristie spent hours making revisions and suggestions, while trying, like Cherise, not to appear as the “Educated Black Bitch” (Collins, 2005) who was being too picky and/or condescending. As the gatekeeper in this process, the social worker’s incompetence was rather disturbing. Unfortunately, in her experience, this feeling of social worker ineffectiveness was typical; out of the six social workers – all White women – she encountered during the entire adoption process, Kristie had consistently positive interactions with only one of them. Wegar’s (2000) research suggests that adoption professionals, much like the general public, stigmatize adoption. As such, it is perhaps not surprising that we both ran into biases and a lack of efficiency with the adoption professionals we encountered (see also Gailey, 2006; Riley-Behinger & Cage, 2014) – issues that ultimately made us question their role as gatekeepers. Despite these difficulties, our cultural capital perhaps aided us in successfully completing the home study, which allowed for the placement of our daughters.

Post-Placement Challenges and the Enduring Nature of Inequality

After our daughters were placed with us and before our adoptions were finalized, we faced new challenges. For example, as we alluded to above, we found ourselves having to comply with a problematic system. Overtly or subtly challenging certain incidents was risky, which meant we had to find a delicate balance between not compromising our social justice values and working within a system that is inherently flawed. This was the case for Cherise during both biological parents’ Termination of Parental Rights (TPR) trials. In order to adopt, both biological parents must have their parental rights terminated. In the case of the foster care system, if the biological parents do not voluntarily sign the paperwork, they go to trial before a judge where the state tries to prove that they cannot parent. (Importantly, Cherise had not been made aware of this process by the agency when she made the decision to adopt from foster care.) When the biological parents are Black, damaging stereotypes can be exploited during the trial by multiple parties in order to achieve the desired end goal. This led to very conflicting feelings for Cherise: though she knew adoption was her daughter’s best chance, the sociologist in her was disturbed by many of these arguments, which placed her in a difficult role conflict. In addition, as the judge receives no information about the foster parent, Cherise was also unsure about how he would view her, given the negative depictions of Blackness used in the courtroom. During the court proceedings, she was keenly aware that there were three White attorneys and a White male judge deciding the fates of four Black people. Lacking legal rights as a foster parent and having to remain silent for a trial that continued for months was extremely difficult.

One of the most frustrating moments for Kristie was figuring out how to negotiate the details of a written contact agreement, typical in open adoptions (Farr, Grant-Marsney, & Grotevant, 2014; Fravel, 2000), that the agency created between the biological mother and herself. The goal was to establish a non-legally
binding mutual agreement between the two parties regarding the type and frequency of contact. Unbeknownst to Kristie, the agency drafted a document in consultation with the birthmother who then signed it before Kristie ever had a chance to review it. Kristie was shocked to learn this as she had never agreed to many of the terms, some of which were unrealistic. Moreover, a key element missing from the agreement was a stipulation that any contact from birth to eighteen years of age had to remain in the best interest of the child. As such, Kristie, in good faith, did not feel like she could sign the document without all parties being more thoughtful and deliberate about feasible expectations. While the agency was at fault for not including her in the process, the social workers were nonetheless resistant to making any changes to the agreement, suggesting that the birthmother might instead decide to parent. Needless to say, Kristie felt disrespected and manipulated by them. Like Cherise, the fate of Kristie’s family was being determined by White social workers entrenched in, and reinforcing, an unjust system. Although this situation could have also occurred within a two-parent adoption, navigating the contact agreement as a Black single parent heightened Kristie’s sense of vulnerability and caused her to rely heavily on an acquaintance who was familiar with the adoption system for support. In the end, Kristie dedicated too much time and emotional energy toward figuring out the best way to rectify the situation, while also not diminishing her chances of finalizing the adoption. Further, as the above situations indicate, we both had to re-channel and reconfigure our social justice principles to prioritize our daughters’ welfare, even if the ways in which we had to do so were difficult.

A second issue we both experienced was navigating the difficulties of pre-adoptive and adoptive parenting, which is distinct from parenting a biological child and also impacted by the intersections of race, class, and gender. Most people within our support networks did not acknowledge the difference between raising biological and non-biological children nor fully understand the inherent challenges of it. In addition to the more universal daily parenting struggles (e.g., sleep deprivation, illness, discipline, etc.), all adoptive parents are confronting a problematic bureaucratic and often mismanaged system of social workers, agencies, and hospitals while also dealing with the emotional realities of the two (or more) families involved. For an undetermined period of time, we were loving and raising children to which we had no legal rights; until the parental termination paperwork was signed and processed by the court (a process that lasted nine months for Kristie and eleven months for Cherise), the children could have been removed from our homes. While all pre-adoptive parents deal with similar issues, for Black single mothers by choice, there are two additional challenges: (1) dealing with the emotional fallout alone (in both of our cases, we didn’t have extended family in the area who could support us and our local friends mostly had no experience with adoption), and (2) feeling the vulnerabilities of race and gender, knowing that this system, like so many others, isn’t necessarily set up for us to succeed.

The structural problems with the adoption system are notable in Kristie’s case when, although the agency assigned one social worker to support the birth mother and a different social worker to support Kristie, both seemed to be
advocating for the birth mother’s wishes, which were not always in the best interest of the child. Until the adoption was finalized, Kristie also had no paperwork (i.e., social security card, birth certificate) legitimizing the relationship with her child. If, for instance, medical issues emerged, any major health decisions would have to go through the agency, not her, yet Kristie was responsible for all medical bills once her daughter left the hospital. The classed implications also became apparent when the hospital tried to double-bill both Medicaid and Kristie’s private insurance for the same expenses related to the care of the birthmother and child. For months afterwards, Kristie received and spent time contesting inaccurate and false billing statements charged to her. While these issues might emerge in any adoption situation, as a single parent trying to navigate the system alone, Kristie had to rely more heavily on extended networks to provide emotional support from afar.

Cherise experienced many of these same problems, which were amplified in the state adoption process. Like Kristie, she had no paperwork legitimizing her relationship with her daughter and was beholden to the state’s demands and requirements. At least two or three times per week, Cherise was in touch with the social worker from the Department of Children and Families (DCF) or a representative who would, for instance, dictate when and where she took her daughter to the doctor. Doctor’s visits were coordinated with the birthmother who still had parental rights at the time and took place at the community health clinic because of its proximity to the birthmother’s home. During these visits, Cherise had to deal with medical personnel who were operating with a set of biases. For example, during one visit, the doctor diagnosed her daughter as underweight and immediately concluded that Cherise must be impoverished and needed a referral to the Women, Infants, and Children program. Assuming (based on the typical patient profile of the clinic) that the child’s thinness could only be attributable to poverty, this doctor relied on raced and classed stereotypes to determine care for Cherise’s child.

In addition to these structural challenges, Cherise found that she often had to negotiate the seemingly benign advice of parents with biological children during social interactions. Biological parents often do not understand a world in which foster-adopt parents are endlessly scrutinized (Riley-Behringer & Cage, 2014). This scrutiny may actually have its roots in “prominent ideologies about heredity [which] invite the belief that genetic parents have instinctual desires to do well by their children” (Stevens, 2005, p. 75), where presumably adoptive parents may not. The level of scrutiny often directed at foster-adopt parents, particularly by the state, meant that Cherise had to be very careful with her daughter. Friends and colleagues would suggest that she was being overprotective and needed to allow her daughter to explore, even if it meant rough-housing, licking the floor, or eating plants. These parents did not understand that Cherise’s daughter becoming injured or ill from these behaviors could be grounds for a daycare worker’s or doctor’s call to DCF which could possibly lead to removal from the home. Indeed, Roberts (2005, p. 237) cites research finding that Black and Latino toddlers hospitalized for fractures between 1994 and 2000 were over five times more likely to be evaluated for child abuse and were over three times
more likely to be reported to child protective services than White children with similar injuries. As sociologists, these kinds of biases weren’t lost on us and became stressful as we parented our young daughters alone and without legal rights.

In sum, as is the case with most adoptions, we were under constant surveillance from the state and our respective agencies until our adoptions were finalized. This involved residing in an out-of-state hotel until the Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (ICPC) paperwork was approved (for Kristie), permission slips to travel out of state (for Cherise), post-placement visits from the social worker (monthly for Cherise; every other month for Kristie), and frequent inquiries regarding the babies’ health and the mother-daughter bonding process. It is a level of scrutiny and restriction that often felt confining, racialized, and requiring physical, financial, and emotional support that is more challenging to receive as a single person.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

For Black middle-class women, the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality narrow their reproductive options in important ways and lead some women, like us, to consider alternatives to the fertility squeeze. In this paper, we first aimed to draw awareness to the inequalities involved when single Black women adopt Black children. Even as Black women privileged by class status, we felt the vulnerabilities of race and the challenges inherent in being part of a process that is White-controlled and dominated; our Black children face these consequences as well. As such, and as is consistent with the history of Black families in the United States, it was never clear to us how important our family’s well-being was to White gatekeepers and how well our daughters would fare during the adoption process.

Second, we aimed to explore the emotional challenges inherent in forming a family through adoption. All adoptions are fraught with emotion and negotiating the reactions of others. But in the context of intersectionality, a good portion of the emotional angst is embedded in our embodiment as single Black women who were intentionally forming families on our own. Our race, class, and gender became categories of difference that affected our interactions with the system and our continuing interactions with significant and generalized others in our lives. And while we are aware that some of our angst over this process was because we are inequality scholars, the Black feminist tradition teaches us that all Black women, not just sociologists like us, are acutely aware of how their embodiment shapes their life chances and opportunities (Collins, 2000). Thus, we would expect that other Black SMCs would be able to relate to our stories and experiences.

Finally, we aimed to examine commonly held notions of “family” and which families are valued (or not) and why. In our experience, the biological, two-parent heterosexual family is still constructed as the ideal. Our interactions with others certainly confirmed this as did our participation in the (often) dysfunctional adoption system. While it is important to find safe and healthy homes for children, the level of scrutiny and surveillance that adoptive parents...
must face is challenging and is only multiplied by us being single Black women, where questions abound about our capabilities to care for a child on our own. As single parent, Black adoptive families, we exist in a liminal social space where people are not sure what to make of our families because we are not dual-parent families, or because we are not biological families, or because we are Black SMCs. Throughout the adoption process and into our present-day lives, this has remained a recurrent issue and one that might cause some women to dismiss the SMC option altogether.

In sum, changing family dynamics in the United States like the fertility squeeze necessitate that scholars continually question how we are conceptualizing and operationalizing the term “family,” while also exploring the structural issues that “new” family formations face. Given the increasing number of Black middle-class women who are becoming SMCs through ART or adoption, we must additionally examine how different paths to mothering are either normalized or marginalized and why (Keels, 2014; Park, 2006). Furthermore, with respect to adoption, in particular, we need to be attentive to the raced, classed, and gendered realities of the system and its impact on adoptive families created by Black SMCs who may need additional structural support. Future research should expand upon our work by systematically studying the lived experiences of single Black middle-class women who choose to adopt. Finally, as parts of our stories suggest, we would recommend revised adoption practices and policies, specifically, more and/or better counseling for adoptive parents. As Suter el al. (2011) and Wegar (2000) argue, pre-adoptive education must help adoptive families develop a critical consciousness to deal with the stigmatized position that adoptive families face. Increased cultural competency for adoption professionals is also important as they continue to work with a more diverse clientele, including Black SMCs.

Despite the challenges in our journey towards motherhood, adoption helped to expand our families in wonderful ways. While the outcome was ultimately positive, by questioning raced, classed, and gendered family dynamics in the U.S., it is our hope that that these case studies will provide some guidance to future adoptive parents, especially Black SMCs, as they navigate the struggles and joys of adoption.

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