# UNFULFILLED FUTURES: MORAL MAINTENANCE IN DOMESTIC PRIVATE ADOPTION

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**Abstract**

Private domestic infant adoption in the United States is an emotionally, psychologically, and financially fraught process. Since the economic downturn of 2008, "fall-throughs"—where a birth mother accepts money from a prospective adoptive family and then decides not to place the baby—have become more common. This ethnographic article examines the dynamics of these risky adoption exchanges as managed by the Chicago-area First Steps Adoption Center. Using the lens of clinical social work, the paper investigates the detective and protective strategies—indeed, the moral maintenance—adoption social workers employ to mitigate the effects of the "fall-through" for all parties to the adoption process.

***August 18, 2009***

It was blustery and hot in Chicago that day. Like many other days that summer, I was out in the field with Stella, an adoption social worker employed at First Steps Adoption Center.[1] As an intern at the agency, my duties included "tooling around" with Stella as she visited birth mothers—providing counseling and collecting paperwork, taking them to lunch, delivering money. On this particular day, we were visiting Valerie at her home on the west side of the city. We were coming from a suburban Wal-Mart where Stella had purchased a $300 gift card for Valerie as part of her "legally allowable birth mother expenses."[2] The money had been provided by the family that would adopt her baby, which was due in the coming months.

Stella parked her little blue Honda hatchback along the street. Valerie's building was flanked on one side by a similar brick walk-up, and on the other by a grassy vacant lot. The neighborhood was residential and the

only visible businesses were a check-cashing outlet and a small mini-mart/liquor store, markers of the neighborhood's state of "advanced marginality."[3] We entered the building and walked up three flights of stairs to Valerie's apartment. Valerie, noticeably pregnant, answered the door with a smile and sweetly invited us inside. She exuded openness and calm, but seemed tired. We sat on the couch, and I took in the surroundings while Valerie and Stella talked. The carpeted living room was small, but had a matching couch and love seat, a set of glass-topped coffee/end tables, a flat-screen television, a laptop, and a printer. Valerie told us that her fiancé had recently been shot and killed. He had been her main financial support (she has other children), but that after the pregnancy she expected to go back to work. Making matters worse, her mother had recently been diagnosed with cancer. Sharing this sad news, Valerie was strong, steady, and faithful; she did not cry. Her main concern genuinely seemed to be bringing a healthy baby into the world for the adoptive family she had chosen weeks earlier.

Stella explained to Valerie how the family that would adopt her baby had experienced a previous "fall-through." They had given a birth mother $1,000 for living expenses and without warning she had gone to another agency and chosen a different family. Valerie told us how she had been keeping in touch with the family by e-mail, sending ultrasound images, asking if they had bought anything for the baby yet, etc. She said that something just felt good, "felt so right," about being able to give a child, an indescribable "miracle," to someone who could not carry their own. The feeling was so strong that she even expressed interest in becoming a surrogate.

Several weeks later, however, Valerie's phone number was disconnected, and we never heard from her again. As far as Stella knows, she never placed the baby.

This paper explores, broadly, troubled adoption exchanges as perceived through the eyes of social workers like Stella. More specifically, it tries to analyze the emotional, psychological, and inherently social labor that social workers must carry out in order to protect themselves, the infant, the adoptive family, and the birth mother from the various risks inherent to private adoption. The problem faced by Stella and other adoption workers, however, is that the underlying motives of a birth mother, or any human being for that matter, can never truly be known, and social workers carry out a measure of precarious policing within this space of uncertainty. When a baby (or the idea of a future baby) gets diverted into the market realm via the exchange of money for birth mother expenses, what are the moral implications of an ensuing fall-through? And how do the social workers at First Steps navigate this morally challenging terrain? This piece, which may be considered a person-centered ethnography, is a very small part of a larger

anthropological study focusing on the flows and futures of private adoption at First Steps and in the greater Chicago area.

## THE INTIMATE IS ECONOMIC

Mentioning money and adoption in the same breath is disquieting. It raises the specter of child trafficking or economic coercion, and recalls sensationalized adoption scandals that occasionally surface in Western media.[4] American societal norms tend to dictate that the economic and the intimate be kept separate,[5] but from an anthropological perspective "it is perhaps by now a given that most forms of kinship are intertwined with market exchanges of various kinds, without necessarily being reducible to them" (Dorow 2010, 70). Both Kopytoff (1986; 2004) and Zelizer (1985; 2005) have studied the intersection of intimacy and monetary exchange and argue that the intimate and economic realms interact more than we might like to admit. Kopytoff (2004) contends:

> In the modern American and general Western perspective … there is a *moral* threat in the commoditization of children and, by extension, of human reproduction; the threat lies in the possible invasion of the human and sacralized world of kinship by economistic principles deemed appropriate only to the world of things.(272; emphasis added)

According to Kopytoff (2004), economism (including commoditization) in kinship relations is "natural" and widespread, the two realms often coming into cultural and ideological conflict.

In this context, morality becomes the node at which Western notions of the economic and intimate realms intersect. Private adoption presents an excellent opportunity to observe and analyze this intersection, for the infant adoptee in American culture can be imagined as an example of a diverted commodity. Such commodities are "objects placed into a commodity state though originally specifically protected from it" (Appadurai 1986, 16). According to Appadurai (1986), "the diversion of commodities from their customary paths always carries a *risky* and *morally ambiguous* aura" (27; emphasis added). Following Appadurai further, we can mark a distinction between diversion and a process he calls enclaving. While diversion draws what was protected into the realm of commodities, "enclaving seeks to protect certain things from commoditization" (Appadurai 1986, 26). A process I will call *moral maintenance* is an example of enclaving in which certain subjects/objects, such as adopted children, are specifically and actively protected from being perceived as part of a commodity market. This notion of moral maintenance refers to a type of discursive and regulatory labor carried out to defend and protect the intimate realm against ostensibly immoral economic encroachments.

Dorow (2010, 74) draws our attention to something like moral maintenance in her study of Chinese adoption, in which international facilitators are shown protecting adoptive parents from "signs of a commodified child." Dorow (2010, 72) contends, "A complex intersection of economic, political, cultural, and emotional labor by the formal facilitators of adoption buffers the production of kinship from the raced, gendered, and classed excesses of marketized relations that would make parent and child into consumer and consumed." Moral maintenance is also involved in the rhetorical disavowal of adoption as being in any way economized. Goodwin (2010, 2) argues, "the free market in children, as a concept, is rejected based on what it symbolizes, including its argued resemblance to slavery or the auction block."[6] Dorow (2010), however, has argued that despite this rejection of financial motivations in the adoption process, the free market in children does exist and continues to influence how adoptions unfold. Alluding to the market's negative impacts on adoption, Dorow (2010, 81) closes, "While markets play a key and even welcomed role in the production of transnational, transracial adoptive kinship, they only sometimes absorb or deflect the dangers of commodification." One of these dangers is, inevitably, the fall-through. When I asked Stella to differentiate adoption from child-buying, she argued that several central aspects of child trafficking were absent from legitimate adoption: spontaneous or unexplained fees, working with non-certified individuals, and the absence of paperwork. In Stella's view, the line between adoption and illicit trafficking is marked by a lack of regulation, a defining trait of baby markets (Goodwin 2010).

In both lay and scholarly discourse, adoptees have been conceptualized as both market commodity (Rothman 2004; Roberts 1997; Dorow 2010; Ertman 2010; Goodwin 2010) and gift (Buckley 2001; Firth 2006; Gift of Adoption Fund 2009; A Precious Gift 2010; Gift of Life Adoptions 2010). However, in an analysis of domestic adoption fall-throughs and possible birth mother "scams," it is difficult to conceptualize the unborn adoptee as anything more than an idea, potentiality, or future, which as such may be *more* powerful than a living, breathing, material child. This future is one in which large investments are made, not unlike what occurs in the realm of futures trading. The idea of baby as future or potentiality requires a great deal of emotional, temporal, and financial investment. These investments put the adoptive family at a great deal of perceived risk; the risk of losing not just hundreds or thousands of dollars and months or years of their time,[7] but the risk of losing what they have already come to think of as their son or daughter, an as yet unborn child.

***September 7, 2010***

One afternoon while Stella and I were on our way back from a hospital in the suburbs, Stella's cell phone rang and she answered it with her usual sing-songy "Hello, this is Stella." From the passenger seat I could hear shouting on the other end. Stella's eyes widened and she held the phone a couple of inches away from her ear. After several seconds she said, "Okay Mallory, okay, put her on the phone." Mallory was one of First Steps' birth mothers who had recently placed her daughter; she called Stella several times a day throughout the adoption process. Stella spoke calmly, reassuring the person on the other end that Mallory had not "sold" the baby, that she had chosen an adoptive family very carefully and placed the child with them. Her measured and patient tone revealed that this speech was rehearsed. Another bout of shrieking emanated from the phone, and I saw Stella roll her eyes. She repeated: "Mallory *did not sell* her baby." There was a pause. "Okay? Okay, you can put Mallory back on," she said. A few more seconds passed. "You're welcome Mallory. Okay, bye bye now." The person shouting had been Mallory's sister who, when she learned of the adoption plan after the fact, accused Mallory of selling her baby. The eruption of shrieking on the other end of the phone was their heated debate over the link between private adoption and "baby-selling."

Mallory's panicked call to Stella, when accused of selling her child, is an example that illustrates multiple efforts at moral maintenance. Mallory performed moral maintenance by refuting her sister's claim and making the call, relying on Stella's authority and expertise to support her counterclaim. In turn, Stella performed moral maintenance by clarifying the terms of the adoption so as to set it apart from child-selling. Even in the event of a "successful" placement, Stella's work to protect Mallory as well as the institution of adoption itself from the fall-out of this common cultural association is evident. One wonders which situation carries a higher level of moral threat: a completed adoption in which a birth mother effectively exchanges her baby for money to pay living expenses (and for other reasons as well); or a fall-through in which the birth mother accepts money and then disappears without placing, thus keeping her intimate kinship relation with that child intact while breaking a socially constructed but unspoken financial agreement.

## BIRTH-MOTHER MOTIVES AND "SCAM" DETECTION

Social work at First Steps consists of a complex amalgam of detective work, risk management, and as we have seen, moral maintenance (which in a sense, encompasses both detective work and risk management) in order to protect all parties to adoption, as well as the institution of adoption itself,

from the negative effects of commoditization. Floersch (2002) notes that within the context of social work, case managers pass moral judgment on a daily basis (126). He continues, "The case workers I studied were constantly reacting to the influences of money on their work, and their own experience with money was refracted or read into moral dilemmas" (128). This is also true of the social work that takes place at First Steps. Part of Stella's job is to mitigate the complex effects of the two-pronged question of money and morality, which seeps into the adoption process at virtually every stage, especially the moment at which a birth mother decides whether to sign a form that legally marks her intent to surrender the child and irreversibly terminates her parental rights.

As of July 2010, Stella estimated First Steps' fall-through rate at about 70%. For every ten birth mothers matched with families by the agency, in Stella's eyes, only three ended up surrendering their babies. This figure is not based on an actual analysis of agency data, but is instead an example of a "subjective probability," in which "the probabilities assigned depend on the points of view, feelings, or convictions of the actors" (Callon, Lascoumes, and Barthe 2001, 19). Subjective probabilities help social workers at First Steps calculate risk in the realm of uncertainty. Even with this purportedly high rate, not all adoptive families that experience fall-throughs also suffer financial loss because not all birth mothers request some form of legally allowable birth mother expenses before the birth of the child, although many do. Indeed, the recession of the past few years appears to have triggered an increase in the number of birth mothers requesting money. I remember one First Steps social worker likening birth mothers to "slippery little eels" during the last couple months of their pregnancies, describing the challenges social workers often meet when trying to maintain contact; a meeting would be missed or cancelled, a cell phone would be disconnected, no forwarding address would be left, one day they would simply "disappear." In these situations, adoptive families are left without closure, but the social workers remain to counsel them through the loss, a kind of symbolic miscarriage.

The tension present in the agency during the final months of a pregnancy is palpable. Stella fields calls from increasingly stressed and apprehensive adoptive parents, seeking some sort of reassurance that the process will be completed. Every day that goes by puts the family one day closer to the birth of what they hope will be their child, and every day Stella half-expects a birth mother's unexplained disappearance. In the event of a fall-through, staff at First Steps must pass moral judgments in order to make sense of the event for the adoptive client. One of those moral judgments involves trying to determine whether or not a "scam" has taken place.[8]

Stella could remember three separate occasions on which she discovered a birth mother "working" more than one agency simultaneously and collecting money from both.[9] "It takes some mastery to uncover it," she admitted, alluding to her own investigative skills. Here the logic of detective work is that it should mitigate risk by allowing social workers to identify "scammers." This rarely works out in practice however, and the social workers are aware of this. Stella continued:

> And there is a fine line. Who really knows if it's a scam? It's set up so that you can take money and walk away. And that's the right thing; nobody should be able to force you. But the line can blur so easily. And adoptive families will say, "Well didn't you know? Can't you figure it out? Weren't there signs? How do you screen them?"

These types of reactions from adoptive families indicate that they expect a certain amount of detective work to be carried out by their social workers in order to evaluate the level of risk involved in a given exchange. As Stella lamented, the successful "screening" of birth mothers was simply impossible given the myriad conditions that determine the outcome of a pregnancy and adoption plan, not to mention the immense heterogeneity—personalities, circumstances, emotional states, etc.—of birth mothers. Furthermore, Stella's judgment of the rightness of the process, in which one "can take money and walk away," points to the complicated ways in which a process designed to prevent immoral coercion produces a different set of moral dilemmas.

Stella often listed "red flags," or warning signs which made her suspicious of certain birth mothers. But even in the face of her suspicions, Stella always continued to work with the mothers until they gave her a legitimate reason not to; a *suspicion* alone of "scamming" was never sufficient *evidence* of a scam. In the case of Valerie, for instance, Stella suspected she was working with her sister, Angeline, who herself had a history of fall-throughs:

> The red flag for me was that I had been to that same apartment building [Valerie's] for another birth mother, and they both described their own mothers as having cancer. Based on confidentiality I didn't want to ask one or the other, "Whoa, is Angeline your sister?" So I never asked that, but that seemed very strange. And Angeline had not placed two kids, and had taken a lot of money for both of those kids. So I had a big red flag about Valerie. And there was some question about a family that lived in Germany, who really were unable to pay any more monies. And at first it seemed to me she didn't want money, and then she said she couldn't manage without more money, and if she had to she would change families. And we did because she said she needed help with her rent. So she took the money. Her mother died of cancer, at the same

time Angeline's mother died of cancer. Angeline fell through, and Valerie eventually fell through.

Despite the warning signs, Stella nonetheless continued to provide Valerie with the support that was purportedly needed, up until the point that contact was lost.

Another story Stella often told was of a woman who claimed that her baby had "passed:"

> I had one birth mother that took a lot of money, and was again this kind of desperate person, texting texting. And I put a lid on how much she was gonna get. No more rent, until—that was the agreement that we had—until the baby's born. I remember going down, taking $50 out of my pocket and bought her food. She called me and did a long set of texting, saying that the cord had wrapped around the baby's neck, wrapped around the baby's shoulder, taken the baby's arm off. And um, never said the word "died," but obviously, and I think we talked about "passed," and when this happened, and she was very upset and she said, "Of course, well you didn't get what you want, so you're done with me, right?" I called that social worker at that particular hospital, and said, "I would really like to verify that there was a death, of a child, for closure for the adoptive family." And she of course told me about confidentiality, and I said "I have, in the record, an authorization for medical records signed by the mother that I can fax you."

When Stella looked into the case she found that no baby had died, no baby had been born, and that there was no trace of prenatal care. Was there ever a baby then, or just the idea of one?

During my time at the agency I heard this story from Stella multiple times. She often spoke in lengthy rambling paragraphs, like those I have included above, a testament to the level of discursive labor devoted to rationalizing and explaining the process, the talk itself a form of moral maintenance. According to Stella, that case "came in a grouping of birth mothers, who were at the same hospital; several of whom shared stories of rape and assault." The notion that birth mothers might have been colluding to work the system was particularly disturbing to Stella, but she conceded, "If anybody is going to fit in the slot or the role of thinking about giving up their child, well, what would one expect? If you're going to be considering that at all, you know you're going to have some pressures and some needs. Or you wouldn't be there," again referencing the moral tug-of-war the adoption process creates. Indeed, changing social trends—including the wider availability of birth control and the growing social acceptance of single motherhood—have narrowed the population of women who now

seek adoption services; many more of these mothers are poor and socially marginalized.

Whether or not certain birth mothers truly were working in tandem or alone with the goal of taking money and walking away will most likely never be known. Their actions and decisions, however motivated, do have moral implications for the ways in which adoption cases are processed by the agency, including the difficulty faced by social workers of distinguishing adoption from baby-selling (and striving to protect the former from the immoral encroachment of commoditization), as well as deciding how to proceed with an adoptive family that has invested, and then lost, thousands of dollars in the mere idea of a baby, perhaps multiple times. Each time a fall-through occurs (whether as the result of malicious intent or not) and an adoptive family loses money and the hope of a child, social workers are pressured to be even more vigilant in spotting potential fall-throughs. The most challenging part of exploring these so-called scams is the methodological challenge of hearing the birth mother's side of the story after the fact.

Perhaps the most telling glimpse into the conflicted feelings birth mothers have toward the creation and completion of the adoption plan lies in a text that Stella received from Selene, a birth mother who had recently slipped off the grid. About two weeks after Stella gave up trying to contact her, in September of 2010, Selene sent Stella a text message:[10] "Had a baby girl on the 10th. 8lbs 7oz beautiful. named her ZARA. can you please tell Alex and Steven I send them my deepest apology. one look at her and I just culdn't bring myself to giving her away." During my entire time at First Steps (the summers of 2009-11 and intermittently during the academic year), this was the only time I can recall that a birth mother considered a fall-through contacted Stella, or anyone else at the agency, with an explanation.

## MANAGING THE AFTERMATH OF THE FALL-THROUGH

About a month after Stella and I met Valerie, she switched families because she needed more money than the first family with whom she was matched could pay. When this happened, the agency was split down the middle on what steps to take next for the adoptive family Valerie had left. The following is an excerpt from my field notes from that day, August 27, 2009:

> There's a bit of a scandal brewing at the agency. Valerie, who I went to see with Stella last week, was matched with a family from Germany. But she wants/needs more money than they can give. So we're having to rematch her with a <u>different</u> family. Problem is, the first family has already paid some of her expenses. So should the 2nd family have to reimburse them? It will be <u>their</u> baby in the end.

> The office is divided: Stella says yes. Dotty [the agency founder] says no. Rita [another intern] says the whole thing makes her sick.

This particular type of fall-through is a rare occurrence; a solution for this dilemma has yet to be codified into standard agency protocol. When I interviewed Stella about the situation later, she told me, "I think it [reimbursement] is the right thing to do if they [the second family] accept placement. I think it should be brought up. I don't think you can make them, but you can strongly, strongly encourage." In Stella's opinion (which actually closely resembles market logic), it is only rational that the original family be reimbursed, since technically, the second family received something for which the first paid. Furthermore, Stella's use of the qualifier "right" signals her moral stance. This is part of the "moral discourse" of adoption: "the emergent, experience-near commentary on the rightness and wrongness of clinical action" (Brodwin 2008, 130). Stella continued, "I had one mom who took money; the following day another agency called me to say they were now working with this woman. And I asked for reimbursement for the family and they said well they would see. And they never did. That's not right. That is ethically not right." This was the same family with whom Valerie was originally matched. Social workers at First Steps must occasionally guide one adoptive family through *multiple* fall-throughs before a placement is achieved.[11]

It is not uncommon for birth mothers to place multiple children through First Steps. Occasionally, a birth mother will fall through and then return, sometimes years later, with another pregnancy, wishing to place. One birth mother had successfully placed a baby, had a fall-through, and then returned, pregnant again. To her Stella said, "Call me when you go into the hospital if you still wanna do this … no more money." The agency was only willing to facilitate this placement as a born baby, a *real* child rather than a potentiality or future which simply carried too much risk. This particular type of risk management serves to bridge the gap between baby-as-future and baby-as-real-entity-in-the-world. Stella continued, "And Angeline called me a third one too, and I said, 'Just call me when you're in the hospital, because we just can't do this.'" The high rate of fall-throughs, some of which appear to staff to be "scams," forces social workers to take measures to protect adoptive families. For example, Stella related to me the following about a situation with birth mother Celeste:

> She had received money for several months … I think it was about $300 per month, which Leslie [the adoptive mother] could afford. Right before she was about to deliver, she was due more money but I put a halt on that until we had some medical confirmation. She made arrangements to get me this from the doctor's appointment that day and never showed up or called again. She had also during this time agreed by phone with Leslie and her sister's arrangements

> to fly here. So who knows what ever really happened? I told Leslie she was not to fly until we had this documentation.

The requirement of medical confirmation—concrete, scientific knowledge—of pregnancy and fetal health is one way that social workers are able to investigate the probability of successful placement and ascertain whether or not they are being "scammed" by a birth mother; throughout the adoption process a great deal of emphasis is placed on prenatal care.

In August of 2010, another birth mother became unreachable, and the adoptive family waited in Oklahoma City, car packed, for Stella's okay to drive the twelve hours to Chicago. The birth mother was never located; her due date came and went. Stella's reluctance to allow both Leslie and the family from Oklahoma to make the long trip to Chicago prematurely is an example of her practice of risk management. This type of travel by adoptive families involves a considerable investment of money, emotional energy, and time, and if undertaken too hastily, may not result in any kind of positive return. Quite the opposite in fact; it may end in loss. Effective risk management at one stage of the adoption process could mean less need for moral maintenance later on; the reduction of investment is one way to effectively manage risk. Adoptive families from outside the Chicago area, therefore, are only encouraged to travel after the surrenders, which officially terminate biological parental rights, have been signed. This policy, enforced by First Steps' social workers, helps adoptive families avoid unnecessary expenditures of money and emotional energy for futures that will never be. In addition, throughout the adoption process, social workers try to keep adoptive parents' emotional investment in the child as low as possible by reminding them often that they are always at risk of a fall-through.

It is crucial to note that staff members at First Steps, though wary of birth mother "scams," fully support a mother's decision to keep her baby at any time in the process. Illinois law forbids a mother to sign surrenders sooner than 72 hours after the baby is born, and those three days are often a very stressful and precarious time for agency workers and adoptive families. The tension present in these 72 hours is akin to the anticipation which slowly brews over the last two or three months of a pregnancy compounded and condensed into three days. During this time, the baby is no longer a potentiality, but a real living being, a real daughter or son who, for the adoptive family is accompanied by the specter of a birth mother who can still change her mind. However, Stella has observed that more often than not, if the birth mother stays in contact with the agency up through the birth of the baby, she will continue on with the adoption process. Most fall-throughs occur without warning, before the birth of the baby (while it remains an idea or potentiality), and the only indication is lack of contact.

Subjective probabilities like this one allow Stella to concretize in a sense the highly volatile and subjective experience of birth-motherhood and pre-placement. Furthermore, these folk statistics, like Stella's rough estimation of a 70% fall-through rate, allow her to communicate risk more effectively to the waiting adoptive parents who grasp for any scrap of assurance in a sea of uncertainty, in an attempt to manage that risk.

## CONCLUSION

As Appadurai (1986) has argued, the diversion of commodities carries with it "a touch of the morally shocking" (28). He also notes that "the force of demand" for enclaved commodities, such as future children, "is such as to make them circulate with considerable velocity" (24). An analysis of the role of money in the adoption process, particularly through the lens of the fall-through phenomenon and the moral issues it raises, illustrates the complex ways that morality represents one node at which the economic and the intimate intersect, and the ways in which social workers at First Steps work to mitigate the effects of this intersection. It also sheds light on the ways in which we might imagine the future child as both an enclaved and diverted subject/object.

Indeed, adoption exchanges are also fraught with the factors of power: Stella is white, middle class, an institutional agent; the birth mothers are most often African American, low-income, on occasion homeless, and sometimes suffering from addiction, trauma, or mental illness. Stella said she often felt like a mother to the struggling young women with whom she worked, but that eventually, after a successful placement, her role often converted uncomfortably to "the person who took away the baby." But whereas social workers generally have the *immense* power to remove children from their biological parents in certain situations, in adoption cases birth mothers retain a great deal of power until the indication of surrender is signed. Until they relinquish their parental rights, they are free to sever ties to the agency, carrying with them another's idea of a coming baby, which for many *adoptive* families, is akin to losing a biological child through death or state action. The families traffic in futures; attachments are formed even before the baby takes its first breath.

The choices and judgments that birth mothers and social workers make during the adoption process are highly conditioned by a number of factors, and subjects practice a complicated form of discursive and regulatory moral maintenance to defend their intimate actions from the cultural and ideological contamination of the market. Perhaps Valerie's stated desire to become a surrogate was simply an instance of "flipping the script" (Carr 2010); it is equally possible that she was being completely sincere at the

time. By nature, birth-mother motives are just part of the vast unknowable for social workers and ethnographers alike, but this does not prevent Stella and other adoption social workers from devising protective strategies in an attempt to maintain the integrity of the adoption process. The next step is to explore more directly the world of urban birth mothers—the suppliers in this chain of exchange—those who "successfully" place as well as those who somehow fall through the cracks.

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## NOTES

[1] Pseudonym. All names of social workers and birth mothers are also pseudonyms.

[2] The state of Illinois deems "legally allowable" expenses for housing, food, clothing, utilities, transportation, and medical expenses. At the time of Valerie's involvement with the agency, First Steps' cap was $3,000. At the time of writing, the agency had lowered the cap to $200/month due a rise in "fall-throughs," or failed placements. Money is usually delivered to the birth mother by an agency social worker in the form of a gift card, fare card, or money order (made out directly to the landlord or utility company in the case of rent/utilities). Money presented in this restricted form prevents spending on unauthorized items/expenses.

[3] In his ethnographic research in Chicago, Wacquant (2008, 121-23) describes such neighborhoods as "hyperghettoes," where "scraggy avenues lined with rubbish-strewn vacant lots and burnt-out or crumbled buildings" might offer residents "a single supermarket, a single bank and a single hospital," but many more lottery outlets, currency exchanges, and "no fewer than one hundred liquor stores." The vast majority of birth mothers who seek adoption services from First Steps reside in neighborhoods such as these, in the southern and western regions of Chicago, a city long-plagued by extensive race and class segregation.

[4] See Whitbeck and Arce 2007 and Wong 2011 for examples.

[5] Much of the difficulty in reconciling Western notions of the economic and intimate realms lies in the distinction between human beings and "things." It has been argued that instead of a strict boundary, there actually exists a natural continuum between the two (Kopytoff 1986, 86).

[6] Kopytoff (1986) and others have broached the subject of slavery in their analyses (see also Ertman 2010; Goodwin 2010; Roberts 1997). Kopytoff (1986) writes,

> The conceptual unease of conjoining person and commodity renders, in most modern Western liberal societies, the adoption of a baby illegal if it involves monetary compensation to the natural parent—something that most societies have seen as satisfying the obvious demands of equity. In the modern West, however, adoption through compensation is viewed as child-selling and therefore akin to slavery because of the implicit commoditization of the child, regardless of how loving the adoptive parents may be (85).

[7] For adoptive families, the domestic adoption process at First Steps can take anywhere from six months, in very rare cases, to upwards of two years.

[8] Social workers at First Steps use the word "scam" natively to describe suspected intentional and/or premeditated fall-throughs.

[9] It is important here to acknowledge that fall-throughs do not only happen for adoptive families; though less common, birth mothers may experience fall-throughs as well. One afternoon I was sitting at McDonald's with Stella and a new birth mother, Denise. Denise had come to First Steps late in her pregnancy because she had been working with another agency originally, but had found out that the family with whom she was matched had also been working with another birth mother, and subsequently dropped her when the other birth mother went into labor. Upon hearing this, Stella stressed that when working with adoptive parents at the beginning of the process, it is First Steps' policy to forbid working with more than one birth mother at a time. This is one strategy for managing birth mother risk and adoptive family morality.

[10] Given the nature of text messaging, I have added punctuation, but left the capitalization and grammar as they were in the original.

[11] If a family has experienced one or more financial fall-throughs, they will often be placed into a special category only considered for a) birth mothers not asking for money, or b) born babies, also called "sky babies," for whom an adoption plan is only created after the birth.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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