From Orphan, to Citizen, to Transnational Adoptee:
The Origins of the U.S.-Colombian Adoption Industry
and the Emergence of Adoptee Counternarratives

A thesis presented to Dr. Marlén Rosas and Dr. Lisa Jane Graham
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Abstract

Roughly 1.2 million residents of the United States trace their ancestry to Colombia. They constitute one of the largest communities of South Americans in metropolitan areas like New York City and Miami. Accounts of this diasporic group often exclude a relatively small but significant minority: those who came to the U.S through transnational adoption. Likewise in Colombia, children who were adopted abroad and the families who lost them are mostly absent from the national imaginary. No single monograph has covered the history of the adoption of Colombian children by U.S. citizens. This thesis is a project of transnational history that demonstrates how crises of social reproduction in both countries converged to create an adoption industry that continues to send hundreds of Colombian children to the U.S. annually. I contextualize the origins of U.S-Colombian adoptions with the emergence of the National Front regime in Colombia, discourses of population control from the 1960s, and conflict between the state and the Catholic Church over control of the family. I argue that these processes are essential to understanding how like-minded Americans and Colombians created a transnational adoption industry that made Colombian children “adoptable” for tens of thousands of U.S. adoptive parents over the last 50 years.
Acknowledgements

Work is love made visible.
And if you cannot work with love but only with distaste, it is better that you should leave your work and sit at the gate of the temple and take alms of those who work with joy.

—Kahlil Gibran, “On Work”

My thesis—the culmination of over two years of reading, writing, hair-pulling and crying—is, above all, an act of love. I dedicate this thesis to my mom Cristina and my aunt Jenna, two Colombian adoptees who raised me and helped me grow into the person I am today. I would like to thank Professor Graham who challenged me to sharpen my analysis and make my evidence come alive. Thank you to Professor Rosas for entertaining my frantic rambling and for joining me along this odyssey. Professor Friedman, thank you for crafting the classroom where the intellectual incubation of this project began. Thank you to Kara, Diana, and Claudia for reading drafts, calling out my lack of commas, and for reminding me to write my thesis statement. Margaret, I cannot thank you enough for helping me launch my research and for cheering me along the way. To my roommates, Frankie, and Maria, thank you for dealing with my brooding silences and for commiserating over our shared thesis pains.

Augustin, I sincerely could not have done this without your love, faith, and reassurance that I have something valuable to offer to the world. Thank you, my love.
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Introduction

Within a black filing cabinet at my family home, a bulging manilla folder contains yellowed documents testifying to the March 21, 1983 adoption “de la menor Luz Angela Mejia a los esposos Michael P. Kawan y Gail Rosalyn Kawan.” From that moment on, the child would be known as Cristina Maria Kawan. She was naturalized as a U.S. citizen two years later, extinguishing the last legal connection to her country of birth, Colombia. Michael and Gail’s home study, completed by a New Jersey social worker a year before Cristina’s adoption, attested to their good health, work ethic, and aptitude to be responsible parents. The Kawans expressed their desire for a “Colombian baby as young as possible of any background except black.” Cristina, a 5-month-old girl with light brown skin matched their request. Covering that report is the couple’s translated letter to a senior civil judge in Cali. They requested that he grant “special power to Dr. Maria Cristina Bernat de Bonilla… in our names to initiate, follow, and carry to its end the required process by Colombian law to adopt a child…” Like a midwife, the lawyer entered the adoption proceedings to facilitate the legal “birth” of this “as-if-begotten” daughter.¹ Dr. Bernat de Bonilla left such an impression on the Kawans that they christened their newly American child after her. Cristina would grow up in suburban South Jersey along the Shore living as any other kid on the block—except when neighbors, classmates, and ever her parents made comments and asked questions that troubled her sense of belonging.

“Is that your real mom?”

“Why don’t you speak Spanish?”

“They found you on the street, naked and malnourished.”

¹ “As-if-begotten” is a phrase to describe the legal construction where the adoptee is recognized as a full member of their adoptive family as if they were born into it.
The Historical Problem

I open with this narrative of my mother’s adoption and early childhood not only to
demonstrate the personal stakes of this thesis project but also because it captures what makes
studying adoption between the Colombia and the United States interesting: the irrevocable
severance of legal ties to birth family and country, the issues of transnational kinship formation,
and the bureaucratic actors who make adoptions happen. A historical analysis of Colombia’s
socioeconomic and political conditions during the 1960s and 1970s illustrates how a small, but
symbolically significant, number of Colombian children were made adoptable to U.S. citizens.
Before 1970, records show very few adoptions, but by 1976, over 500 children had entered the
U.S. in this manner. Since then, thousands of children have joined an uninterrupted migratory
flow from Colombia to North America and Western Europe through the juridical mechanisms of
transnational adoption. At the most fundamental level, this thesis investigates why within a few
years Colombia became such a major source of adoptable children. I argue that during the 1960s,
the interests of U.S. and Colombian elites converged to increase the Colombian state’s authority
over the family under a pan-Latin American campaign for population control. The regularization
of legal adoptions along with discourses of parental responsibility and child welfare primed
Colombia to be integrated into the global transnational adoption industry. Actors invested in the
adoption of “abandoned” children collaborated to ensure the steady supply of Colombian
children to meet foreign demand. In the last 20 or so years, adult adoptees have highlighted the

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consequences of these commodified and often secretive adoptions and have disrupted dominant narratives of transnational adoption.

During the 1960s, the U.S. and the development agencies it funded like the World Bank urged Latin American leaders to slow population growth, which threatened to neutralize or reverse improvements in living standards. Undergirding these concerns was the belief that an ever-expanding Latin American underclass ground down by persistent inequality would prove fertile ground for communism. In particular, the Cuban Revolution of 1959 set the stage for greater cooperation between the U.S. and the Colombian ruling class that struggled to gain legitimacy amongst an increasingly young and urban population that demanded social progress.

The expansion of state authority encroached on matters that the Catholic Church traditionally governed. While Church authorities ceded most formal power over the family unit, they influenced the ideological and discursive grounds upon which the Colombia state would build its own authority. The Church advocated to make reproductive decisions autonomously. This ideal of “family planning” contrasted with “birth control” which carried negative connotations of coercive sterilization and government regulation. The Church was not making a feminist argument for women’s liberation, however. The right of a family to operate autonomously rested upon a married couple’s ability to exercise “responsible parenthood” by practicing sexual self-restraint and only having as many children as they could support with their own resources. According to the Church, “responsible parenthood” was supposed to be guided by Catholic instruction and adherence to natural law. In this way, the Church preserved its spiritual influence at a time of diminishing formal power. The Church also offered the state useful language to legitimate novel population policies and institutions, so long as it presented them as instruments to promote responsible parenthood.
The National Front (r. 1958-1974), a shared-power arrangement between the Conservative and Liberal parties, governed Colombia as the country’s demography transformed and implemented the first population control programs. Eager to legitimate their authority, National Front leaders identified the lack of responsible parenthood as a causal factor for social issues that threatened the well-being of children. The *gamines*, or street children that roamed Bogotá pestering pedestrians for money and engaging in “delinquent activities,” were a prominent visual symbol for Colombia’s societal failures. The National Front framed parental *irresponsibility* in the form of extra-marital sex, neglectful fathers, and impoverished women who abandoned their children as the root cause of the *gamine* problem. Intervening as a guardian of the rights of children, the Colombian state constructed legal and institutional apparatuses for the revocation of parental rights from irresponsible parents. Children who were legally recognized as “abandoned” represented a new problem about how to provide them with long-term care.

One temporary solution emerged from mostly Catholic and Liberal well-to-do women who used their social connections and resources to open “*casas privadas*” or private adoption houses. These centers were not intended to care for children until adulthood but attended to a child’s basic needs while adoption house officials sought placements with new families. Social stigma against illegitimacy and the adoption of biologically unrelated kin among Colombia’s middle and upper classes presented major obstacles to finding families for abandoned children, however. Still, institutionalized “waiting children” lacked the emotional and moral development that many Colombians believed could only be provided through the family unit. The prospect of foreign couples from North America and Europe who desired to adopt abandoned Colombian children signaled a promising *permanent* solution. *Casas privadas* in turn perpetuated a
“common sense” that placing an abandoned Colombian child with foreign families was in the “best interests of the child.”

A few U.S. couples who adopted children in the early 1970s played a significant role in popularizing Colombia as a ready source of adoptable children who were legally “abandoned.” The U.S. “sexual revolution” of the 1960s reduced stigma against illegitimacy and offered greater reproductive autonomy for white women. Additionally, social movements from below pressured federal and state governments to reform/dismantle child welfare structures that systemically placed Black and Native American children with white families. White liberal adoptive parents had fewer options to adopt healthy white infants and felt political and social pressure to not adopt children of another race domestically. Adopting abroad presented an opportunity to raise a child as their own without having to navigate domestic politics of transracial adoption.

Serious ethical issues arose not long after transnational adoptions between the U.S. and Colombia began around 1970. The influx of U.S. dollars around many points of the adoption process like fees for adoption applications, document translations and room and board for adopters while in the country incentivized Colombian actors to find legally dubious ways to profit. At least one former ICBF (Colombian Institute for Family Welfare) bureaucrat used misleading and coercive measures against vulnerable Colombian mothers to relinquish their children, ensuring a steady supply for wealthy foreign clients who desired faster adoptions and lighter-skinned children than what the casas privadas could provide. Neither U.S. adoptive parents nor Colombian adoption officials anticipated that the adoptees themselves would decades later, beginning in the late 1990s, uncover layers of secrecy, corruption, and cover-ups associated

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4 Laura Briggs in Somebody’s Children does an excellent job juxtaposing histories of U.S. interracial adoption with transnational adoption from Latin America.
with their adoptions. Adoptee interventions against dominant adoption narratives that reproduced a myth of rescue from poverty by humanitarian Americans were critical in opening discursive and political space to question the fundamental logics of the Colombian transnational adoption industry. Without the scholarly and cultural work of Colombian adoptees, this thesis would not be possible.

**Literature Review**

Through this thesis I engage with historical research on Colombia’s National Front period. Grand projects of elite-driven socioeconomic institutional formation ultimately did little to alleviate persistent precarity among the urban lower classes. On another level I am also in conversation with the interdisciplinary body of work that belongs to critical adoption studies (CAS). Familiarity with this scholarship allows me to critically assess and illuminate how my evidence speaks to transnational/racial kinship formations. The case study of Colombia is represented to a degree in CAS, but it is often part of generalized sociological and anthropological analysis of the whole Latin American region to the detriment of a country-specific inquiry. At the same time, transnational adoption has seemingly no place in broader histories of 1960s and 1970s Colombia. My project deploys the rich theoretical frameworks and methodologies generated by CAS to make the case for why those interested in this period of Colombian history ought to pay attention to the development of the transnational adoption industry.

**The National Front**

Colombianists consider the National Front (*Frente Nacional* or FN) period as a relatively peaceful, but ultimately ineffective period of attempts by elites to stabilize the country after *La Violencia*, and incorporate the greater population into a modern nation-state. Marco Palacios’
*Between Legitimacy and Violence: A History of Colombia, 1875-2002,* argues that the FN was uninterested in meaningfully improving the lives of Colombia’s urban working classes or those participating in the vast informal economy. The FN built its base of political support primarily from the upwardly-minded middle class who had formal higher education and sought positions within Colombia’s burgeoning bureaucracy. The social institutions heralded by President Carlos Lleras Restrepo (r. 1966-1970) under the banner of “*Transformación Nacional*” were based on paternalistic attitudes towards the poor that did little to remedy widespread apathy towards political participation. Palacios does not significantly engage with the specific conditions of proletarianized urban women, but his analysis of the elitist logics which guided FN policymaking offer an important lens for interpreting legislation written during this period. The rhetoric of even the most “progressive” FN president like Lleras Restrepo who claimed to care for the poor was not matched by substantial improvements in their quality of life.

Amy Offner’s *Sorting Out the Mixed Economy: The Rise and Fall of Welfare and Developmental States in the Americas* traces the technical cooperation and capital that Colombian officials sought from the United States to initiate grand infrastructure projects and jumpstarting new sectors of Colombia’s industrial economy. Offner focuses on the role that the U.S. played in guiding Colombia’s new political economy and establishes that Colombian elites generally looked to the hegemon as their guiding example. Supposedly “state-led” development was equally produced through decentralized public-private partnerships. These techniques of policy making reflected the Colombian state’s struggle to “fulfill extraordinary promises under punishing ideological, material, and political constraints.”

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5 President Marco Fidel Suárez (r. 1918-1921) once stated that Colombia’s destiny laid with the “North Star” of the United States.

FN bureaucrats implemented, and designed policies inform how I interpret the government’s regularization of adoption. The institutions and policies that were created to regulate adoption depended on the cooperation of Catholic society ladies who ran the *casas privadas*, where most children declared abandoned were sent in the 1970s and 1980s. These adoption houses were under the jurisdiction of the Colombian Institute of Family Welfare (ICBF) but operated autonomously.

**Critical Adoption Studies**

The critical study of transnational adoption exposes powerful, but purposefully obscured structural hierarchies. These inequalities on the axes of race, gender, class, and geopolitics must be illuminated to properly historicize the phenomenon. I hope to model the type of inquiry practiced Laura Briggs *Somebody’s Children*. By examining the history of transracial adoption within the U.S. of Native and Black children by white families and the deployment of transnational adoption in Cold War arenas like Guatemala, Briggs demonstrates how adoption carried immense symbolic weight in public debates over race, sovereignty, ideology, and the family. She theorizes international adoption as an “index of vulnerability” among birth mothers which, when paired with a country’s integration into global networks of trade, makes their children susceptible to this involuntary migration. The title indicates Briggs’ opposition to the idea that the children available for adoption are ever truly orphans. Instead, due to a combination of state neglect, poverty, and an absence of family or community support, birth mothers faced pressure to relinquish their children to relatively well-resourced state and private actors. Under the pressure of the doctrine of the “best interests of the child,” birth mothers had a limited set of options to secure their child’s health and wellness. Briggs advocates for a “history of adoption

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that pays as much attention to the position of those who lose children in adoption as to those who receive them.”

This thesis follows Briggs in unsettling the supposed “naturalness” of the institutionalized child in Colombia waiting for a forever home in the U.S.

Arissa Oh’s To Save the Children of Korea both investigates the Cold War origins of the massive and long-lived South Korean adoption industry and makes a powerful intervention by pointing to how the Korean state used international adoption to hand off the responsibility of child welfare to eager Christian humanitarian American couples. Instead of addressing the root issues of child abandonment, the Korean government could export these undesirable and costly burdens. By the 1970s however, the government and the many adoption officials including lawyers, social workers, and orphanage directors were incentivized to keep the industry growing by the influx of U.S. dollars it brought to the country. Korea is an exceptional case of international adoption at a massive scale, but Oh’s research encourages me to question whether similar motivations played a role in the growth of Colombia’s adoption industry. Was a genuine crisis of child abandonment and delinquency driving transnational adoptions or did the robust legal and social infrastructure laid out in the years prior for the state to act in a child’s “best interests” make Colombia an attractive source of well-regulated and ostensibly ethically adoptable children?

In his Masters’ thesis “Politics of Colombian Adoption,” Michael Maestranzi answers this question by arguing that Colombian elites were not primarily motivated by a desire to facilitate international adoptions when they established the ICBF which would later regulate such procedures. Instead, he locates the impetus for the creation of Colombia’s adoption infrastructure in separate but related domestic concerns over population control, rural-urban migration, and the

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8 Briggs, 18.
healthy development of children under “responsible parenthood.” Maestranzi argues these developments predated the initial wave of international adoption in Colombia but critically made a solid institutional foundation for the consistent availability of children without interruption by outrageous scandal or a shift to nationalist bans or restrictions of the practice. Maestranzi’s work informs this thesis’s engagement with population discourses and gives me a valuable launching pad in identifying relevant primary sources.

While Maestranzi focuses on Colombian state formation in relation to adoption, I am more interested in how the juridical technologies of adoption, as David Eng describes them, transform the adoptee from a burdensome object of pity into a subject “worthy of investment—economic protection (capital accumulation), political rights (citizenship), and social recognition (family).” The logic of the “best interests of the child” shaped the legal formalization of transnational adoptions during the 1960s and 1970s. The industry favored plenary adoption— which irrevocably alienated children from birth origins—over informal adoption practices because it helped sustain adoptive parent’s understanding of their children not as involuntary migrants with still-existing connections to Colombia, but as full members of their family. Secret and closed adoptions that formalized new adoptive relations at the expense of original birth relations reinforced the unequal geopolitical hierarchy between the U.S. and Colombia.

Sources

Despite the secrecy of Colombian adoption, I have assembled a substantial and diverse set of materials which trace the historical origins of Colombia’s transnational adoption industry. For sections 2 and 3, I divide my evidence into three categories: conference proceedings that demonstrate hemispheric debate over a trans-Latin American trend of rapid population growth

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and urbanization; both Colombian legislation which laid the institutional scaffolding for international adoptions and U.S. legislative action in response to lobbying by adoptive parents demanding that adoption regulations be rationalized; and diverse commentary in Colombian and U.S. newspapers which took sympathetic and critical stances towards the growing phenomena.

Stitching together these disparate sources recreates Colombian and other actors’ underlying assumptions about how a state should take control of its demographic transition. Colombian elites viewed the poorer, darker classes with suspicion and their rhetoric and policies reflect their culture of racialized paternalism. U.S. developmentalist policies to preempt communist revolution in Latin America required managed population growth so not to exacerbate the gross inequality and precarity that Colombia’s political economy produced. However, the privileged position of the Catholic church, both papal authority in Rome and Colombian clergy, gave it influence in shaping the terms of state authority over the family, including responsible parenthood.

U.S. and Colombian powerbrokers colluded to implement a comprehensive population politics to Colombia. The ICBF scaled up and opened adoption to foreigners, but the architects of this institution primarily intended to impose order onto what they perceived was a problem of parental irresponsibility among the urban popular classes whose children they abandoned, left to run delinquent in the streets, or live impoverished lives. Analyzing the juridical logics of child protection and conditional parental rights activated by policies like Ley 75 de 1968 and Ley 5 de 1975 clarifies how Colombian elites normalized and regulated plenary adoption which in turn reified the “as-if-begotten” model of kinship. Although Colombia’s particular domestic context inspired these social engineering projects, reading them alongside U.S. Congressional discourse about transnational adoption as a peculiar, but valued, form of migration demonstrates that U.S.
adoptive parents and Colombian adoption professionals shared a common interest in legitimizing
the practice.

Both Colombian and U.S. newspapers were places for mainstream publics to make sense
of an interconnected world in which even matters of family and childcare seemed to take on
transnational frameworks. The incomplete but still useful digital archive of Colombia’s most
widely shared broadsheet, *El Tiempo*, captured moments when issues of adoption and child
abandonment were brought to mainstream Colombian attention. *El Tiempo*’s readers considered
themselves as part of the forward-thinking segment of society concerned with militant trade
unions, an influx of poor rural migrants to cities, and the looming threat of guerilla activities. By
the 1970s, the newspaper published articles and opinion pieces that contributed to the growing
consciousness of child abandonment and adoption. The focus on the irredeemable gamine (street
urchin) transferred to the abandoned or orphan baby that needed a home. I use these sources to
demonstrate how the concepts of responsible parenthood and protecting vulnerable children were
received by middle and upper-class Colombians who then participated in constructing
Colombia’s adoption industry.

Adoptive parents, government and non-governmental officials in the U.S. and Colombia
and contributors to *El Tiempo*, wrote and thought much about the adoptee; but adoptee voices are
absent from this body of evidence. Adoptees asserted themselves in transnational adoption
discourse when they come of age, beginning in the 1990s for the earliest Colombian cohort. In
roughly the last 30 years, they have produced a fountain of memoirs, visual art, podcasts, and
scholarship of their own which problematizes the idealized narratives of adoption which others
constructed in their name. They have pursued the truth of their own histories which often
remained unsatisfactorily incomplete. Adoptee-led questioning of these narratives and their
efforts to learn more about suspected corrupt practices in the 1970s and 1980s have brought greater attention to international adoption in both the countries they grew up in and in Colombia. Section 3 will grapple with this diverse body of emotional and intellectual labor that functions as a corrective against the archival silencing which pervades the historical documentation of Colombian transnational adoption.

SECTION 1: Transnational Adoption Pre-History, 1957-1968

Colombia’s incorporation into the global transnational adoption industry occurred during a period of elite-driven reform after a decade of violent crisis. National Front leaders confronted social ills, like child abandonment, that emerged from a rapidly growing and increasingly younger and urban population. After gaining suffrage in 1957-, middle- and upper-class women emerged as political subjects who would later shape the growth of transnational adoptions. At the 1965 Pan-American Assembly on Population, Colombian politicians and members of the intelligentsia cooperated with delegates from Latin America and the U.S. to create a hemispheric management plan for “la explosión demográfica.” Internally, the FN negotiated with the historically powerful Catholic Church over how the Colombian state would preserve a place for Catholic family values while exerting control over the country’s demography. The state and the Church collaborated in creating institutions and laws that empowered the state to “protect” children in cases of “parental irresponsibility” by revoking parental rights. This section will demonstrate how processes of state formation and societal transformation in Colombia led to the establishment in 1968 of the Colombian Institute of Family Welfare, the entity which regulated all adoptions, including by U.S. citizens.
The National Front and women’s electoral debut

On December 1, 1957, over 4 million Colombians approved a plebiscite to establish the National Front, a power-sharing agreement where the country’s two traditional parties, the Conservatives and the Liberals, would rotate the presidency and cooperate to strengthen Colombia’s economic and political institutions. This conciliatory pact among the ruling classes sought to bring stability to Colombia after a disastrous decade of partisan civil war—incited by the assassination of popular Liberal leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in 1948—ravaged the countryside, killing over 200,000 and displacing around one million. The conflict earned the name La Violencia not only for its scale, but also the spectacle of public killings and extreme torture methods. In the eastern plains of Los Llanos and the coffee growing regions of the Andes, paramilitaries backed by large landowners and Conservative peasants fought with armed guerilla groups associated with the Liberal party. The Conservative President Mariano Ospina Pérez whose election in 1946 ended over 15 years of Liberal dominance declared a state of siege and suspended Congress in 1949. The Colombian state lost control over wide swaths of the country and, until the late 1950s, struggled to end La Violencia. The 1957 plebiscite gave FN leaders a mandate to restore security to the Colombian countryside.

Colombia’s oligarchs also constructed the FN to preserve their political duopoly following the regime of General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla (r. 1953-1957). While the parties assented to the general’s coup against the far-right President Laureano Gómez, Rojas Pinilla tried to extend his stay in power and demonstrated an interest in populist rhetoric and policies. The general did not commit to the type of fiscal discipline that Colombia’s strengthening industrial business class expected of the national government. Rojas Pinilla’s ideologically ambiguous

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platform (*Tercera Fuerza*) failed to gain significant traction among the populace, but it did threaten the interests of Colombia’s elites who capitalized on public discontent to oust the general. The National Front therefore was born out of a mandate to end the state of banditry and egregious violence and foster a favorable economic situation for industrial development.

While the traditional elites denounced Rojas Pinilla as a dictator, Colombian women suffragists used his outsider status to break through Catholic conservative opposition and achieve the right to vote in 1954. The realization of “*el voto femenino*” built upon decades of agitation beginning in the early 20th century. In the industrializing cities laboring women agitated for better working conditions and middle-class women demanded access to professional occupations. Liberal reforms in the 1930s to the Civil Code granted women greater property rights and private efforts slowly recruited more women into higher education programs. Colombian women understood the right to vote as one part of their emancipation in a deeply patriarchal society and political system that allotted them a curtailed form of citizenship. Their participation in the plebiscite bolstered the new regime’s claim to popular approval and made the 1957 election a high watermark in Colombian electoral participation.

Carola Correa de Rojas Pinilla, wife of the general-turned-president, embodied the integration of middle- and upper-class women into Colombia’s body politic. In 1956 she received the first cédula, or identification card, issued to a woman (Fig. 1). The *cédula*, a small laminated white card introduced in 1952, reflected the state’s desire to settle the issue of electoral fraud which frequently catalyzed partisan violence since the mid-19th century. If the state

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identified and kept track of all its citizens, then election officials could enforce the rule of one
person, one vote. Mrs. Rojas Pinilla’s cédula records information about her age, place of birth,
and key biometric information like her photo portrait and the impression of her right index
fingerprint. Colombian voters embodied their political participation at the ballot box when they
dipped their finger in ink to provide the prints that officials cross-examined with the cédula. In
figure 2 below, the woman looks directly towards the camera pointing her glossy index finger
outwards. Colombian newspapers circulated the motif of the raised inked finger which
transformed into a visual symbol of the voto femenino that reinforced official narratives of a
modernizing Colombia. The cédula functioned as a technology of population record-keeping and
guarantor of electoral legitimacy. Because Colombia began issuing cédulas in the 1950s and
expanded the program to women, the state also ensured that cédulas would play a role in both the
beginnings of transnational adoption a decade later and adult adoptees’ searches for their birth
family.

Figure 1. The first cédula issued
to a woman in 1956, first lady
Carola Correa de Rojas Pinilla
(Serrano 2018).

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14 Maritza Serrano, “The historic maliciousness behind the Colombian ‘cédula,’” Periódico UNAL, 2018,
Colombia’s response to the “population crisis”

During the 1960s the idea of a “population crisis” reached a new height of public consciousness on a global scale. In his 1966 state of the union address, U.S. President Lyndon Johnson pledged to “seek new ways to use our knowledge to help deal with the explosion in world population and the growing scarcity in world resources.” State leaders in North America and Western Europe, Latin America, and Asia sent delegations of academics and policy makers to a flurry of international conferences to discuss solutions to the “population crisis.” Even the Roman Catholic Church indicated openness to updating its doctrine regarding reproductive management. A “neo-Malthusian” discourse shaped much of the global debate on the causes of rapid population growth which contemporary observers believed would soon outstrip the productive capacities of the global economy. Whereas in previous decades, global public health oriented around disease control campaigns to reduce mortality, development institutions like the World Bank blamed such accomplishments for dooming more people to poverty.\textsuperscript{15} Academics and bureaucrats working on development projects for the “Third World” worried that those

countries’ increasing population would neutralize any positive impacts from investments in food production, healthcare, and education. Leaders in the industrialized north agreed that the United Nations and its subagencies like the World Health Organization urgently needed to support the developing world in slowing down population growth.\(^{16}\)

It is important to emphasize that population control discourses and policies were not simply exported from geopolitical centers to the Global South. In the Latin American case, members of the intelligentsia and ruling classes had already been engaging with the question of an “explosion demográfica” before it dominated international development circles. Research institutions like the CELADE (Centro Latinoamericano de Demografía) provided platforms for social scientists, public health officials, and medical professionals to counter pessimistic projections of famine and collapse. These researchers disagreed with the U.S.-led singular focus on family planning as a curative measure against poverty. They understood the region’s rapid population growth as part of the “demographic transition” model. It was expected that birth rates would take time to adjust to decreased mortality just as they did in the industrialized North Atlantic. The Anglo fear of famine caused by overpopulation made little sense to Latin American experts. They believed that the continent still had abundant natural resources but weak and ineffective institutions that struggled to deliver social goods. Influenced by developmentalist theory, academics and policymakers supplemented the imperative of population control with calls for agrarian reform, educational investments, and national industrialization.\(^{17}\) By the end of the decade, most Latin American countries—including Colombia—had established social welfare institutions that would facilitate a wide range of family planning programs. A close

\(^{16}\) Cueto and Palmer, 194.

reading of one hemispheric gathering on the population question illuminates the discursive context in which Colombia established the institutions and juridical logics upon which international adoption would later depend.

On August 11, 1965, former Colombian president Alberto Lleras Camargo delivered the opening address for the first Pan-American Assembly on Population in Cali, Colombia. Sponsored by Columbia University’s Population Council and the Universidad del Valle, the Assembly was a multinational gathering of demographers, physicians, clergy members, and politicians to discuss solutions to Latin America’s population problem. Representatives from all countries except Cuba attended. In his speech, Lleras Camargo condemned past leadership, including himself, for not recognizing that rapid overpopulation threatened Latin America’s modernization. He acknowledged the benefits of recent reforms to landownership and taxation but warned such polices accomplish little “as long as wave after wave of people pile misery on misery.” The statesman did not hide his disgust toward the hundreds of thousands of people moving from the country to Latin America’s cities. They were an “illiterate, half civilized” peasant mass which “does not contribute to production and hardly figures in consumption.”

More urgently, Lleras Camargo warned that “here in this chunk of eroded and desperate humanity lie the seeds of Latin America’s gravest hazard.” The Assembly delegates did not need a reminder of the threat that communist insurrection and revolution posed so soon after Cuba’s revolution in 1959. According to Lleras Camargo, if Latin American leaders did not get a handle on their country’s demography, they may follow Fulgencio Batista in exile.

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Lleras Camargo, an esteemed Liberal architect and statesman of the National Front, positioned himself as a champion of closer military and economic relations with the U.S. Such a stance was not unprecedented in Colombia which in 1951 was the only Latin American country to send a battalion to assist U.S. led forces in rolling back the communist North Korean invasion of the South. The hegemon’s attention shifted from Eurasia to the Western Hemisphere after the Cuban Revolution overthrew Fulgencio Batista and nationalized U.S. business assets. During the Lleras Camargo presidency between 1958 and 1962, Colombia helped establish the Alliance for Progress in 1960. This multilateral partnership between the U.S. and Latin America republics promised large-scale U.S funded development projects. U.S. President John F. Kennedy cited the models presented over several years of Latin American diplomatic efforts, especially by Brazil, Argentina, and Colombia.\(^{19}\) By allying themselves to the U.S., Colombian elites hoped to secure military hardware and funding for internal security and capital investments into major infrastructure and development projects.

Like other Latin American actors, Lleras Camargo and the rest of the Colombian delegation readily took up the global population question, strategically engaging the U.S. intelligentsia as a chance to shape demographic policy to promote development needs. All parties to the Assembly consented to 11 recommendations for hemispheric population control. Echoing Lleras Camargo’s words that overpopulation is “our problem” the recommendations encourage governments to establish “national population policies,” encourage “responsible paternity,” and ensure that family planning services are accessible to “the people who desire them.” Until national bureaucracies crafted such policies, the delegates also encouraged private organizations to “awaken public opinion,” and “adopt experimental programs.” Even after governments

implemented population programs, private initiatives should “remain a continuing stimulus for new ideas.” The demographic platform put forth from Cali represented a logic of technocratic governance that also promoted private solutions to public problems. The language of these recommendations also reified the ideal of an educated public sphere where responsible citizens could be persuaded that population programs were in their rational interest. The National Front’s valuation of private social welfare overseen by a national bureaucracy would later give rise to a distinctly Colombian ordering and governance of international adoption beginning in the 1970s.

Church authority and “responsible parenthood”

The 1965 Population Assembly foreshadowed the importance of responsible parenthood (paternidad responsable) as a moral framework to discuss and implement family planning programs. Both Colombian and U.S. actors readily deployed this phrase in their conference proceedings, hearings, press, and legislature. Through appeals to responsible parenthood, proponents of greater state regulation over reproduction tried to mitigate tensions with the Catholic Church. During the mid 1960s, the Church’s Vatican II Council discussed aggiornamento, or “updating” its doctrine for the modern world. Ecclesiastical authorities in Latin America at this time held a diversity of ideologies and stances towards the population debate. They universally condemned abortion but an increasing number of clergy urged the Church to cease promoting the doctrine of “be fruitful and multiply.” Responsible parenthood emphasized the virtues of married couples who consciously planned the growth of their families at a rate that did not overwhelm the household’s resources. The Latin American peasant or urban

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20 Population Crisis, p. 1473.
poor family became the object of top-down scrutiny in a way that mirrored Global North discourses about the developing world’s population growth.21

Gustavo Pérez Ramírez, a Catholic priest and trained sociologist, attended the Population Assembly in Cali and presented a paper that provided background on the theological position of the Church vis a vis family planning. He demonstrated a Colombian interpretation of the Second Vatican Council’s spirit of aggiornamento. According to Pérez Ramírez, the Church needed to reexamine its doctrine on marriage and procreation according to established demographic fact of reduced mortality. With an eye towards the Latin American context, he condemned patriarchal cultural norms which promoted irresponsible sexual practices among men while restricting women’s knowledge of and access to contraceptives. Pérez Ramírez rejected the idea of incongruency between the Church and family planning. For example, Pérez Ramírez synthesized advances in physiology that proved the natural presence of contraceptive hormones with corrections to Augustinian doctrine that, he argued, wrongly condemned marital sexual relations without the intention to conceive a child.22 The promotion of family planning by a respected Colombian clergy member helped grant legitimacy to the state’s encroachment on social regulation that the Church traditionally governed.

The Assembly purposefully excluded the press and limited circulation of the names of those attending to promote amicable and forthright dialogue among “respectable gentlemen.” One of Congress’ key informants then was Representative John Brademas who participated in the Assembly and possessed a working command of Spanish. In his testimony, Brademas conveyed a deep admiration for the Catholic clergy, including Pérez Ramírez, who “did not play

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a defensive role at the conference… nor were [they] eager to put the church in that role.”

Responding to the laudatory reporting on the Assembly, Senator Gaylord Nelson suggested that “the intelligentsia of Latin America is further along than we had supposed” and that “the time is ripe for government at all levels to give the population problem the full attention it deserves.”

U.S. policymakers were pleasantly surprised by what they believed was a rare moment of genuine unity and concordance between Latin America and the U.S. that was not derailed by Catholic opposition.

Catholic opposition did not significantly reduce the adoption of contraceptive by Colombian women, but it prevented the state from explicitly promoting birth control by artificial means. The Church successfully influenced the 1965 Assembly to adopt responsible parenthood as the dominant paradigm by which states would craft population politics. U.S. participants and observers recognized its utility in “selling” population control to a region sensitive to Catholic interests. It also struck a chord with U.S. Congressional leaders who lamented a decline in moral standards, increasing social discontent, and alarming population growth trends in their own country. Expert testimony Dr. Mary S. Calderone, executive director of the Sex Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS), reinforced Colombian Catholic skepticism about pharmaceutical technologies of birth control. Although “the pill” had been approved by the Food and Drug Administration in 1960, Dr. Calderone asserted that “overpopulation has its roots within the individual family.” She argued that individuals imbued with fatalistic attitudes—“what I do can’t matter”—can only be expected to exercise irresponsible parenthood, even if they are given the tools to limit their family sizes.

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23 Population Crisis, p. 1721.
24 Population Crisis, p. 1471.
25 Pérez Ramirez, p. 200-204.
Calderone linked the success of population control globally with “education for responsible parenthood,” beginning with the U.S. After all, she noted, the world “has seen only sexual irresponsibility and reproductive profligacy as examples emanating from our shores.” By arguing that the technological intervention of contraceptives was not enough to control family size, figures like Dr. Calderone gave credence to the Church’s arguments that their mission to provide spiritual and moral education remained relevant in a modernizing Colombia.

The motto of parental responsibility also resonated with the Colombian middle- and upper- classes whom the National Front favored. One can gauge the attitudes of this segment of Colombian society through the most widely shared broadsheet daily, El Tiempo. In the early 20th century, it served as a fief of the Liberal Party but during the National Front period the paper’s editorial stance shifted to reflect the elite’s downplaying of partisan difference in the interest of technocratic national recovery and development in the wake of La Violencia. El Tiempo’s readers considered themselves part of the forward-thinking segment of society concerned with militant trade unions, an influx of poor rural migrants to cities, and the looming threat of guerilla activities. The disdainful attitude that these gente de bien (decent people) carried towards the internally displaced peasants manifests in the omniscient and anonymous voice of Figure 3. The caption pejoratively referred to the children taking a ride through Bogotá as “good-for-nothings,” withholding all generosity about their characters. Even without the caption, the photo would likely have generated a contemptuous reaction in readers who may have asked “where in God’s name are there parents?” Such behavior legitimated greater governmental monitoring of unaccompanied children.

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26 Population Crisis, p. 1324-1328.
Figure 3. From the April 24, 1971 issue of 
*El Tiempo*. Translation: Collective transport. The scene is very common in Bogotá. A group of good-for-nothings have grabbed onto a moving vehicle, without worry about the risk this represents. This seems, of course, to validate campaigns begun to gather them [off the street].

*El Tiempo* readers would also categorize such boys as “gamines.” Generally any group of mostly male children making their life in the city by panhandling, running through traffic, and sleeping in alleyways would be called gamines. The phenomenon of gaminismo in Colombian mirrored similar behaviors and descriptions of poor street children in other major cities. In his master’s thesis, Jackson Kirk Felsman analyzes the life of gamines by contextualizing them within post-*Violencia* Colombia and conducting sustained ethnographic work with groups of children in Cali’s streets. He argues that the destructive and transformational social and political impact of *La Violencia*—migration of internal refugees from the countryside to cites, the breakup of families from the conflict, and the growth of informal squatter settlements on the urban periphery—contributed to the precaritization of children in Colombian cities. Felsman rejects the blanket antipathy that elite Colombians held towards street children, describing their behavior as
“goal-directed—an effort to meet physical and emotional needs not satisfied elsewhere.” He also argues that the Colombian public and government inaccurately described any street child as a gamin. From a sample of 300 Cali street children, 61% reported that they maintained relations with “home” that ran the gamut between returning home every evening after securing money or resources and only visiting “around religious holidays or when driven by an inner need to make contact.” 32% reported that they chose to leave home, fleeing extreme poverty in rural hamlets or physical violence from abusive stepfathers. Felsman identifies these mostly male children who “have broken primary ties with his family… [and are] responsible for their own physical and emotional survival while sleeping in the streets” as the true gamin.28 Felsman hypothesizes that the overrepresentation of boys in the gamin population could be attributed to a convergence between early childhood development factors with characteristics of Colombian machismo culture which conditioned young boys to take aggressive and independent actions when confronted with family stress and discord.

Orphaned and abandoned children constituted a total of only 7% of Felsman’s sample. While this one survey conducted in the early 1980s cannot be interpreted as a comprehensive representation of Colombian street children during the 1960s, it complicates the narratives around child abandonment and protection that the Colombian state and press reproduced about this heterogenous population. Rather than being passive victims of abject parental neglect or mistreatment, a significant proportion of street children were enacting ways of life that made sense according to their positions within impoverished families that suffered from societal dysfunction in the wake of La Violencia.

The establishment of the ICBF

Responding to growing national and global calls for stronger social planning, the Colombian legislature passed Ley 75 de 1968. Although much of the law’s language was gender neutral, it devotes considerable attention to how a father may be recognized judicially in cases of paternal ambiguity in the first chapter, “Of Filiation, Paternity Investigation, and the Effects of Marital Status.” Ley 75 assumes that fathers may deliberately avoid their obligations to a child and mother such as in cases of rape or malicious seduction under the “promise of marriage.” The law recognized “patria potestad” or “parental authority” as a desired form of social organization, that primarily rests with the father.  But while the state provided rhetorical concessions to the Catholic position that favored the family’s independence, parental authority was also tied with “parental responsibility.” If a parent withdrew from the “legal obligations of moral or food assistance” or “misappropriates or squanders the assets that they administer in the exercise of parental authority,” they would be subject to imprisonment and fines. In the case of parental irresponsibility, the state held the right to take custody of children “morally or economically abandoned by his parents.” While I lack data about the quantity and quality of ICBF interventions into Colombian families, I suspect that such legal actions targeted single mothers the most. If a poor father was present and earnestly contributed to his family, ICBF bureaucrats likely hesitated to take actions that undermined the authority of men. They likely viewed single mothers more harshly based on being an economically independent but impoverished woman caring for illegitimate children. Poor mothers had to balance low wage shifts in factories or

29 Ley 75 de 1968.
domestic service to wealthier households with the labor of childcare and maintaining a home. Without a husband or permanent male companion, poor Colombian women raising children on their own received both societal contempt and isolation, and experienced economic insecurity.\textsuperscript{31}

With the 1968 law, the Colombian state consolidated its role as guarantor of children’s rights and wellness. \textit{Ley 75} established the \textit{Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar} (ICBF/Colombian Institute of Family Welfare). The ICBF was tasked with stabilizing the Colombian family which many upper-class and middle-class interests believed was in crisis. Minors were to receive protections from the Institution and benefit from “programs for the prevention of antisocial states in the youth population.”\textsuperscript{32} The seemingly numerous “gamines” of Colombia’s growing urban centers confirmed the necessity for both public and private stakeholders to invest in their “rehabilitation.” Adoption as a solution to abandonment appears in \textit{Ley 75} but its development was comprehensively articulated in \textit{Ley 5 de 1975} which the next section will examine.\textsuperscript{33}

Although by the end of the decade the Catholic Church ceded most formal social control in Latin America, it preserved an influential position in setting the moral terms of population policies through the concept of responsible parenthood. The Colombian state would later promote initiatives by private religious organizations and individuals to develop the country’s adoption infrastructure. Both the state and other actors continuously invoked parental \textit{irresponsibility} to garner support for new family planning programs against the social ills of illegitimacy, abortion, and child abandonment and delinquency. Upon this foundation of political attention towards and institutional investment into the regulation of families and the protection of

\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Ley 75 de 1968}.
\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Ley 5 de 1975}.
vulnerable children, Colombian and U.S. actors built the machinery of a transnational adoption industry which would explode in scale over the next decade.

SECTION 2: Maturation of the Transnational Adoption Industry, 1968-1978

Through Ley 75 de 1968, the National Front created a juridical framework for the state to make orphaned and abandoned children adoptable in ways that facilitated their integration into the global transnational adoption industry. Prospective adopters from the U.S. desired infants and young children who could easily be assimilated into white American society. They expected to have closed adoptions that stripped adoptees of all ties to Colombia; the complete legal replacement of one kin group by another is referred to by the term plenary adoption. The children in Colombian orphanages and adoption houses fit the bill because the ICBF often already dissolved their relations with biological kin if they deemed a child to be abandoned. However, the establishment of the ICBF did not immediately usher a wave of U.S. couples flocking to Colombia. In 1969 only 8 Colombian children were adopted by U.S. citizens. Over the course of the next decade, Colombia quickly rose as a major “source country.” By 1976, U.S. citizens had adopted 554 Colombian children. This rapid growth can be traced back to the collaboration between middle- and upper-class Colombian women that operated the casas privadas where many adoptable children resided and U.S. adoptive parents who promoted Colombian adoptions. Adoption houses like Bogotá’s Foundation for the Adoption of Abandoned Children (FANA in Spanish) which was directed by Mercedes de Martinez, actively nurtured contacts with adoption agencies and adoptive parent groups in the U.S. Two Minnesota

34 In 1971, the Immigration and Naturalization Service issued immediate relative visas to 23 Colombian “immigrant orphans;” in 1972, 35; in 1973, 107; in 1974, 245; in 1975, 379; Figures based off of INS data provided submitted to the House of Representative’s 1977 hearing on “Alien Adopted Children.”
couples, Jean and Heino Erichsen and Arnold and Joyce Lindgren popularized Colombia by sharing their experience with neighbors, recruiting new couples through adoptive parent newsletters, and guiding others through the adoption process. This section will examine the legal and social scaffolding developed by both Colombian and U.S. actors that formalized transnational adoption and facilitated this peculiar migration’s growth.

**Consolidation of plenary adoption**

Colombia’s early adoption infrastructure shares emerged from the “population crisis” in the mid 1960s. The 1965 Pan-American Population Assembly recommended that “private organizations” should be incorporated into a country’s population policy. Through *Ley 75*, family welfare in Colombia coalesced around a logic of “contracts for the provision of services” with non-governmental organizations, both secular and religious, for the “scientific and administrative management of campaigns and establishments for the protection of minors.”  

Colombia’s National Front leaders privileged technocratic rationality that led to an expanding bureaucracy, but they also restrained spending on public goods and salaries. The non-partisan economist had far more sway in FN governance compared to the politically powerful public-sector unions that existed in other Latin American countries. The language of *Ley 75* demonstrated that the Lleras Restrepo administration closely adhered to the Assembly’s recommendations in part because they complemented the FN’s governing philosophy.

As discussed in the previous section, the ICBF was tasked with rehabilitating the gamines of Colombia’s cities. In his study of Cali street children, Felsman observed that ICBF programming garnered little good will amongst the gamines. Through encounters with police, gamines were referred to guarded dormitories staffed by social workers, pediatricians,

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35 *Ley 75 de 1968.*
psychiatrists, and teachers who demanded conformity and dealt physical punishment to “correct” the boys. While these rehabilitation centers provided limited education and technical training, many gamines refused to cooperate and actively planned their escapes from facilities they described as “very oppressive jails.” Gamines who were used to life on the streets and held suspicions towards more traditional family rarely made their way through plenary adoption proceedings. More often they developed informal relations of care with individuals or businesses who offered food and clothing regularly.  

Because of these difficulties, Colombians who were troubled by child poverty and homelessness transferred their focus from the irredeemable gamin to the innocent abandoned or orphan baby who could still be rescued from delinquency if they were given a home headed by responsible parents.

During the 1970s, *El Tiempo* published articles and opinion pieces that contributed to the growing consciousness of child abandonment and adoption. “Adoption should be informed and irrevocable” declared one editorial on June 25, 1971. The author argued that the “innocent victims of irresponsible parents” had a sacred right to an “honorable name and to grow up in a healthy home surrounded by love and the stability necessary for their proper development.”

Through an interview with Maria López de Escobar, the daughter of a former president and founder of *Casa de la Madre y el Niño* (House of the Mother and Child, the first adoption house in Colombia), the article presents adoption as the best solution and preventative measure against juvenile delinquency. The editorial paints a romantic picture of the adoption house with its “large patio enlivened by play dolls that was surrounded by a “meadow where little children played merrily.” From this perspective, *Casa* was a welcome refuge for children who otherwise may turn to a life of gaminismo, According to López de Escobar, although every abandoned baby

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36 Felsman, 110-116.
carries the potential to become an outcast of society, swift intervention would ensure them a better future. The children at Casa exuded health and carried “confident and smiling” expressions that reflected the excellent care they received. This editorial endeared El Tiempo readers to the efforts of Catholic society ladies to care for abandoned children while they searched for adoption placements. The sentimentalization of children under the care of adoption houses endeared El Tiempo readers towards transnational adoption by presenting it as a mission to protect children who supposedly were neglected by their birth family.

López de Escobar shared her beliefs about the causes of abandonment, citing “false ideas about honor, erroneous religious concepts, and difficult economic situations.” However, she downplayed the role of poverty in forcing birth parents to make the difficult decision to abandon or surrender their child. She explained that according to internal statistics, “the poor do not abandon their children often. The principal factor is irresponsibility. Therefore, our single goal is to find respectable home for these foundlings.” Without access to the data López de Escobar invoked, it is difficult to make any solid conclusion about the reasons behind abandonment. However, as discussed in the previous section, the idea of “parental responsibility” in the Colombian context was charged with class- and gender-based assumptions of what the ideal family looked like. Poor single mothers received greater scrutiny about their ability to parent and little sympathy from ICBF officials. López de Escobar reflected this sentiment by reassuring readers that all the recent laws about adoption and child protection are for the “benefit of the child and not the mother or the parents in general.” She explained that while they may benefit from economic assistance, they do not require special protection in law or from society. López de Escobar believed that protecting an irresponsible mother who decided to have a child she could not raise properly would only be “demoralizing.” This editorial and others press article
presented the abandoned child as a worthy object of charity in contrast to the delinquent gamin and the irresponsible parent.

The author of the 1971 editorial called for more legislation that regulated adoptions and granted the practice an air of legitimacy, pointing to similar programs in France and Chile. Adoption as a solution to abandonment appears in *Ley 75* but its development was consolidated in *Ley 5 de 1975*. Here, a child was considered abandoned if they were a foundling or after a 3-month waiting period after a parent surrendered them to the ICBF or licensed private institution. The law introduced *adopción plena* or “full adoption” as an evolutionary progression from traditional “simple adoption.” Whereas simple adoption retained a child’s ties to biological family while under the custody of adoptive parents, through full adoption the child was completely alienated from “blood family.” The legal identity of a child was modified to render null and void “the original [birth] certificate” in favor of the adoption’s recording in the Civil Registry. *Ley 5* further reduced the authority of birth parents by placing the right to decide on an adoption’s status as simple or full, with the adoptive parent. By 1984 full adoption constituted 90% of all adoptions and the 1989 Children’s Code finally abolished simple adoption. Full adoption’s introduction and rapid supplanting of private and informal adoption arrangements laid the groundwork for foreign prospective parents to recognize and promote Colombia as a ready source of “orphans” longing for a family. Plenary adoption satisfied adoptive parents’ desire to have an “as-if-begotten” child who would not one day leave them for birth family that they remained in contact with. Colombia’s reputation amongst U.S. adopters was further bolstered

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38 *Ley 5 de 1975.*

through collaboration and contact with the seemingly well-organized casas privadas de adopción.

The adoption houses

Prior to the 1970s, the only private facility that U.S. adopters engaged with was Casa de la Madre y el Niño in Bogotá. María López de Escobar received a governmental decree to establish Casa in 1942. Casa catered to high society unwed mothers who required secrecy to avoid social stigma. Therefore, plenary legal adoption, and falsified or destroyed documentation were deployed to preserve birth mother anonymity. After 1968, socially conscious middle and upper-class Colombians established and supported several private orphanages that would become the main conduits of international adoption. Among this wave of adoption houses, Mercedes Rosario de Martinez acquired legal recognition from the ICBF for the Foundation for the Adoption of Abandoned Children (FANA) in 1972, also in Bogotá.\footnote{The name has since changed to the Foundation for the Assistance of Abandoned Children.} Martinez had adopted a daughter herself and rented a home to care for children until they could be matched and placed with adopters.

Private adoption houses operated in parallel to government facilities, especially in the early 70s as the state developed its family welfare infrastructure. FANA and other adoption houses were staffed mostly by unprofessional middle and upper-class women who were deeply motivated by a sense of Christian service. They managed their own referrals and arranged adoptive placements autonomously from the ICBF besides submitting case files and necessary documentation. Birth mothers directly surrendered most of the child under private adoption house custody.\footnote{Hoelgaard, Suzanne. “Cultural Determinants of Adoption Policy: A Colombian Case Study.” International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family 12, no. 2 (1998): 211-215.} These mostly poor, laboring women also received informal counseling and
other forms of support, including room and board during the last stages of pregnancy. In a 1974 news article, *El Tiempo* called FANA the “‘exportadora de niños colombianos,” not in a critical manner but as a way of reporting the relatively novel phenomenon of transnational adoption. The newspaper closed the article with an “SOS” from Martinez who called for financial “collaboration from many more people.” According to Martinez, child abandonment was a grave problem for the whole country. As houses like FANA gained greater financial support from philanthropists, coalitions of adoptive parents, and foreign adoption agencies, they expanded in scale and influence.

**Transnational relations and exchanges**

U.S. actors played a significant role in turning Colombia into the second most popular country after South Korea for foreign adoption. While most transnational adopters did not engage in the industry after getting a child or two, a significant minority of U.S. couples saw their act of family-making as part of a greater mission to rescue orphan children. A Christian humanitarian ethos propelled the beginnings of the Korean international adoption industry following the Korean war. Bertha and Harry Holt, an Oregon couple who championed the operation to place the mixed-race “G.I.” babies of Korea with U.S. families, cultivated a sense of Christian responsibility towards the world among Americans. The Holt Adoption Program promoted adoptions as a form of missionary anti-racism that would assist the U.S’s Cold War efforts to win “the allegiance of Asia.” The image of the American family who served God and country by adopting Korean children promoted a racial ideology of colorblindness that was seemingly progressive for the 1950s.42 However, this attempt to ignore race also naturalized global white supremacy at a time when the peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America demanded

42 Oh, Arissa. *To Save the Children of Korea*. 110-111.
decolonization. Adoption advocates perpetuated conservative narratives that only under the protection of the Cold War nuclear heterosexual family, could non-white Korean “waifs” be transformed into thriving American citizens who enjoyed the post-war economic boon.

The Holts conducted extensive recruiting campaigns to find American families for mixed-race Korean orphans, taking advertisements in papers across the country and encouraging parents who adopted through their agency to spread the word to friends, family, and neighbors. The budding Korean adoption industry acquired its own inertia that extended beyond the post-war crisis. Domestic adoptions in the U.S. were tightly regulated by professional social workers who emphasized placing children according to race and other physical attributes to create “as-if-begotten” families. Additionally, the social revolution of the 1960s contributed to a decreasing supply of healthy white infants. Legal abortion, the birth-control pill and lessening stigma around illegitimacy and single mothers raising children compounded with the slow-moving bureaucracy to create a “baby drought” by the 1970s. Prospective adoptive parents turned to foreign sources of children in greater numbers, introducing powerful demand-driven motivations for the Holts and other agencies to expand operations to other countries, lobby legislators to create a favorable regulatory system, and facilitate quick, cheap, and easy adoption processes for their clients. Adoptive parents downplayed their role as “consumers” of adoption services, but the commodification of Asian and Latin American children would become harder to ignore as the industry matured.

While the Holts based their adoption operations out of Oregon, several factors converged to make Minnesota a nexus of transnational/racial adoption within the U.S. Minnesota was

43 Oh, 152.
44 Oh, 156.
45 Oh, 165-171.
overwhelmingly white compared to other states and never passed common racist legislation like anti-miscegenation laws. The racially homogenous Scandinavian and German Lutheran immigrant communities were strong in Minnesota. They favored progressive politics of “activist government and innovative social welfare programs.” Lutheran Social Services and Children’s Home Society were two agencies that developed and promoted Korean adoption programs as Minnesotan whites faced a shortage of healthy white infants domestically. Minnesotans learned of Korean adoptions informally through their social networks; a neighbor walking her new Korean daughter through the neighborhood, a brother who introduced them to their new niece. Local news coverage of Korean adoptions prompted readers to make calls and write letters to agencies and the first few adopters for information and guidance on how they could adopt. Adoptive parents, clergy, and social workers built an infrastructure for transnational/racial adoptions for Minnesota which quickly acquired a reputation as a state friendly to the practice.46

As Korean adoptions snowballed, a Lutheran Scandinavian couple from Minnesota, Jean Nelson-Erichsen and Heino R. Erichsen explored adoption in a different country—Colombia. In 1972 an old Colombian coworker, Maria Mosquera, called Jean to share that she and her husband were finally matched with a child to adopt. The Erichsens describe Maria as a “well-educated and well-traveled” woman who broke stereotypes about lazy Latin Americans. Maria Mosquera belonged to a similar social stratum as the Erichsens and saw them as her peers. The fact that a Colombian was the one to encourage them to adopt belies simplistic understandings of transnational adoption as something that sending countries passively experience. The ease with which upper class Colombians could travel to the U.S. for business or education along with their paternalistic attitudes towards the popular classes facilitated Colombia’s integration into the

global transnational adoption industry. After Jean expressed her longing for a daughter, Maria reassured her, “I’m going to Colombia in December, and I’ll find one for you.” Acting as an intermediary for a couple who knew little about the country, Maria conveyed the Erichsen’s interest in adoption to Casa de la Madre y el Niño, the prestigious Bogotá agency.

Casa matched Jean and Heino with “two-week-old dark-skinned twin girls” who had been relinquished by a young unmarried woman. The Erichsens sent a cable to Casa the next day declaring that they accepted the pairing, but the couple discovered several more necessary procedures before they could retrieve the twin including securing FBI clearances and a home study from the state. Additionally, they needed to appeal directly to Minnesota senator Hubert Humphrey for advice navigating the immigration procedures required to bring home a Latin American orphan.\(^{47}\) Colombian adoption houses already had child-placing contracts with social work agencies and Christian charities, but these mainly operated in East Coast cities like Boston, New York, and Miami.\(^ {48}\) Over the next several months the Minnesota couple underwent a crash course on meeting the bureaucratic requirements of the respective U.S. and Colombian offices of immigration and family welfare and navigating the fraught political and cultural terrain of international adoption.

Jean and Heino Erichsen published their guidebook-cum-memoir, *Gamines: How to Adopt from Latin America*, in 1981 after nearly a decade of work in promoting Latin America as an abundant site of children who U.S. families could rescue from lives of poverty. They deploy the term “gamines” capaciously to refer to all abandoned children in Colombia, ignoring—knowingly or not—the nuances about the lives of street children that Felsman illuminates.

\(^ {48}\) “Alien Adopted Children”, 48. FANA began operations in close cooperation with the Florence Crittendon League of Lowell, MA.
Whereas adoption house directors like Maria López de Escobar distinguished between innocent abandoned children and delinquent gamines, the Erichsens represented their work as a humanitarian project that could benefit any street child. The content of *Gamines* demonstrates how Jean and Heino Erichsen fashioned themselves as pioneering experts of U.S. adoption from Latin America and Colombia in particular; they claim to be the “first mid-westerners” to adopt from a licensed Colombian agency. The Erichsen’s first-person account of adopting the twins Rosana and Tatiana from *Casa* supplemented legal advice for prospective adopters, discussion of Latin American society and the causes of abandonment, and solutions for common health ailments of Latin American orphans.

To “eliminate the haphazard quality which has characterized the usual search for an adoptable orphan,” the Erichsens conducted research on Latin American adoption procedures by sending surveys to embassies and consular offices in the U.S. Through these surveys and their growing network of contacts, they produced a “Compendium” which provided prospectuses on international adoption from nearly every Latin American and Caribbean country. These data entries included summaries of adoption law, available air services to each country, and the mailing addresses of both national welfare offices and private adoption agencies.⁴⁹ In contrast to the Erichsens’ experience, readers of *Gamines* had a comprehensive resource that equipped them to begin their own adoption journeys. Jean and Heino transformed from naïve Americans relying on the generous help of a Colombian insider, to influential experts on Latin American adoption.

Because their home state of Minnesota had already become a nexus of transnational adoptions by the early 1970s, the Erichsens were able to channel their liberal humanitarianism into an established network of adoptive parents. The most influential of these was the

⁴⁹ Erichsen, 255.
Organization for a United Response (OURS), founded in 1968. Originally called “Parents of Korean and Korean-American Children,” this group formed among Lutheran Social Service client families who coordinated flights of their adopted Korean children to Minneapolis together. From these interactions of convenience and contingency, these families arranged regular potluck dinners in the mostly rural Minnesota towns where they resided. Eventually, these first families created a volunteer-led formation that provided crucial yet uncompensated pre- and post-adoptive services for Minnesotan couples adopting from Korea. By 1972 when the Erichsens flew to Colombia, OURS had ballooned to include thousands of mostly Minnesotan families who helped recruit new families for Korea’s “waiting children,” produced a magazine which was distributed nationally, and disseminated otherwise difficult to access information. Although they described themselves as an apolitical support group, OURS played an enormous role in making Korean adoption both attractive and feasible for an ever-growing number of Minnesotans.50

Despite OURS’ attachment to the Twin Cities metro area, they garnered national acclaim as the leading source of information for all transnational adoptions. Jean and Heino Erichsen promoted Colombia as a new source of readily adoptable babies through the existing information infrastructure and economy. After Heino published an article about their adoption process in OURS’ newsletter, the floodgates opened and the Erichsens received an overwhelming number of letters and phone calls. Adoption agencies and prospective adopters alike requested information on Colombian institutions and culture to ascertain its promise. Haunted by the *gaminas* of Bogotá, the couple spent hours corresponding with parents who expressed interest in

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Colombian adoption. They counseled prospective parents with the hopes of saving them “from the time-wasting procedural mistakes we had made, as well as from black marketeers.”

**Orlando Garzón, immigrant orphan adoptee**

Through the social network of adoptive parents that OURS facilitated, the Erichsens met and corresponded with another Minnesota couple, Arnold and Joyce Lindgren. Arnold Lindgren was a Lutheran reverend from the small town of Olivia, 100 miles west of the Twin Cities on the Minnesota prairie. The Lindgrens supported a large family of biological children and domestically and transnationally adopted children from South Korea and Colombia. They coordinated efforts with the Erichsens to place more Colombian children with American couples. The Lindgrens are featured in *Gamines* as par exemplar of the humanitarian impact that ordinary Americans could make by opening their homes to orphan and abandoned children. In 1976 on a visit to FANA in Bogotá to retrieve their newly adopted Colombian daughter, the Lindgrens also grew attached to another child, four-year old Orlando Garzón. At the time Orlando was living with severe visual and mobility issues for which FANA struggled to provide adequate care. Arnold and Joyce remained committed to “rescuing” Orlando from the adoption house. After returning to the U.S. the Lindgrens tried recruiting other couples to adopt Orlando, but his disabilities discouraged prospective adopters who preferred healthy infants. According to the account in *Gamines*, Arnold and Joyce decided after several months that Orlando was “destined” to join their family. But a significant legal obstacle stood in the way; the Lindgrens had already filed their allotted two I-600 adoption petitions to Immigration and Naturalization Service. These petitions were a mechanism for U.S. adoptive parents to secure immediate relative visas for foreign-born orphan children that they adopted through the sending country’s courts.

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51 Erichsen, 46.
52 Erichsen, 32-35.
Without an immediate relative visa, any third transnationally adopted child would have to “wait his turn as a ‘nonpreference applicant’” among the thousands of other people from their birth country applying to immigrate to the United States. Adoptive parents like the Lindgrens argued that while the law did not bar families from adopting more than one foreign born child, the extended waiting period threatened to leave vulnerable children like Orlando to languish unnecessarily in facilities like FANA. Additionally, the arbitrary and unreasonable restriction made adoptive parents uncomfortably aware of how contingent their adoptive kinships were on bureaucratic maneuvers outside of their direct control.  

The indeterminate status of their adopted child also marred American families with a proximity to immigrant Others that adoptive parent advocates denounced. Janemarie Major, a member of the adoptive parent organization Northern Virginia Parents of Chosen Children, testified in Congress about the impact of adoption-related immigration regulations like the cap on 1-600 petitions and waiting periods required before filing for the adoptee’s citizenship:

My 4½ year old has been adopted, been in this country for more than 3 years, and she is still not a citizen…There is always a feeling involved that you really haven’t completed the adoption, that she is really not yours, she is still under the apron of a foreign government and we never really feel that it’s over, done, she is secure, and safe until we have American citizenship, and all the paperwork is completed.  

To overcome the immigration barrier that stalled the adoption of Orlando Garzón, Arnold and Joyce, and their wide network of adoptive parent supporters lobbied Congress to pass a private bill on behalf of the Lindgrens to waive the 2-petition cap. To learn about the legislative maneuvers made on Orlando Garzón’s behalf, one must review the White House Record Office’s “Legislation Case Files” from the Ford Presidential Library which date between 1974-1976. Private bills were often requested by individuals who had issues about immigration statuses. The

customary titling of such bills used the phrase “for the relief of X” indicating that the purpose of the legislation was to answer a grievance or correct an error. In total, the “Legislation Case Files” series records the clearance procedures of 118 private immigration bills. President Ford signed them all. Some bills made one or more individuals eligible for citizenship or permanent residency, despite infractions like prior drug convictions and “moral turpitude.” Others affirmed an individual’s visa request on the grounds that they could provide urgently needed medical expertise to underserved regions like rural Montana and Mississippi.

A subcategory of 20 private bills mark instances where the petitioner requested that the U.S. government waive the provision of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) which effectively limited the number of children who could be adopted to 2. It was this type of immigration relief that Arnold and Joyce Lindgren sought for Orlando Garzón. Their engagement with the bureaucracies that could grant relief is documented in the Ford library’s “Legislation Case File” series. The files present the paper trail of S. 3485, a private bill that Minnesota Senator Walter Mondale sponsored and recommended to the Senate Judiciary Committee on May 25, 1976. Several summary memos for the President and Congressional chairmen covered similar beats of the Lindgren’s and Orlando’s story. They identify Orlando Garzón—“the beneficiary of the bill”—as a four-year old Colombian child in the custody of FANA. Reportedly, Orlando’s “natural” parents could not be located. The summaries established Orlando as a medical subject in need of care for visual impairment and polio-induced paralysis; that the polio vaccine had already existed for about 25 years contributed to U.S. imagination of Colombia as an

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56 See appendix for digital scans of the original documents. It seems that only by luck these case files were digitized. Private bills for adoption matters were passed less frequently after President Ford’s administration but perhaps more of these case files exist in the Nixon and Johnson presidential libraries.
underdeveloped country that was hostile to children’s health. The Lindgrens then were described as U.S. citizens who already had four natural and five adopted children and intended to bring Orlando for medical treatment at the University of Minnesota Hospital. Each “statement of facts” presented the stakes of S. 3485 where the child’s quality of life could be greatly improved if the bill was passed. Following the Congressional reports are additional letters and affidavits from a group of interested parties that offer detailed insights into why they believed S. 3485 ought to be enacted. They attested to the good character and financial standing of the Lindgrens and presented their own interpretation of why a private bill was necessary. These letters demonstrate the type of biographical information that was considered key to making a persuasive case for the passage of private bills on the behalf of internationally adopted children.57

Adoptive parents needed to demonstrate their capacity to care for an additional child, especially one with special needs. In question was a couple’s income and assets. Both a memorandum from INS and a letter from the president of the Lindgren’s bank provide background on their financial status. While Joyce Lindgren was a “housewife,” Arnold Lindgren earned a yearly income of $13,000 from his position as pastor of Olivia’s Lutheran church. The church provided them with a home but otherwise the Lindgrens held assets valued at $15,000.58 Additionally, Arnold held a life insurance policy worth $62,000 and could look forward to a pension in retirement.59 The Lindgrens likely considered themselves and were perceived to be lower-middle class. While they enjoyed secure housing and received earnings that were just below the 1976 national median income of $15,540, they also cared for 9 dependent children.60

58 Ibid.
59 Converted to 2021 U.S. dollars, these figures equate to about $63,000, $72,000 and $300,000 respectively.
Such a large family could have raised concerns among legislators about their fiscal fitness and ability to devote attention to a child with special needs.

Gayle Tripp, a Minnesota social worker, and Joyce Lindgren sent letters to Sen. Mondale on May 18, 1976 in order to make their respective cases for the passage of S. 3485. Gayle Tripp anticipated prejudice against the family’s size, countering that, “I feel they have the physical, financial and emotional strength to successfully parent Orlondo [sic].” Tripp cited the findings of the home study that was conducted in March as evidence of Arnold and Joyce Lindgen’s “remarkable” character that was full of “warmth and love” towards their children. Joyce claimed to already have a connection with the young Orlando. The previous year they adopted Adriana (Nicole) Uribe, a young girl with visual disability from FANA. Sometime during their visit Arnold and Joyce “saw [Orlando] and held him and loved him very much.” Both parties worked to construct an image of the Lindgren home as one where the abandoned and vulnerable Orlando could be nurtured and rehabilitated. Joyce reassured Sen. Mondale that she and her husband were serious about their desire that Orlando join their household.

Nearly every letter attached to the Congressional reports asserted that if Orlando were to stay in Colombia, he would suffer greatly, or even die. Gayle Tripp alluded to this dire possibility, explaining “we do not like to think what might be Orlando’s [sic] fate if the Lindgrens cannot adopt him soon.” Joyce did not hedge her statements but declared that “Orlando will not survive if something is not done quickly.” These concerns were corroborated by the inclusion of a formal affidavit by FANA director, Mercedes Rosario de Martinez. She strengthened the perceived validity of her statement by being put under oath, perhaps by a Colombian notary officer.

61 Although the letter was signed “Rev. and Mrs. Arnold Lindgren,” Joyce revealed her authorship in the letter’s opening sentence, “my husband and I [emphasis added] want very much to adopt a handicapped 4-year-old boy from Colombia, South America.”
62 “Relief of Orlando Garzon.”
Additionally, she cited the Colombian decree that sanctioned FANA’s operations as an adoption house. Martinez stated that Colombia lacked “the equipment necessary for the treatment of this child.” FANA had struggled to pay for Orlando’s medical care since he entered the custody of the institution in March 1975 due to malnutrition and his polio-related paralysis. Martinez warned that Orlando would soon be sent to a far less compassionate institution where, “his condition, we are sure, will deteriorate.” She retained hope, however, that with specialized medical treatment in the U.S. Orlando could recover both sight and mobility and become “a useful person to society.” The three women reinforced each other and delivered a unified message to Sen. Mondale—and by extension the key powers within Congress and the Executive Branch—that the life of Orlando Garzón rested on the passage of S. 3485. Their letters and petitions demonstrated an instance of transnational cooperation between women inspired by Christian morality to frame adoption as a form of child welfare.

The passage of and debate over S. 3485 and other similar private bills on behalf of Colombian adoptees convinced Congress to facilitate kinship formation through transnational adoption. Families like the Erichsens and the Lindgrens argued that transnational adoptions were a “win-win” solutions to crises of family in the U.S. and Colombia. Falling birth rates and fewer single mothers relinquishing their babies meant that U.S. demand for adoptable foreign children grew. Beleaguered by rapid population growth and migration to the cities where much of the population lived precariously, National Front Colombia invested greater resources into child protection and promoting paternidad responsable. Proponents of transnational adoption framed it as a dual project of relieving cash-strapped Colombian institutions from the burden of supporting abandoned children while growing American families in a way that reinforced Cold War values.

63 “Relief of Orlando Garzon.”
of humanitarian action on behalf of the developing world. As demonstrated in the case of Orlando Garzón, narratives of rescue also reinforced white liberal ideals of racial tolerance/color-blindness. It was important to bolster such ideals through transnational adoption at a time when radical social movements among racialized communities exposed and demanded an end to U.S. racial, class, and gender inequalities. Beyond Orlando and the Lindgrens, persistent lobbying by U.S. adoptive parents contributed to a developing consensus among Congress that the Immigration and Nationality Act ought to be amended to lift restrictions on the creation and expansion of adoptive families. On October 5, 1978, President Jimmy Carter signed H.R. 12508, a bill that struck from the INA the language which restricted adoptive parents to two petitions for immediate relative status for foreign adopted children. Heino and Jean Erichsen credited the passage of H.R. 12508 to “thousands of U.S. families—typically with two adopted Korean children—who want to adopt a third foreign child.” By linking the “best interests” of abandoned and orphan children to rescue from poverty, adoptive parents, ICBF officials, and casas privadas directors secured the long-term future of transnational adoption.

SECTION 3: Afterlives of Corrupt and Unethical Adoption Practice

So long as conditions of underdevelopment and social inequality remained in Colombia, actors invested in transnational adoption could justify the practice. Statistical data demonstrates the durability of the Colombian transnational adoption industry into the 21st century; between 2003-2011 over 14,000 Colombian children were adopted abroad to wealthy North American

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66 Erichsen, 132.
and European countries.\textsuperscript{67} The historical development and longevity of transnational adoption was and remains premised on the perpetuation of gross inequalities of living standards both within Colombia and between the Global South and North. Transnational adoption functioned as a poverty alleviation scheme for a particular and sentimentalized population of Colombian children that did little to address the root causes of abandonment. In fact, due to the commodification of Colombian children and supply/demand driven transactions, transnational adoption creates market-based incentives for its perpetuation. The final section of this thesis will interrogate framings of Colombian transnational adoption as noble humanitarianism by discussing cases of illegal adoption practices that profited off wealthy foreigner’s demand for healthy infants. The absence of demonstrated illegality in adoptions did not guarantee sound ethics. By considering adult adoptee interventions on discourses of transnational adoption, the next section will also illustrate the severe consequences of secrecy associated with plenary adoption onto adoptee identity formation.

Parallel and illegal adoption systems

In 1981, both Colombian and U.S. readers learned about a sophisticated illegal transnational adoption scheme centered in Bogotá that gave credence to critics who denounced the industry as a respectable form of child-trafficking. The New York Times and El Tiempo both covered the exposure of a multi-layered operation involving many actors that procured adoptable children, recruited buyers along transnational networks, and obscured criminality with false documentations. This was a transnational adoption complex primarily orchestrated by a former ICBF official, Roberto Vasquez Morales.\textsuperscript{68} Because Colombia’s macroeconomic policy kept the

\textsuperscript{67} Peter Selman. \textit{Key Tables for Intercountry Adoption: Receiving States and States of Origin 2003-2012}. (2013). Newcastle University.

currency low to boost exports, the exchange rate between peso and dollar created incentives for unethical practices that flouted ICBF regulations. Foreign demand for faster adoption “transactions” ensured that Roberto Vasquez Morales had a steady stream of clients. “The lawyer prefers to give a child to a European couple who is willing to spend $10,000 rather than to a Colombian who offers much less and pays in pesos,” said then ICBF director Juan Jacobo Muñoz. The language of the article primes readers to think of this criminal activity as part of an intricate machine. It is said that key officials of the ICBF “suministraban bebés” which described the procurement or supply of adoptable Colombian children. The article highlighted the role of blank birth certificates signed by doctors as evidence of the “perfection of the organization's “mechanisms.” Within a decade of forming, the Colombian adoption system already produced a machine-like structure that incentivized illicit adoption profiteering.

Notaries helped produce the documentation necessary to move a child who was unethically made adoptable along the official juridical channels of transnational adoption. In the El Tiempo article, one notary defends himself and other implicated notaries by characterizing them as beleaguered bureaucrats who have “gigantic volumes” of papers to review and sign. He argued that bad actors took advantage of the notaries’ “good faith.” Although these public officials may not have knowingly facilitated illegal foreign adoptions, their failure to detect and prevent fraud casts doubt on the legitimacy of thousands of other adoptions in the 1970s. The operation organized by Vasquez Morales, a middle-class professional who worked for the ICBF, upended the moralistic binary the Erichsens created between black-market and ethical transnational adoptions. An individual tasked to protect the “best interests” of Colombian

children used his position and contacts to orchestrate a parallel adoption circuit that depended on the cooperation of other supposedly respectable actors. Allegedly three civil juvenile judges in cahoots with Vasquez Morales moved his adoption proceedings with “dizzying speed.” Two receptionists at the ICBF are also identified as key suppliers of “human commodity.” *El Tiempo’s* language attempted to mark these “bad actors” as criminal and immoral to separate them from the upper social strata they occupied.

The *New York Times* article moved to absolve the wealthy European couples who paid $10,000 to $15,000 per child from any responsibility, citing an investigation which concluded these couples were unaware how the children were made adoptable. The article explained that Colombian authorities and diplomats “believe there is almost no chance any attempt will be made to repatriate youngsters already abroad.”

One can infer that such an effort would upset powerful interests invested not only in the illegal scheme, but all Global North adopters who wanted birth families to stay out of the picture. Even if Colombian officials fervently pursued a reversal of these adoptions, the couples’ home countries would likely side with their own citizens, citing their legal parental rights. As a political technology of transnational adoption, plenary adoption forged new and irreversible kinship relations that were contingent on complete natal alienation between a Colombian child and their birth family. That dramatic intervention, facilitated by multiple state and non-governmental institutions, was a central component of all transnational adoptions whether legally sound or fraudulent.

**Cracks in adoption “common sense”**

In the span of a decade, Colombia was integrated into the global transnational adoption complex with support and participation from broad sectors of the upper and middle classes.

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including urban socialites, lawyers, and bureaucrats. The Cold War backdrop of fervent anti-communism combined with substantial financial dependency fomented pro-American sentiments among many of these same groups. The transnational adoption industry followed the well-trodden paths of the finance capital, military arms and agricultural products between the United States and Colombia. Colombian agents of adoption believed the U.S. had much more wealth and economic vitality than their own country—many had first-hand impressions when they studied in the U.S. Adoption officials subscribed to a “common sense” that life in the U.S. was preferable for orphaned or impoverished Colombian children. This formulation of a child’s “best interest” valued social mobility and material comfort over “preservation of the family, the rights of birth parents and children’s rights to a name, nationality, and culture.”

Jean and Heino Erichsens’ adoption guidebook *Gamines* offered adoptive parent perspective on how transnational adoption was understood and experienced by Colombians from all social classes. After flying to Bogotá, their unofficial ambassador Maria Mosquera set them up to stay with a wealthy couple--Alberto and Claudia Gomez--while they finalized the adoption of Rosana and Tatiana. The Erichsens felt comfortable with this Colombian/British couple whose home resembled “middle income apartments in Minneapolis.” That the Gomezes employed several young women as domestic servants further demonstrated their high social status. One of their employees, 18-year old Luci, insisted on accompanying the Erichsens to *Casa de la Madre y el Niño*. Squished together in the back of mini-bus, Luci showed them a picture of her baby, Roberto, who was adopted by a Swedish couple a month earlier. Taking on the role of paternalistic patron, the Gomezes had paid for their employee’s medical expenses throughout the pregnancy. The day after she gave birth however, Claudia arranged for Luci to relinquish

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71 Cheney, 257.
Roberto to Casa. Because of Luci’s vulnerable state post-pregnancy and her dependency on the Gomezes to make a living, she made her “decision” not out of a selfless desire for Roberto to have a “better life” but under conditions coercion and economic precarity. When the mini-bus arrived at Casa, Luci pressed the staff for any news or photos of Roberto from the Swedish couple. A secretary patronizingly explained, “I’m sorry, Luci, like so many other adopters, they think they are too busy to write, but I know they are taking good care of Roberto. Our directress said they were the nicest Swedes she had ever met.” When the Erichsens returned to the Gomez household with their twin girls, Luci could not hide the profound grief she had from losing Roberto. The Erichsens write that she “refused to babysit or help with our children… old resentments flared up between Claudia and Luci.”72 The situation grew so tense that they asked Maria to find them new hosts for the rest of their stay in Bogotá.

That the Erichsens described interactions in their book indicates they did not hold a totally naïve and sentimentalized understanding of how Colombian children were made adoptable. Still, they positioned themselves as outside observers who were above the fray of Colombian social inequalities and conflict. From their perspective, transnational adoption was a mechanism for concerned Global North individuals to rescue innocents from a dysfunctional society. They put the burden of responsibility for abandoned children and gamines on Colombians, obscuring how foreign demand for children incentivized the state to offload said responsibility to “humanitarian” U.S. citizens.73 Only when Latin American “nations, as well as individuals, begin to care about hopeless, hungry, and ragged children, there will be hope for abandoned children—from the Rio Grande to the Tierra del Fuego.”74

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73 Cheney, 255.
74 Erichsen, 61.
Some Colombians criticized the ICBF and adoption houses for systematically placing Colombian children with wealthy foreigners. For example, not all contributors to *El Tiempo* agreed with the de-facto preferential preference to place Colombian children with foreign parents. A 1976 piece by regular columnist and psychiatrist Jose Francisco Socarras disagreed with critics who claimed that a recent presidential decree mandating the presence of foreign adoptive parents in Colombia would be detrimental to the placement of children in “good homes.” Socarras was a nationally renowned scientist who, under the Liberal Republic in the 1930s, helped modernize the higher education system and establish the *Escuela Normal Superior* system to train future educators. His voice carried weight among *El Tiempo*’s readers when he criticized the government’s policies for adoption.

Socarras anchored his argument on the ICBF director’s invocation of “difficult to place children” to defend proxy adoptions, or adoptions which allowed U.S. citizens to adopt in Colombian courts through a designated proxy agent. Proxy adoptions were a convenient tool for adoptive parents who could not afford to travel or preferred not to bother with a month-long stay in a country they may have viewed as dangerous and dirty. The ICBF worried fewer families would adopt if they had to make the trek to Colombia, thus “endangering” the future of “hard to place” older and disabled children. Knowingly or not, the director exposed a crack in transnational adoption “common sense” that a child’s “best interest” was the primary factor in decision-making. The ICBF dealt with adoptive parents as if they were clients they needed to satisfy. In other words, the placement of Colombia’s waiting children in “loving” families was conditional upon the positive customer experience of North American and European couples.

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75 Jose Francisco Socarras, “*Sobre la adopción.*” *El Tiempo*. February 18, 1976.
76 Because of its ease and convenience, Harry Holt made proxy adoption a key selling point in recruiting more adoptive parents for Korean children during the 1950s.
Socarras questioned the morality of “dumping those innocent victims of irresponsible parents, poverty, and the moral incapacity of the community” in the hands of foreigners. He framed the explosive growth of transnational adoption as an indictment of Colombia’s values and compassion toward vulnerable members of society. Proxy adoptions, which upheld the adoptive parent’s comfort over the child’s rights, contributed to what Socarras called “the massive export of children whose fates we ignore.” He recounted a specific case where about 50 Afro-Colombian children from the Pacific Coast region were taken out of the country for adoption by an unscrupulous private organization. Socarras explained that ICBF directors declined to comment when he requested further explanation. Given Colombia’s long history of anti-Blackness and commodity extraction from the Pacific Coast, it is unsurprising that the ICBF either had no knowledge of this story or was aware of impropriety and hoped it didn’t catch the media’s attention.

**Digital adoptee communities and organizing**

In her research with adult Colombian adoptees, Susan Branco used a biomedical ethics framework to evaluate transnational adoptions from the 1970s through the 1980s. Branco described an ethical transnational adoption practice guided by principles of autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence, and justice. Ideally, transnational adoption practice would ensure that birth parents, adoptees, and adoptive parents can make meaningful choices, helping others would be prioritized over inflicting harm, and that risks, benefits and costs to each party are distributed equitably. 77 Branco conducted her case study on the Colombian adoption industry by interviewing adoptees who all moved through one private adoption house. The participants described how they learned about discrepancies in their adoption records by comparing

documents with other Colombian adoptees. Forged birth mother signatures on relinquishment
documents, suspiciously similar pre-adoptive narratives among unrelated children, and opaque
answers from adoption house when asked for further documentation (“your papers were burned,
we can’t locate them”) signaled that their adoptions were unethical or even criminal.

Branco corroborated these adoptee narratives of birth family searches with journalistic
reporting from that time period, including the articles discussed above. She concluded that
“evidence suggests that the Colombian adoption system operated under circumstances and belief
that enabled corrupt and unethical adoption practices.” The consequences of the rampant secrecy
and falsification of the 1970s and 1980s cannot be dismissed as a regrettable but since reformed
period of Colombian transnational adoptions. The now middle-aged Colombian adoptees
continue to struggle with healthy identity development, significant material and emotional costs
associated with often unsuccessful birth family searches, and estranged relations with adoptive
family.78

Branco, a licensed professional counselor, is one of many Colombian adoptees who
contribute to a growing body of cultural and knowledge productions that question the formative
logics of the Colombian adoption system and propose counternarratives to understand their pasts,
presents, and futures. In the roughly 30 years since the oldest generation of Colombian adoptees
came of age, digital mediums for communication and expression have proliferated. A Facebook
group founded in 2009 by and for Colombian adoptees now has over 2,000 members and
functions as an information and social hub.79 By discussing news articles about Colombian
affairs, sharing favorite dishes from the country, and organizing in-person meet ups, adoptees

78 Branco, 40-45.
79 “Adopted From Colombia!” is a private group on Facebook that centers adoptees but is open to other members of
the “adoption triad” including adoptive parents, and birth family. The triad model does not include children of
adoptees, however. I hope that more spaces and events that intentionally include us are organized.
forge social relations based on a degree of mutual understanding that often are absent from their lives. Adoptees who are pursuing reunion with birth family frequently seek advice and support including how to make formal requests for adoption records from the ICBF.\(^8\)

One poignant genre of posts are short testimonials where adoptees share everything they know about the circumstances of their adoption in the hopes that someone somewhere will recognize them. Adoptees often write these in Spanish (busco a mi madre...), hoping for engagement from people in Colombia. In one sense the testimonials are messages in a bottle tossed into a sea of unpredictable internet connections—perhaps one’s birth mother is also searching and checking the Facebook groups for signs. The posts resemble missing persons flyers circulated at the community bulletin board, but they are authored by the missing person themself. The language of adoptee search posts—especially for those adopted in the 1970s and 1980s—reflect the uncertainty and doubt that adoptees hold about essential facets of their life histories including birthdays and the cédula numbers of their birth mothers which were often falsified by adoption houses.

In the comments, adoptees offer insights on the bureaucratic practices of adoption houses and suggest other means of pursuing reunion like hiring Colombian private investigators and conducting DNA testing. 40 years ago, Colombian officials admitted they were unwilling or uninterested in pursuing justice for birth families and adoptees who were essentially trafficked to North America and Western Europe. Since then, adoptees have organized together and have grown a vibrant information ecosystem that empowers adoptees with the resources and tools needed to not only pursue birth family reunion but also attend to deep psychic fractures and

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trauma over their adoptions. Adoptee-led initiatives for reunion with birth family are essential to rolling back decades of clandestine adoption practices designed to preserve adoptive parents’ innocence and naivete.

The breadth and diversity of Colombian adoptee organizing and cultural work warrants a thesis of its own. Marissa Bruno, a journalism student, produced an investigative documentary that aimed to “reveal the world of adoption in an often-misunderstood country.” Filming secretly at times, she interviewed staff at FANA where she had stayed before being adopted by a U.S. couple. Marissa also facilitated interviews with two women staying at Hogar Margarita, FANA’s facility for expectant and new mothers who receive room, board, and counseling through the pre- and post-adoption process. One mother speaks frankly about her decision to relinquish her child to FANA, “I don’t have a lot of possibilities to make sure he is well off… I don’t have any money. I have emotional problems. I don’t believe I can raise him.” Another mother explained that she would tell her child, “the decision wasn’t based on hatred or any kind of bad emotion. It was all based on love.” Marissa’s documentary was published on YouTube and has received over 10,000 views. Like a homing beacon, the video attracted comments from numerous adoptees and adoptive parents who have expressed a mix of positive and negative sentiments towards Colombian transnational adoption. Marissa expresses her disappointment in not meeting her birth mother but concludes that “I actually did get to meet her—through the other birth mothers.” Although the documentary reinforced idealistic understandings of adoption as fundamentally about child rescue, it serves as rare representation of Colombian

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82 For example, adoptees who met through a Facebook Group came together to share their stories in Decoding Our Origins: The Lived Experiences of Colombian Adoptees, the first published anthology of Colombian adoptee narratives. All profits from sale of the book go toward financing DNA kits for birth mothers and adoptees who are seeking reunion.
mothers’ voices that have thoroughly been excised from and pathologized in dominant narratives about transnational adoption.

Conclusion

This thesis is a project of clarifying the histories that shaped the “as-if-begotten” kinships of Colombian adoptees and their U.S. adoptive parents. It is important to analyze the origins of transnational adoption during Colombia’s National Front period because it offers the chance to learn about the consequences of elite contempt for the most vulnerable Colombians. For a birth mother to make the “choice” to surrender her child to an adoption house or abandon them outright indicates a serious level of dysfunction in that society. Studying adoption is one window into the subaltern lives of the poor women who lived in Colombia’s growing urban centers. Transnational adoption was a “solution” to Colombia’s social ills that did little to address the root causes of women’s precarity and reproduced itself out of adoption official’s conviction that children would be better off living abroad in the Global North. As demonstrated in this thesis, the historical development of Colombia’s transnational adoption industry was not inevitable nor was it imposed upon Colombia by greedy adoption agencies without Colombian collaboration. The lives of the tens of thousands of Colombian children adopted by foreigners cannot and should not be isolated from or made exceptional within the context of Colombian 20th century. Unfortunately, the mechanisms of plenary adoption and assimilation into white American families alienate adoptees from Colombia and make attempts to reconnect difficult.

Daniel ElAwar, a Lebanese adoptee who had a radicalizing experience upon returning to his home country, proposes that adoptees take a decolonizing approach towards making sense of their adoptions. Taking a note from Frantz Fanon’s Wretched of the Earth, ElAwar compares the transnational/racial adoptee’s experience to the “native intellectual [who] identifies with his
colonizers.” ElAwar highlights the following passage from Fanon: “Like adopted children who only stop investigating the new family framework at the moment when a minimum nucleus of security crystallizes in their psyche, the native intellectual will try to make European culture his own.” To truly resolve the psychic fractures and imprint of loss that transnational adoption leaves on adoptees, ElAwar argues that they must “break down the learned barriers of class distinction that would otherwise separate her from her likely forebears.” He concludes:

I call on all of us [adoptees] to re-examine our place and our role not just in our acculturating space, but in the local lands of our birth and by extension those of our adoptive/immigrant ancestries, whether we return there physically or virtually. We need actively study them for their resistant and revolutionary potential, as well as alternative modes and methods to our current ways of living, working, and being. In so shifting our outlook—in negating our invalid nationality as Fanon would have it—we move toward a corrective re-localization, a connection to the commons, and a décroissance: a de-escalation, a great winding down.84

I cannot pretend to speak for those directly impacted by adoption and other systems of family regulation. But issues of identity formation and cultural alienation don’t end at the adoptee. I have inherited a lot of the same challenges that my mom experienced and continues to grapple with. I hope one day to return to Cali with her and my sister to not only reclaim what we lost, but to help build a world anew where transnational adoption is dismantled for good.

A Note to the Reader

If you still have questions about this history, so do I! I hope that this thesis can be a resource to Colombian adoptees who are trying to make sense of how their personal histories fit into a bigger story. At the end of my references, I included a selection of other sources on Colombian and Latin American adoptions that I did not directly use in this thesis but encourage others to check out. I invite anyone who would like to know more about my sources and research methods (or just to chat with someone else doing this work!) to reach out.

You can email me at collinemler20@gmail.com.
A letter, with attached memorandum, dated June 20, 1976 to the Chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee from the Commissioner of Immigration and Naturalization with reference to the bill as follows:

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE,
IMMIGRATION AND NATURALIZATION SERVICE,
Washington, D.C., June 20, 1976.

HON. JAMES O. EASTLAND,
Chairman, Committee on the Judiciary,
U.S. Senate, Washington, D.C.

Dear Mr. Chairman: In response to your request for a report relative to the bill (S. 3485) for the relief of Orlando Garzon, there is attached a memorandum of information concerning the beneficiary. The bill would provide that the beneficiary, who is to be adopted by United States citizens, may be classified as a child and be granted immediate relative status. The bill further provides that the provision of the Immigration and Nationality Act which limits the number of petitions that may be approved for adopted children shall not be applicable in this case. The bill also provides that the natural parents or brothers or sisters of the beneficiary shall not, by virtue of such relationship, be accorded any rights, privilege or status under the Immigration and Nationality Act.

Sincerely,

L. F. Chapman, Jr., Commissioner.

MEMORANDUM OF INFORMATION FROM IMMIGRATION AND NATURALIZATION SERVICE FILE R 8 3485

Information concerning the case was obtained from Mr. and Mrs. Arnold Lindgren, the prospective adoptive parents of the beneficiary.

The beneficiary, Orlando Garzon, was born March 10, 1972 in Bogota, Colombia. His parents are unknown. He was found abandoned and is presently in the custody of the Foundation for the Adoption of Abandoned Children, Bogota, Colombia. The beneficiary is visually handicapped and suffers from post polio paralysis in both legs. The Lindgrens stated that medical help has been offered by the University of Minnesota Hospital with the advice that the possibility of success of said treatment decreases with the passage of time.

Arnold and Joyce Lindgren, who are natives and citizens of the United States, were born on July 4, 1933 and December 16, 1934, respectively. They were married on June 8, 1957, and presently reside in Olivia, Minnesota. Mr. Lindgren is the pastor of the Cross of Calvary Lutheran Church in Olivia and earns more than $13,000 per annum. Mrs. Lindgren is a housewife. Their home is provided by the church and they have other personal property valued at $15,000. They have nine children, the first four of whom were born to them. The

last five children have been adopted. They have filed two previous petitions, approved in 1973 and 1975, to accord their adopted daughters, Jim Hae Lee (Susan) and Adriana Uribe (Nicole), immediate relative status for the issuance of immigrant visas. Both of these girls are visually handicapped.

H.R. 1892 has also been introduced in the beneficiary's behalf.

Senator Walter Mondale, the author of the bill, submitted the following supporting information:

U.S. SENATE,
COMMITTEE ON LABOR AND PUBLIC WELFARE,

HON. JAMES O. EASTLAND,
Chairman, The Judiciary Committee, U.S. Senate, Washington, D.C.

Dear Mr. Chairman: Orlando Garzon is a four year old native of Colombia, South America. Orlando is blind, has had polio and has no use of his legs. His mother has abandoned him.

F.A.N.A., who is the adoptive agency in Colombia, states that according to medical releases, the child can recover his sight if he is allowed to come to the United States and receive proper medical help; and that with special therapy and braces, the child can also recover the use of his legs, but that they do not have the equipment necessary for treatment of this child in Colombia.

My constituents, Mr. and Mrs. Arnold Lindgren, have seen the child and have made arrangements for the adoption and care of Orlando. Since his condition will deteriorate if not promptly taken care of, they are most anxious to bring the child here as promptly as possible.

Rev. and Mrs. Lindgren have already adopted two other orphans and according to reports sent me, have greatly helped to restore their health and emotional stability. Their home life shows love and respect for one another and devotion and patience with the children.

Your prompt passage of S. 3485 would be greatly appreciated. Enclosed are statements and affidavits in support of the Bill.

Sincerely,

WALTER F. MONDALE.

OLIVIA, MINN., MAY 18, 1976.

HON. WALTER MONDALE,
U.S. Senate,
Washington, D.C.

Dear Senator Mondale: My husband and I want very much to adopt a handicapped 4 year old boy from Colombia, South America. His name is Orlando Garzon and he is blind and has had polio—and has no use of his legs. We have used our two 1-000 visas previously and our only hope of bringing him to the U.S. is with a private bill. On May 31st a bill on his behalf was introduced into the House by Richard Nolan. We are members of O.U.N.S., an adoptive parents group and they have informed us that it has been the experience of parents that a private bill with a companion bill passes much more quickly than one that does not have a companion bill. We beg of you to sponsor such a bill for Orlando. His medical problems are great and the doctors
in Colombia feel it is imperative that he get medical help in the States as soon as possible before his condition deteriorates any further. We began our first contacts with Nolan's office the 1st of March so close to 3 months have passed already. Orlando will not survive if something is not done quickly. We adopted a little girl from there last year and saw him and held him and we love him very much. Our papers are all ready but we must have a visa! Please help us! I'm enclosing a picture of Orlando, a letter from our social worker and all supportive papers.

Senator Humphrey did write General Chapman requesting a parole visa but it was denied at this point. We have been told that when a private bill is introduced and has definite hopes of passing that perhaps a parole visa could be again requested and would then meet the requirements for a parole visa, so he could begin treatment quickly. His physical health is in such a state that it is of the utmost importance.

As OURS parents we want to thank you also for the companion bill you introduced for Ralph Robert of St. Paul, Minnesota. We know it meant a great deal to them. God bless you for any help you can give us.

Sincerely,  
REV. AND MRS. ARNOLD LINDGREN.

Kawana County Family Service and Welfare Department
Oleiva, Minn., May 16, 1976.

HON. WALTER MONDALE,  
The U.S. Senate, Washington, D.C.

DEAR SENATOR MONDALE: We are hoping to introduce a private bill to the U.S. Senate to gain permission for Orlando Garzon to travel to the USA to be adopted by the Arnold Lindgren family. We are in hopes your staff will consider sponsoring a companion bill in the Senate. Representative Richard Nolan has introduced a bill to the House recently.

The Lindgren's home study and update were accepted and approved at the March 16, 1976 board meeting. I have found them to be remarkable people with a lot of warmth and love to share with their children. They have helped their multi-racial, multi-handicapped family make a good adjustment to our rural community. Although they are a family of nine already, I feel they have the physical, financial, and emotional strength to successfully parent Orlando.

Orlando was born March 19, 1972 and was later abandoned by his parents. Orlando has sight, problems as well as some post polio paralysis in his legs. He receives no medical attention for the problems. If his adoption and immigration to the United States can be achieved, surgery may restore part of his sight and therapy may make it possible for him to walk. Sadly, he receives only custodial care at present. This is not the best and longest the wait, he has to endure. This is further compounded by the Colombian government feeling that handicapped children should be allowed to die because their country lacks the facilities and programs to help them.

Quite frankly, we do not like to think what might be Orlando's fate if the Lindgrens cannot adopt him soon.

Sincerely,  
REV. and MRS. ARNOLD LINDGREN.

The Lindgrens have already used both of their I-600's in adopting their other Colombian child and a child from Korea. Orlando would have to wait for possibly years before his name came to the top of a non-preference visa waiting list. Therefore, he needs a parole visa in order that he may soon join his adoptive family and receive the nurturing possible only in a loving family and the medical care he needs so very much.

We urge you to help Orlando and the Lindgrens become a family by making a parole visa available to Orlando.

Sincerely,  
GAYLE THIBY, Case Worker.

THE CITIZENS STATE BANK
Oleiva, Minn., March 17, 1976.

To Whom It May Concern:

GENTLEMEN: This letter will serve to confirm and substantiate the fact that Rev. Lindgren is honest, reliable and worthy of our every consideration.

His Financial Statement which we have on file indicates a Net Worth in excess of $15,0000.00; an annual salary of $11,000.00 from his church and life insurance totalling some $85,000.00. He also has a pension benefit which will be due him in the future.

Your dealings with Rev. Lindgren have proved to be mutually beneficial and I feel sure you will have the same experience.

Very truly yours,

G. JEROME KIRCHNER PRESIDENT.

ORGANIZATION FOR A UNITED RESPONSE,
April 12, 1976.

To Whom It May Concern:

As an adoptive parent group numbering over 5,000 families, we occasionally have among us a particularly outstanding family, one who has the strength both physically and emotionally to love and care for several children.

The outstanding family in OURS is Reverend and Mrs. Arnold Lindgren of Olivia, Minnesota. They have several biological children and adoptive children from the United States. They also have two foreign-born children with very special needs, and they are seeking to adopt Orlando, a small boy in Colombia, South America, who desperately needs a loving home and parents who can accept his limitations and help him.

Because the Lindgrens have already used both of their I-600's in adopting their other Colombian child and a child from Korea, Orlando would have to wait for possibly years before his name came to the top of a non-preference visa waiting list. Therefore, he needs a parole visa in order that he may soon join his adoptive family and receive the nurturing possible only in a loving family, and the medical care he needs so very much.

We urge you to help Orlando and the Lindgrens become a family by making a parole visa available to Orlando.

Sincerely,  
BETTY KRAMER, President.

FOUNDATION FOR THE ADOPTION OF ABANDONED CHILDREN,
Bogota, Colombia, February 1, 1972.

To Whom It May Concern:

Mercedes Rosario de Martinez, being duly sworn, deposes and says: That she is over the age of 21 and resides in Bogota, Colombia; That

Sincerely,

MERCEDES ROSARIO DE MARTINEZ,
Legal Representative.

The committee, after consideration of all the facts in the case, is of the opinion that the bill (S. 3485) should be enacted.

Very truly yours,

MERCEDES ROSARIO DE MARTINEZ,
Legal Representative.
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