Race is a 15th century invention, born of a marriage between European imperialism and white-supremacist pseudo-science, meant to explain the reasons for phenotypic differences found among humans in disparate parts of the planet Earth. Race survives and thrives in places where people of various nationalities meet because one or more of the persons involved in the encounter have been exposed to racial thinking beforehand. Racial thinking may be found at national borders, in neighborhoods and their boundaries, in schools, in policies shaping border/immigration, housing, and schooling processes, and in workplaces and places of worship. Race and racial thinking also rear their hydra-like heads in family formation practice and policy, including practices and policies related to adoption.

Childless couples, fully-formed families with room for more, and singles (mainly female) wishing to parent turn increasingly to adoption. Racialized politics brings up questions like these: If black children are ‘hard to place,’ what can be done to increase their rates of placement, and are any of these options inappropriate or unethical? Is it useful or even ethical to promote ‘colorblindness’ as a policy or parenting strategy? Under what conditions should a child ever be removed from his or her birth family? And is it right or ethical to deem someone inappropriate to parent a removed child because their race differs from that of the child? After the adoption takes place, how important is it to nurture some presupposed culture that is presumed to go hand-in-hand with a child’s birthplace or customs of an imagined family of origin? How much should outsiders care about and interfere with personal decisions made by individuals about what their family will ultimately look like, and the route they take to get it to look that way? And, last, how much of all of this has to do with race?1
What race is, and what race is not

For over ten decades, the best science has assured us that there is no biological or genetic basis for the persistent belief that there are subspecies of the human race; the relevant facts are now widely known, even if not universally acknowledged. Neither the shape of one's skull, the length or breadth of one's nose, the texture of one's hair, nor the pigment of one's skin can determine one's race; nor can these be related to particular cultural traits. (Said another way, one's 'race' neither provides nor proves one's ability to play musical instruments or basketball or hockey, facility with mathematics or martial arts or makeup, or propensity to steal, fornicate, or lie.) Races do not exist in any real form, other than to distinguish among human beings by linking culture with phenotype in order to create a systematic and stratified scale of human deservedness.

The unequal treatment of human beings persists despite repeated scholarly and scientific proofs about the falsity of racial difference. In attempting to explain the persistence of beliefs in racial difference where biological and genetic scientists have found none, social scientists have developed a body of scientific inquiry focused on the ways race is socially constructed. This social constructionist school, if it can be called that, codifies research on the creation and maintenance of racial categories and racial hierarchies, and develops theories or traces histories that will teach us about the persistence of racial privilege and deprivation.

Race (the system) and racism (the practices that cause racially stratified privilege and deprivation) persist because we create and recreate them every day in our interactions with one another. Most people in the more economically developed ‘Western’ world wrongly think that race hovers up somewhere at the ‘societal level’ or somewhere else in the stratosphere, far away from where we live, eat, love, and make decisions. We like to think that race is something we inherited from previous generations but did not create and certainly have no part in maintaining.

While there is a truth to the idea that the existence of race (the concept) and racism (beliefs and actions) preceded the births of all who read this text, it does not follow that we have no role in perpetuating racial systems. Racism and racial ideology do not persist because we all slavishly follow racial rules dictated to us. Nor can we believe the ‘race problem’ is solved because humans have seen brief periods of social upheaval marked by World War II, the US Civil Rights Movement, or the end of South African apartheid. These upheavals are only varyingly effective in changing the rules of race. The reality is that we are born into social systems that stratify people by race, and we, by our own actions (sometimes knowingly, sometime not), keep racial ideology alive.

Race – that 500-year old fiction we use to keep up divisions among humans where none existed before – lives on because we reshape its properties and