

# Introduction



On 8 April 2022, I received an email from a member of the Child Welfare Parent Organizers group of New York, addressed to the whole mailing list. It reported the news that the New York State Bar Association found, with their last report, the child welfare system to be “replete with racism,” identifying the necessity to push for reform “to prevent the breakup of Black families” (Andrus 2022). Even if ten years had passed since I last participated in one of their meetings, it seemed like the main topic of our discussions was still prevalent.

This book investigates racial and social inequalities in the New York child welfare system, retracing through the ethnography I conducted from 2011 to 2013 how they are reproduced, measured, represented, regulated, and contested between families and professionals in the child welfare system in New York City.<sup>1</sup> In so doing, it analyzes the concurrent factors that make the child welfare system an important context for the reproduction and strengthening of inequalities, how these are embedded and interlocked within professional practices and institutional action, and which forms of dissent they generate about and within the system. The child welfare system—the institutional apparatus responsible for the protection of minors and for administering rehabilitation to parents before returning children to their full custody—has rarely been explored in anthropology, but it is a crucial arena for examining how race, gender, and class intersect, and shows how families are treated by child welfare professionals when they don’t comply with “correct citizenship.”<sup>2</sup>

The intention for conducting this research dates back to 2010, when I moved to New York for six months with the goal of doing an internship at an organization that aimed to fight against racial discrimination. The ethnography I had previously conducted in Italy on housing policies for Roma groups had brought me closer to the issue of racism, and I intended to explore how this was defined and confronted in a completely different national context like the United States. Move-

ments for racial and social justice in the United States had and have visibility all over the world, and a crucial role in defining global anti-racist struggles and agendas. Scrolling through a list of activist and nonprofit associations on a website dedicated to social initiatives, my attention was immediately captured by one that focused on “structural racism.” I contacted them and they invited me to attend one of their meetings. This was my first step on the path that would lead to, eventually, writing this book. When I first attended their meeting, an almost completely new way of codifying and talking about race, racialization, and racism opened before me. My initial difficulty in thinking through these new categorizations seemed confusing enough to consider it an anthropologically advantageous starting point for further exploration. The organization was mainly made up of people working in the public sector, and one of the areas in which they were most active was through the child welfare system because of its over-representation of Black children in the system.

As the rich North American scholarly output in the subfield of critical urban anthropology demonstrates, issues related to the reconfiguration of the panorama of inequality in US cities has long been present in anthropological reflections (Brash 2011; Mollenkopf and Castells 1991; Mullings 1987; Morgen and Maskovsky 2003; Susser 1996). It has therefore become increasingly important to examine not only the dynamics of socioeconomic stratification in urban centers but also how citizenship has become a more fragmented concept, with sets of rights and practices in which population groups are treated differently by the legal and administrative framework (Ong et al. 1996) and the multiplication of citizenship practices in the global city (Sassen 2005). The shift from an “isomorphic” idea of citizenship (Çağlar 2016) to one accounting for its unstable and contested terrain could indeed be more fruitful in showing how inequalities are reproduced in cities and how the gaps between apparatuses of the state and civil society are generated.

In Western countries, particularly the United States, the 2008 financial crisis exacerbated a series of social tensions, which then translated into movements criticizing global financial and economic infrastructures (such as Occupy Wall Street) or denouncing oppressive and discriminatory practices adopted by law enforcement against racialized population groups (like BLMM/M4BL).<sup>3</sup> Within this renewed geography of contestation, cities are doubly relevant. On the one hand, cities exacerbate inequalities, and on the other hand, they become the incubators for protest movements that then expand and are articulated nationwide, or even globally. This book aligns itself to the strand of research interrogating this productive tension, exploring the forms of

inequality and dissent that are generated within the child welfare system in New York City.

Although the United States is a country where some of the most important theoretical and methodological anthropological approaches were and are developed (Ortner 1984), research and contributions to North American anthropology are usually within national borders and are an almost exclusive prerogative of US-based academics. In the last twenty years, several US researchers have focused on the new ethnic, racial, and cultural reconfigurations in Europe derived from migration processes related to globalization, (post)colonialism, and the North–South divide (Cabot 2014; Cole 1997; Silverstein 2004; Ticktin 2011). However, the analysis of similar processes in the United States have usually remained within US political and urban anthropology, critical race studies, and ethnic and racial studies, while very few non-American anthropologists have engaged in long-term ethnographies in and on the United States (Dominguez and Habib 2016).

Approaching the themes of North Americanist anthropology from the slightly decentralized position as an Italian scholar, I decided to use my relative “estrangement” to the US social and political context to interrogate the historical and cultural processes manifesting through the interactions I observed between citizens and institutions in child welfare. These processes refer to the national administration and practices of the welfare state (chapter 1); the dynamics of racial formation in the United States and the debate about race and racism in public and institutional spheres (chapter 2); the way in which neoliberal policies reshaped the relationship between the impoverished and racialized population, the city, and its administrative apparatuses in the case of families served by social services (chapter 3 and 4); and the role of advocacy and community participation in the interactions between citizens and institutions (chapter 5). Throughout the book, the voices of parents, professionals, advocates, and activists intertwine in describing the system and the various ways in which it encounters the broader dynamics I just described.

The child welfare system is represented in different services and administrative sectors. These include the following:

- The Administration of Children Services (ACS) is the main public agency that coordinates services and administers procedures related to child protection and conducts investigations into alleged abuse or neglect toward a minor.
- Numerous private and nongovernmental agencies are coordinated and financed by ACS and provide the various services its

users need, from preventive services for families to those aimed at specific categories of users (children and parents with special needs, drug addiction, etc.), as well as the numerous parenting classes included in the child welfare rehabilitation program. Some of these organizations manage foster care, selecting temporary families and mediating between them, the child, and the biological parents.

- The Family Court is the court where cases of neglect and abuse are discussed, along with the services that could be needed, before evaluating the rehabilitation efforts of parents and then choosing whether to terminate parental rights.
- Advocacy- and community-based associations were created to defend and support the rights of families and assist them in navigating the child welfare system. They are distributed across the five boroughs of the city and can participate in the institutional path of child welfare in various fashions. These include the three main providers of free legal representation for parents who cannot afford a private lawyer.

These all belong to the institutional complex regulating citizenship that sociologists and anthropologists have long described (Mullings and Wali 2012; Ong 2006; Piven and Cloward 1971; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011; Susser 1996) and offer an empirical context to analyze how inequalities in the United States have been reproduced and maintained. These studies have been invaluable in identifying the historical and economic processes participating in “the realities of impoverishment” (Morgen and Maskovsky 2003: 325) and the dehumanizing and ideological discourses on the poor and on welfare recipients in the public sphere.

However, the child welfare system seems to locate itself in a different realm from that of impoverished population groups and consequentially has not been the focus of ethnographies about inequalities and poverty in US metropolises, with the exception of the book by Tina Lee, *Catching a Case*, which was published in 2016 and was also grounded in fieldwork conducted in New York.

Social services for minors and their families are addressed not only to low-income populations, as in the case of financial assistance, but to all of society. Yet this book documents how the child welfare system has always interacted with economic welfare and has always almost exclusively involved the economically disadvantaged section of society.

The child welfare system began as an antipoverty measure for minors, founded by charitable associations and private citizens. It later

transitioned into a federal apparatus and is now an extensive network of services for families and children, structured slightly differently from state to state. Simultaneously with its philanthropic genesis, the abuse and neglect of minors began to be recognized and described with specific medical and legal categories. Their full formulation appeared in the mid-1960s, becoming the reference paradigms of the child welfare system (Hacking 1991; Nelson and Knudsen 1986).

Despite the formalization and professionalization of the child welfare system now, what emerged as the most revealing aspect of my ethnographic analysis is its political dimension, as its practices are contested both inside and outside child welfare institutions. As I met the individuals and organizations involved, it became clear how critical families and communities are of the system. The widespread opinion is that the intervention of social services into a family crisis intensifies problems rather than solves them.

My interlocutors identified this problem in the authoritarian, punitive, overly rigid, and bureaucratic functioning of child welfare. Since the actions of the child welfare system are concentrated in specific areas of the city, where the population is, for the most part, non-White and low-income, the type of tension that occurs between social workers and parents is often associated with that marking the relationship between racialized communities and apparatuses of surveillance (e.g., the police, the criminal justice system, and the juvenile justice system). Therefore, an institution designed to preserve the welfare of the most vulnerable members of society—children—is perceived as hostile to families, and especially to parents. It is seen as either exploitative and oppressive or simply as dysfunctional, bureaucratic, and deaf to the real needs of families. This widespread perception, which has earned Child Protective Services (CPS) a reputation for being “baby snatchers,” often leads to a lack of commitment to the parental rehabilitation path. While this happens, their children are temporarily placed with relatives (kinship care) or strangers (foster care) until the Family Court declares that rehabilitation has been completed and the problems originally identified by the CPS solved. In my research, I observed how the many parenting rehabilitation classes are often seen as ineffective and are not incorporated because parents are forced to attend them in order to regain custody of their children and/or close a case with CPS.

Furthermore, in a child welfare system that is divided into preventive services, foster care, and rehabilitative services, and fragmented into public and private agencies, parents often have to “juggle” several commitments in order to reunite with their children. Parents feel

trapped and blamed in the child welfare system and are disempowered by the complexity and length of the bureaucratic/rehabilitative procedures to which they must conform. For these reasons, several self-help associations, including those I describe in this book, began to appear, aiming to support parents with information and emotional understanding, creating spaces to share an experience that is associated with shame and failure.

Child welfare agencies, on the other hand, are also constantly exposed to negative public opinion when a child's death caused by a family member breaks in the media. When a child's death occurs, government agencies are usually held coresponsible, and their practices and policies are questioned with accusations of being ineffective and shallow. The risk that similar tragedies could occur constantly undermine the legitimacy of child welfare institutions, which are charged with the protection of a highly moralized and abstract subject: the neglected or abused child. This dreaded possibility is one of the reasons social workers move with caution, preferring a preventive approach. One of the techniques most implemented in the last decade (2010s) is a formalized questionnaire for risk assessment aimed at reducing the chances of a case worker's misjudgment by reconstructing the family history to identify risk factors.<sup>4</sup> In doing so, however, the risk assessment reinterprets the whole family situation as potentially dangerous, even amplifying what the real risks could be, which can have a damaging effect on family cohesion (Scherz 2011).

Child welfare is one of the institutions low-income and racialized urban communities experience the most, and it—together with the penal system—heavily shapes their interaction with governance, which is judged as invasive, biased, and unfair. Child welfare can therefore be read as a good example of the technology of subjectification (Ong 2003), given its mission to regulate the most intimate aspects of social life. The ideal of nuclear family unity “does not even exist anymore,” as one of my interlocutors told me, but imposes its normativity only on a specific category of the population, which has always been portrayed in the public and institutional sphere as problematic.

The analysis of child welfare, therefore, helps understand how institutions construct and administer “social deviance” through moral ideals rooted in certain cultural, economic, and racial orders. As Black feminist scholars have convincingly argued, Black motherhood has long been denied and dispossessed in the course of US history, as Black women did not fit into patriarchal tropes of femaleness because of the de-humanizing process enacted by the Atlantic slave trade (Spillers 1987; hooks 1981).

Nevertheless, this ethnography tries to avoid an exclusive focus on social suffering and oppression, documenting the efforts to discuss and deactivate them with a focus on the network through which I navigated fieldwork, made up of groups and organizations that have an explicitly critical stance on ACS operations. With this opportunity, I explored the objectives and strategies of these organizations, as well as the degree of legitimacy they were able to build both in the institutional archipelago and among the families they aim to support. The analysis of discourses and practices they adopt to defend and support families and parents, and to differentiate themselves from other services, led me to address the images of the system and of families that they construct and circulate. These images are based on the central issues of class and racial biases in child welfare and the structural inequalities affecting the system's recipients. As a result, the organizations' strategies to transform the system are based on the decentralized, community-based management of child welfare services. In their vision, it is necessary to foster a greater awareness of the social and economic obstacles faced by families with an ACS case and to construct a safety net through local solidarity to collectively act against any form of oppression exercised by institutional apparatuses. The analysis of how these groups interpret, narrate, and reimagine social services sheds light on the dialectic between the state, social policies, and civil society. Ethnography thus becomes a tool for investigating how multiple discourses, practices, and sociopolitical entities participate in crafting the role of institutions centered on citizenship.

The peculiarity of this case study, therefore, does not lie in its analysis of the child welfare system, *per se*, but in how the inequalities expressed and reproduced in this context are grafted onto preexisting ones, and how they are understood within the professional field and the families for whom they work. If symbolic power is "the power to act on the world by acting on the representation of the world" (Bourdieu 1992: 25), then the child welfare system possesses great symbolic and material power in reinforcing a stigmatizing representation of marginalized communities as being made up of abusive and neglectful families. While these representations point to morally and ethically deviant behaviors, they strengthen the inequalities from which such communities suffer. At the same time, as we will see, its users try to weaken the system and develop counternarratives to its real intentions. Therefore, while symbolic and material violence exercised by governmental functions are widely shown and discussed in my ethnography, the volume will also show the inherent contestation that goes with it, circulated and negotiated among those subjected to institutional prescriptive

power, as well as those who translate the system's goal in their work practices—an aspect I emphasize as a potentially transformative force (Clarke 2009; Herzfeld 1992).

In my analysis, the data I treat as *emic* is related to the overrepresentation of Black families in the child welfare system compared to White families and to the debate this aspect has generated in the area of social policies.<sup>5</sup> New York represents one of the most striking cases of disproportionality. In 2011, 56 percent of children in state custody were African American (African American children make up 28.3 percent of the total child population), 28.4 percent were Latinx (32.5 percent of the total child population), and only 4.1 percent were White (26.9 percent of the total child population). These statistics partially reflect the poverty indexes of the city but do not represent a faithful reflection of them. The Latinx population, which is proportionally reflected in the child welfare pool of recipients, is classified as the poorest and this fact makes the question of racial disproportionality more complex than the directly proportional relationship between poverty and race, which is often used as an approximation of reality in public debate. What factors are involved in determining this disproportionation?

My ethnography is not equipped to provide a thorough discussion for a question with such vast implications and which would necessitate an in-depth investigation of how the afterlife of slavery, anti-Blackness, and racial capitalism interacted with social services throughout the history of the child welfare system. The discussion is also not elaborated through quantitative analysis but limits itself to the use of statistical data to contextualize the narratives of inequality that I present. This volume deals instead with the way citizenship is produced as a stratified and differentiated set of relations through the daily interactions between professionals and welfare recipients.

### **The Organization of the Ethnographic Field and the Ethical-Epistemological Positioning**

During my fieldwork, I moved between these organizations and agencies, touching on many issues. The main ethnographic sites in which I conducted participant observation were the following:

- The Brooklyn Family Court and the Bronx Family Court, where I attended hearings with lawyers working at two of the three nonprofit agencies providing free legal representation to parents



- The Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP) and advocacy association led by parents
- Parenting skills courses organized by the association
- Antiracism groups and institutional initiatives to reduce racial disproportionality
- Professional and community forums on the child welfare system

In addition to these and other less-structured contexts for participant observation, I collected fifty-two interviews from thirty informants, each lasting an average of two hours. I conducted longitudinal interviews with four specific interlocutors because of their key roles within the field of relations in which I moved. The interviews involved a fairly wide range of stakeholders: parents, parent advocates, social workers, and other professionals, activists, and policymakers.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, many informal exchanges informed the research, mainly with members of the various associations and with the many parents I met at CWOP and in court.

I attended weekly support groups for parents in a grass-roots association and monthly meetings of antiracist workgroups and racial disproportionality committees for fourteen months, conducting participant observation. I shadowed parents' attorneys in the Brooklyn Family Court and the Bronx Family Court, following the cases of twenty families. I participated in policy and community forums, initiatives, and workgroups created to reform the child welfare system, and I took part in workshops and parenting-skills classes held by two organizations, switching from more active and engaged participation to more discreet observation, depending on the context I was researching. I conducted semistructured and in-depth interviews with forty-seven people whom I encountered moving in and out of the intricate child welfare institutions. They included parents, parent advocates, social workers, policymakers, psychotherapists, family court attorneys, and racial- and social-justice activists. I conducted repeated interviews with four privileged interlocutors, selected for their key role in the system (a parent, a nonprofit director, a psychotherapist, and a parent advocate) and for the close relationship I had developed with them.

My access to the field was facilitated by my previous experience as an intern in the antiracist organization that conducted workshops with social services and institutional professionals. During that period, I encountered various social workers, activists, and parent advocates working in the child welfare system, and I became aware of its "racial disproportionality." In building on such a network, I constructed my

fieldwork around a core of interlocutors who were parents, activists, advocates, and child welfare professionals who shared a social and political commitment to reforming the system. This group of people, who knew each other for the most part, regularly participated in meetings, forums, and child welfare initiatives in which I also took part.

This network, committed to questioning the procedures and functioning of child welfare, traversed the whole system so I was able to meet, interview, and shadow the daily routine of a variety of people working and interacting with all four sections of child welfare service administration. In courtrooms and in the support group lead by parent advocates in East Harlem, I met parents involved in the system. Throughout the research period, I participated as a scholar and supporter of the various initiatives promoted to discuss inequalities in child welfare, especially those that were connected to or organized by the antiracist organization with which I interned and with whom I discussed the goals and objectives of the research on various occasions. When moving through the various sections of child welfare administration, services, and advocacy, I was constantly introducing the overall topic of my research to my interlocutors, sharing how I was working “on issues of inequalities in the child welfare system and in particular on racial disproportionality.” Being affiliated with and accessing the field through this specific network alienated some potential participants, especially case workers, who were afraid they may be criticized in my research, and who automatically placed me in a specific category of social actors in the polarized debate surrounding the child welfare system. By contrast, parents were very receptive to the topic of my research and willing to collaborate with my research and be interviewed about their own experience within the child welfare system.

Despite their enthusiasm, I often wondered while writing about the research if I was fostering a negative image of marginalized families and communities. Was my focus on racial disproportionality reinforcing rather than challenging the pathologizing and racialization of Black motherhood? Does attention to multiple perspectives and interpretations of an institutional apparatus allow the researcher to escape the pitfalls of “speaking for others” (Davis 2010)? I was by no means an “innocent bystander,” a position that is always impossible in the field as it erases the political weight of the researcher within a particular power structure (Davis 2010). As scholars are increasingly pointing out, and as efforts to decolonize anthropology and ethnography point toward (Harrison 2011; Bejarano et al. 2019), there are important questions an ethnographer must reflect on before, during, and after their fieldwork. These pertain to the ethical and political responsibil-

ity associated with producing and circulating social representations and descriptions, especially in sensitive areas in fieldwork. More recently, several scholars have highlighted the mechanism of silencing engrained in the academic structure, which decreases the public impact and engagement of anthropology, a process that passes through publishing, funding, resources, and the tenure process (Nader 2019). Questions of “who speaks for whom and about what” (Ryan-Flood and Gill 2010) are essential to disentangle the epistemological, methodological, and ethical stakes in any ethnography. In this regard, the anthropological analysis of racism has highlighted how the liberal Boasian tradition of cultural anthropology has been crucial for deconstructing and contesting biological racism; but, on the other hand, it has become race and racism “avoidant,” seeing racism as a product of ignorance and marred by the fear of indirectly reinforcing the concept of race when analyzing it as a social construct (Brodkin 2000; Harrison 1995; Mullings 2005a).<sup>7</sup> However, as Visweswaran notes, “If race is only epiphenomenal, how does it continue to ground material reality?” (Visweswaran 1996: 73). In this way, anthropology has failed to recognize the structural and institutional dimensions of racism as a force and how “race and manifestations of racism are historically contingent and shaped by many interrelated processes, including conquest and state-making” (Mullings 2005a: 673), which is a tendency that has been increasingly confronted in anthropological debate (Wade 2015; Anderson 2019).

As I approached my fieldwork, I became aware that touching on issues of racialization and racism in the child welfare system was, as the Director of an advocacy association told me, “political dynamite.” A similar remark came from a professor of anthropology I met at Columbia University, who compared these issues to a “hot stove,” something that, as a researcher, he preferred (understandably) not to touch. Despite these warnings, I kept my focus on racialization/racism in the child welfare system, as I perceived its presence as an unspeakable and unmanageable object that requires anthropological analysis “to identify the subterranean mechanisms through which racial hegemony is both perpetuated and deconstructed” (Mullings 2005a: 689). To do so, I addressed racial disproportionality as a policy-related concept, acknowledging “policy as a space of contestation where differently positioned people across different sites, albeit with different access to resources and forms of power, were all active participants” (Wright 2019: 115).

To avoid reifying race to a category and instead exercising an epistemic interrogation and ethnographic excavation of how racialization/

racism were reproduced in the child welfare system, I tried to differentiate between the object of observation and the object of study (Fernando 2014; Trouillot 1995). If my object of study departed from the data of racial disproportionality to look at structural inequalities, the object of observation was the institutional arrangement that produced it and the response professionals and targeted communities developed to confront and react to its inequalities. In other words, my attention was directed to detecting how “institutional racism characterizes a system in which policies that do not necessarily refer to race nevertheless reproduce and sometimes intensify racial disparities and hierarchies” (Bornstein 2015: 53). This feature was evident in the racial geography of the New York child welfare system where, especially in the district where I worked (East Harlem), the mothers I met were both African American and Latina, and strongly identified with the issue of racial disproportionality, redeveloping their social positioning as women of color through their experience in the child welfare system.

In line with this methodological and epistemological tension, I decided not to follow the stories of parents closely but to pay attention to their commitments and engagements with various initiatives and the resilient practices through which they questioned the functioning of the system.

During the course of the research, I thought about the ways in which my racial, gender, and class identity was projected by research participants, how I showed it in different settings, and how my presence in the field slipped into the same unequal geographies of power that pervaded the child welfare system. This could take the shape of a radical existential distance from some of the interlocutors, which had multiple dimensions and could not exclusively be referred to through race. What created a distance between myself and the mothers I interviewed, for example, was not simply race and class but also the fact that I have never had to live the culturally and materially specific ways in which impoverished and racialized people do in the United States. In addition, I have not experienced motherhood, a position of which I needed not only a rational but also an affective and intuitive understanding. Nevertheless, I had to confront my unquestioned cultural assumptions and expectations about motherhood and parenthood, inherited through my cultural upbringing, family relationships and biographical trajectory.

At the same time, throughout the various sites I traversed, I noticed that how my identity was perceived and played out in the field was not at all fixed. The fact that I was a PhD student, economically unstable, on a temporary visa, and partially estranged from the particular

“racial formation” (Omi and Winant 1994) affecting society and the self in the United States intervened in the process of negotiation entailed by the field. These factors, together with the facts that I come from a Southern European country, , and, finally, my affiliation to antiracist activist groups, structured the terms of my positionality and articulated my potential to interact with the people and worlds with which I came into contact.

My positionality in the field affected my presence (Fabian 2001) and influenced how I observed and participated in it (Haraway 1988). However, the precarious conditions structuring it partially limited the power asymmetry embedded in my “formal” identity as a young, White, educated woman, representative of an institution like academia, which—even if peripheral to many of my interlocutors everyday life—often created representations of marginalized groups and the policies addressed to them.

I noticed how these terms were not fixed anyway, of course, and depended on the relational field and the interlocutor. For example, when interviewing an African American child’s advocate, he told me that he was at first a little dubious about the interview because I introduced myself as an Italian scholar in my email, and he had had traumatic experiences of racism growing up in an Italian American neighborhood. By contrast, an African American foster mother asked me (in an informal conversation in a bar months after we met) if I considered myself White, implying that her perception of my racial identity was somehow different. Nevertheless, my positioning affected my relationship with others in the field, my capacity to read and access data, and played out in the messiness of fieldwork politics in ways I was not always conscious about. For example, I tended to have longer and more open conversations with White child welfare practitioners, who accepted my invitation to critically discuss their work in child welfare, and who let me interview them several times.

The core of my informants were the parents, activists, advocates, and child welfare professionals who shared a social and political commitment to reforming the system. This group of people, who knew each other for the most part, regularly participated in meetings, forums, and child welfare initiatives in which I also took part. I had the opportunity to meet and follow them during the research and to explore their connections, benefiting from their various networks. My access to the field gave me an insight into what commitment and activism in child welfare meant to my interlocutors, and how these were translated into practice. Reflecting on the experiences of my interlocutors and the knowledge they shared, I wanted to avoid represent-

ing child welfare as an unassailable monolith, or a sort of composite organism that swallows up the lives of families before returning them to pieces. At the same time, the decision to look at the system through the perspective of parents, and those who defend them, has shaped my ethnography, situated my research, and, consequently, affected my analysis.

In conducting fieldwork and in the writing process, I mainly represent the difficulties and challenges parents and families face to regain custody of their children and to become legitimate parents again. But what about the harm caused by these parents to their children, and its severity? Could I just believe the parents' version of the story? Could I run the risk, in a way, to justify their noncooperative attitude toward the system if social services had identified relevant family issues? Did listening to parents without collecting their children's voices put me at risk of underestimating the consequences of their behavior? Did this choice expose me to the possible silencing and manipulation of the children involved?

The possibility of also doing research with children in the system was something I immediately excluded, despite my awareness of their absolute importance. I was dissuaded from collecting their voices because I was not trained to do ethnography with children, and I did not feel suited to such a delicate task, especially when the topic was the intimate relationships already marked by conflicts, institutional intervention, and custody issues. Also, I was aware that legal issues such as supervisors' authorization to conduct interviews with minors would make my work difficult to accomplish, especially as a non-US researcher. There are clear limits in this volume as it does not directly engage with the subjects whose protection and well-being are the institutional system's aim. As children do not speak for themselves in any institutional setting and are instead mediated by figures who are juridically charged with their custody and/or to represent them (as in the case of law guardians), it would have been extremely complex to engage with them as interlocutors, not just juridically but also epistemically.

When approaching parents, I tried to be mindful of the fact that their conditions and stories needed to be handled with extreme care and with an awareness of the limits I had in confronting and relating to them.<sup>8</sup> The exasperated behaviors and psychological states I often observed in the parents showed their intense desperation and suffering, and an interview would inevitably touch their wounds. For this reason, I often preferred to give space to their voices within the support group, a setting that left them free to interact with others as they

liked and in which group participation provided a new perspective of their experience. From there, I started meeting some of them individually; and with some of these, I built relationships that went beyond the contingencies of research and accessed a more personal and intimate relational sphere.

As the intense scrutiny and judgment of their parental adequacy left them feeling undermined, I preferred not to run the risk of increasing their suffering with questions that could echo those asked during official investigations, and which would have been perceived as a reiteration of surveillance and control. Their suspicion of anyone interested in their history stemmed from the idea that the system confused legitimate educational practice and the violent abuse of children's rights. This ambiguity played on very thin boundaries and on the arbitrariness of the contingencies, such as the way the case was reported to the Central Register of Child Abuse and Maltreatment, the precise moment Child Protective Services entered the reported household, the personal inclination of the social worker on duty, or the judge's decision whether to consider the allegation reported by the ACS as a case of abuse or neglect. This produced circumspection in parents, who were always frightened by the risk of saying too much or too little. The system thus created a certain confusion between those instructed to listen and those instructed to control, similar to other contexts where social policies operate (Fassin 2011).

In this opaque, conflicted, and uncontrollable context, I preferred not to pressure the participants who did not want to relate their experiences. The parents I met were sometimes experiencing intense battles with drug addiction and mental illness, and they were always at risk of relapsing and postponing reunification with their children, or even having their parental rights terminated forever. The fragility of their condition was such that it was shaken by even the most trivial and apparently innocuous comment. Relating to parents, such as parent advocates, who had somehow overcome this critical point represented an ethnographic strategy that allowed me to mitigate the sense of intrusiveness and voyeurism intrinsic to a context of an investigation so heavily marked by social suffering and structural violence (Das, Kleinman, and Locke 1997; Farmer 2006).

The book, on the other hand, does not discuss in-depth specific individual cases but looks at the power configuration generated by the child welfare system, at the discursive environments built by the interactions between its different actors, and at the process of subjectification that its practices enact. Nevertheless, in the various chapters, the volume touches on the contradictions inhabiting the system's goal

of protecting the best interests of the child, as it can appear difficult to discern and to disentangle from a condition of social suffering affecting the whole household. The parents who speak throughout these pages, as well as the practitioners I interviewed, do not gloss over the severity of the harm caused to minors, although in the research I rarely encountered such cases. In this regard, it is crucial to point out that according to the New York State Bar Report, parents were accused of intentionally harming their children in only one-quarter of child protective cases in the United States and that the vast majority (74.9 percent in 2017) of cases lodged with Child Protective Services are for neglect rather than abuse. I hope therefore that the book, even if not directly involved in a discussion on child abuse and neglect, is capable of restoring the complex and difficult situations in which families and professionals interact (and from which most accusations of neglect take shape) and the deep ethical dilemmas they trigger.

With this volume, it is not my intention to suggest a more tolerant attitude toward child abuse or neglect, the seriousness of which I do not wish to question in any way. I would rather show how an institutional system that does not consider the local representations of its functioning (which circulates among service recipients and even professionals involved) could reproduce social, racial, and economic inequalities without effectively tackling the social problems for which it was created.<sup>9</sup>

In this book I anonymized the name of people and of organizations to protect the privacy of my interlocutors. The only organization I refer to with its real name is CWOP, but have still anonymized those who worked there at the time of my research, because of its central importance in my research. I wrote about CWOP in other occasions (Castellano, 2021) and the decision to keep its name is motivated by the fact that, as the organization doesn't exist anymore, to write about it is a way for me to acknowledge its important work in the past and its legacy for the future.

## Contests of Analysis and Recurring Themes

What I have described above is the broad epistemological framework that informed the construction of the ethnographic field. From the collected data, some recurring topics emerged, which I discuss extensively throughout the book. These topics include the construction of deviance in welfare-related working cultures, the structuring of inequalities and the dynamics generated by their intersection, the dia-



lectic between public interest and family intimacy, and the recognition of new political and professional actors in the context of welfare governance. This volume tries to depict the intersubjective, social, and historical entanglements not only of the forces structuring the relational field of the child welfare system but also of the various figures who move within it, looking at them through the framework of political subjectivity to overcome the dichotomy between structure and agency.

Focusing on the political subjectivities elaborated within the child welfare system means exploring the contrasting narratives and representations of it from which they depart. If the exploration of child welfare shows one thing, it is how the outcomes planned and expected by its protective and rehabilitative tools do not correspond to its empirical outcomes. The reactions of the people who experience its programs and procedures radically differ from those of the rational social actor imagined by social policies, highlighting instead how people's interpretations, material conditions, intentions, desires, and affections play out in the policy field. The procedures of child welfare, which are standardized for the sake of case management, do not take into account a subject's response to an event as disruptive as the removal of a child from the household, and demonstrate a form of blindness that could become deleterious and counterproductive. Moreover, the system also underestimates the role state agents can play in overlooking the discretionary ways in which individuals translate such delicate and intense work into everyday practices and relationships. Indeed, as noted by Lipsky, "Street-level bureaucrats characteristically work in jobs with conflicting and ambiguous goals" (Lipsky 2010: 59). The people who work in child welfare are never neutral and are not interchangeable parts of a harmonic mechanism, but always present as an irreducible resistance, resulting from their individuality and the forces mutually conditioning and positioning them in the social spectrum. This can be constituted by socioeconomic status, racial identity, personal biography, and political and cultural affiliations. My work aims to show, therefore, how the spurious practices and interactions inhabiting the child welfare system, and the fact its actions intervene on already precarious and deeply unequal lives, do not conform to the planning that social policies are aimed toward. In other words, this study wants to show how the everyday practices of child welfare policies generate confusion among their recipients while contributing to generating unfair outcomes and producing unstable juridical grounds. If the parents are not rehabilitated, the system fails to address its second most important task, intimately entangled to the primary one of child protection: correcting parental behavior that can be seriously dangerous for

the child. The suspicion espoused by the system of any attitude that departs from an unreal and untraceable middle-class family ideal ends up being perceived as more harmful than beneficial by the same families who are in a difficult situation.

This outcome results from the mandate of Child Protective Services, highly ambivalent and extremely complex in practice, that is eternally strained between two goals: protecting minors and preserving families. No matter what efforts policymakers put into developing rationalizations and standardizations of the decision-making process, through technocratic devices such as risk assessment, the social, racial, and class-based frames around child-welfare users matter, as well as the subjective assessments made by social workers and even more by court professionals (Scherz 2011). The tendency to divorce child protection from family preservation is indeed well documented in the child welfare system (Lee 2016), becoming more intense depending on the political climate of the time and the pressures CPS must face in the aftermath of a particularly tragic and mediatized episode of child abuse.

In addition to the formalization of risk assessment practices I have discussed, the medicalization of parents and their children is a widespread practice to reduce the degree of potential conflict to avoid the political backlash to which they can be subjected in case they fail to protect child safety. In this volume, I focus on how medical diagnosis can frame the behavior of parents as pathological and certifies the damage suffered by the child, but the topic has such profound and complex consequences that it deserves to be properly explored in a specific ethnography. The ease with which family members are diagnosed with psychiatric problems and syndromes is a fact, like that of racial disproportionality, that is omnipresent and hypervisible.

A discussion of how “deviant behavior” is constructed and addressed through clinical paradigms has long been present in anthropological literature, even in contexts similar to what I have investigated (Briggs and Mantini-Briggs 2000; Taliani 2012; Tsing 1990). Nevertheless, the critique of a biomedical approach in the field of child protection is particularly challenging because any alleged mental disorder not only affects the parent but can dramatically compromise children’s safety. I have therefore not downplayed this issue, while retracing the cultural and historical continuity of the debate on the pathological nature of African American families and the “undeserving poor” (Katz 2013) and the way it intertwines with the medicalizing discourses and practices.

The attention toward mainstream narratives and representations of Black motherhood and parenthood is crucial to fully grasp how dis-

criminary decision-making is enacted throughout the progression of a child welfare case. In this regard, Tina Lee documented how professionals can see mothers through the lens of the over-sexualized Black women stereotype and that “decision makers at all levels assume they are irresponsible and careless mothers” (Lee 2016: 133). The conflation of race, class, and gender also generates connected archetypical figures of child welfare, such as the “angry Black woman” incapable of controlling herself or the “deadbeat father,” whose “culture of violence” also extends into the family sphere. Other anthropologists who have dealt with the medical-legal system of child protection in other national contexts have likewise examined the forms of pathologization and primitivization of Black and Indigenous mothers (Briggs and Martin-Briggs 2000; Scheper-Hughes 1992; Taliani 2015, 2012).

Despite the powerful impact these stereotypes can have, and the way in which they become “ideological conductors” (Hall and al. 2017) of child welfare practices and their related social imaginaries in the public sphere, the research does not aim to emphasize exclusively the oppression they embody and enact. It also aims to account for the multiplicity of opinions and positioning present in the system as a consequence of conflicting interactions between families and professionals, using it as a case study to investigate the forms of contestation and dissent generated by policies aimed at managing the “social” (Foucault 1988). John Clarke (2004) noted that the will of governance is always an attempt to limit the horizons of meaning of a community through the imposition of certain hegemonic narratives: an attempt that never completely succeeds because of the continuous manipulation and disavowal of such narratives operated by those who are governed. Child welfare is a striking example of this dynamic, as its subjects are constantly questioning its functioning. The permeability of its hegemonic field is demonstrated by the emergence of collective subjects, such as the network of parent advocates, who fight to overcome the stigmatizing narratives and powerlessness that affect parents in the child welfare system. As Piven and Cloward (1971) highlighted, the way people experience oppression shapes their discontent against specific targets, and the child welfare system offers one of the most concrete and shocking examples of oppression because it physically separates parents from their children.

While describing the pervasive phenomena of state contestation in the case of child welfare, I nevertheless grounded the discussion in an in-depth analysis of the fundamental asymmetry between families and the institutional apparatus, and the almost total lack of negotiation and advocacy left to its subjects. I also point out how contestation that

is not collectively channeled into families' advocacy or activism can become a more dysfunctional element, especially when it generates parents' opposition to an apparatus that nevertheless has the fundamental purpose of protecting children.

### Theoretical Directions and Interpretative Keys Used

This book dialogues with the extensive literature on inequalities written by North Americanists in recent decades so to inform my analysis with the main theoretical tools and empirical research produced on the topics I discuss in my ethnography. The contributions of anthropology connected to critical race theory and in particular the scholarship of Black women who have critically examined the impact of US welfare policies on Black families and communities have been fundamental to my analysis of the field and to elaborate my fieldwork data (Bridges 2011; Cox and Davis 2012; Mullings 2005b). As an Italian scholar who was not familiar with the social, economic, and cultural contexts of US cities, I am also indebted to the literature developed from critical urban anthropology, which has provided a crucial lens to frame the social phenomena observed during my research (Brash 2011; Mollenkopf and Castells 1991; Mullings 1987; Morgen and Maskovsky 2003; Susser 1996).

This ethnography can also be seen within the anthropology of social policies and institutional ethnography (Clarke and Newman 2009; Tate 2020; DeVault 2013). In this way I follow Shore and Wright's (1997) indication to look at "policy as the guiding principles for social order, as political technologies for new categories of subjectivity and political relation, and as sites for analyzing the operation of power" (Tate 2020: 85). By focusing on how inequalities are reproduced by child welfare policies and how they are rationalized, treated, and contested within its policy field, my aim is to document the political processes in which actors, agents, concepts, and technologies interact across different sites, creating or consolidating new rationalities of governance and regimes of knowledge/power (Shore, Wright, and Però 2011).

Using the work of anthropologists such as Leith Mullings, Ida Susser, Catherine Kingfisher, Jeff Maskovsky, Sandra Morgen, and Dána Ainsworth, my work has benefited from the richness and depth of their ethnographies, in which they examine how class, race, and gender intersect in structuring the inequalities in American society. In the early stages of my research, the volume *The New Poverty Studies* (edited by Goode and Maskovsky 2001) was key to focusing some crucial socio-

economic factors when looking at urban poverty in the United States, such as the power of transnational neoliberal mechanisms and the changing dynamics of production and economic exploitation. They stress the importance of analyzing new forms of governance, which have replaced the rhetoric of rights and entitlement that come with individual autonomy and independence from public assistance (Morgen) and the investigation of the regime of invisibility that characterizes contemporary poverty (Goode; Maskovsky).

The kind of moral panic surrounding governance and policy in the child welfare system led me to engage with the vast literature based on a Foucauldian reading of biopolitical technologies to regulate citizenship: technologies that are represented in the social arena of child welfare in an emblematic way. Family regimentation, the numerous and explicit programs aimed at rehabilitation, the pervasiveness of medicalization, and the construction of moral dichotomies such as the abused child and the monster parent can all be addressed through the interpretative keys provided by the literature on how governance techniques operate for the population. Here, the contributions of scholars such as Didier Fassin, Aihwa Ong, and Susan B. Hyatt, but also Loic Wacquant, articulate a discourse capable of revealing the complexity, intersectionality, and reciprocity of the disciplining apparatuses of citizenship. These scholars describe how the hierarchy of access to resources and the construction of social representations are produced in the social realm.

While I am aware that combining these different theoretical traditions represents a challenge for the analytical rigor of my work, I am convinced that the epistemic framework should find a balance, especially in this specific ethnography. The anthropological literature on the production of inequalities provides a fundamental lens for analyzing how governance is experienced, grounding the analysis of subjectifying technologies, always defined with respect to the ethnic-racial, economic, and social variables of a given population. Without such integration, the Foucauldian approach could reproduce an abstract and partially obscure theory of governance and citizenship, with ubiquitous power relations that lack the depth necessary to reveal how they operate practically in different socioeconomic and national contexts. If governance is widespread, infiltrating, and leads to people becoming docile subjects of the state, then the way inequalities are produced is not fully comprehensible. Moreover, Foucauldian contributions cannot be applied indiscriminately to every national context, as this risks naturalizing the theoretical-methodological apparatus and presenting it as universally relevant. It is necessary to be careful using this approach for the contemporary United States, as it refers to a Eurocentric

notion of governmentality, based on the French national context of the postwar period. The construction of the US nation-state and the ideals of its citizenship differ greatly from that of the French republican model.

However, more contemporary publications on recent forms of governance can be of great help here, as they can relate local and national models of citizenship to current and globalized governance projects. An example of this interconnection is the shift in welfare administration toward a managerial perspective, where citizen-services relations are modeled on those of the consumer market, with increasing privatization and fragmentation of services (Clarke 2012), or the incorporation of a community-oriented paradigm in the administrative practices of local governance (Rose 2006), or again to a form of citizenship that is progressively defined as moral (Muehlebach 2012; Schinkel 2013). I use this literature to make sense of seemingly contradictory government demands, such as the requests to single and low-income mothers in New York City to be first and foremost workers, as the “welfare to workfare” shift implies, and, concurrently, first and foremost mothers, as the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) reform in child welfare seems to point at.<sup>10</sup>

To understand these contradictions, I argue that it is necessary to know what directionality, intentionality, and forces are articulated in—and outside of—state devices, and how these construct a context in which the subjects of the state are asked to legitimize their conduct and their choices (or lack thereof). Morgen and Maskovsky have pointed out how ethnographies that examine the relationship between changes in urban political economies and new ways of survival and politicization of poor urban groups integrate Marxist, feminist, poststructuralist, and critical race studies to investigate power relations, governance, citizenship, and inequalities (Morgen and Maskovsky 2003). My contribution aims to align itself with this analytical choice, which makes use of a theoretical framework that is fluid and heterogenous but which, for this very reason, seemed to be more flexible and versatile in communicating with the object of my research.

It is important, finally, to contextualize the specific historical moment in which this research took place. I conducted fieldwork during a complex political moment for the United States: from one side the Obama administration had sparked hopes of a progressive agenda, but at the same time Occupy Wall Street and the movement against police brutality and racial profiling contested the widespread inequalities that still marked US society. In this book, some of these tensions are made visible, as well as some of the consequences of neoliberal

governance. Since then, the situation has escalated intensely. The election of Donald Trump in 2016 covered the country with far-right populism, which, as Mullings noted, took off the gloves of the neoliberal racial project and embraced an explicitly racist and hyper-conservative agenda (Mullings, 2020). In this regard, it is interesting to point out the historical links and parallels Laura Briggs identified between child-taking policies. There is a reiteration through difference between Trump's child separation policies for asylum seekers, foster care for the children of "welfare mothers", Indian boarding schools, and the taking of children during slavery (Briggs, 2021)

On the other side, the BLMM/M4BL exploded as a new driving political force in an increasingly polarized social spectrum enhanced by the COVID-19 crisis. In this landscape, with BLMM/M4BL demonstrations, and the simultaneous renewed political visibility and legitimacy of White supremacy, some of the issues in this volume will resonate. The movement for reproductive rights and the use of an intersectionality framework in antiracism, which gained momentum recently (Briggs 2017; Zavella 2020; Collins and Bilge 2020) in the United States and further afield, also contributed to highlighting in the public sphere, as well as in academic literature, some of the topics and open questions I address in the volume. The call for defunding the police launched by BLM activists and the abolitionist agenda reverberated, though less noticeably, in the child welfare system as well (Dettlaff et al. 2020; Roberts 2021). In the final chapter and in the conclusion, I present a brief account on how the field of child welfare systems condense a series of issues marking what Ruth Wilson Gilmore has called the anti-state state and its anti-Black racial capitalism (Gilmore 2007; 2022), while the struggle for advocacy of marginalized families, caught between cooptation and dissent, documents the challenges of radically reforming oppressive institutional systems in the neoliberal racial project. Therefore, this book could be useful not only in the renewed discussion on the contribution of an anthropology of policy but also participate in a form of engaged anthropology to the contemporary debates on abolitionism as a way to reimagine the scopes and functioning of certain institutional functions. I believe this direction requires an understanding of how inequalities intersect and that an attuned research endeavor should foster an "anthropological social critic whose engagement with the world begins by treating other subjects/informants as fully embodied and affective interlocutors" (Jackson 2013: 278). This means looking at the families and parent advocates I met as "knowledge producers in their own rights" (Restrepo and Escobar 2005: 118) concerning the policies to which they are subjected (Davis 2013).

## Structure of the Book

I have organized the ethnographic material into five chapters, focusing on the different themes that emerged from my fieldwork and that share an anthropological context, units of analysis, and a broader field of research. Since this research derived from the desire to investigate the local and situated representations that different social actors build around the institutional apparatus that deals with child protection, the systematization of the ethnographic material and the theoretical discussion were carried out while trying to respect what emerged as the main lines of interpretation during fieldwork.

Despite this intention, it is necessary to provide a more historical and anthropological introduction to the evolution of welfare systems in the United States and the concept of “dependency,” which is highly relevant to the American public and academic debate on public assistance and poverty. From the second chapter onward, however, the issues that I perceived to be the most urgent from the words and attitudes of the people with whom I worked during the research are addressed in this order: the issue of racial disproportionality; the mechanisms of marginalization and the silencing of biological families; the attempts to manipulate and negotiate with the system itself; and the bottom-up forms of participation and advocacy aimed at reforming the institutional system.

In the first chapter, the discussion is organized chronologically following the representations and discourses that circulated about welfare recipients, and the moral economies of the deserving and undeserving poor. These representations and discourses about welfare administration stand in a symbiotic relationship, shaping each other and constructing specific images and ideals of families and their needs over the past two centuries (Abramovitz 2000; Gordon 1994; Skocpol 1992). Moving from feminist scholarship, which has questioned the history of public assistance for women, the chapter enters the current debate on the disappearance of specific forms of assistance, the strengthening of forms of control and surveillance, and the consequent limitations of personal freedom, especially of single, poor, and usually Black mothers (Davis 2004; Kingfisher 1996; Morgen and Maskovsky 2003; Mullings 1997; O’Connor 2001; Wacquant 2006). A section is dedicated to a brief history of the child welfare system, from its origins as religious and charitable organizations to its institutionalization at the federal and state level, describing its essential structure and its organs. The chapter argues that the debate on the underclass acts as a glue between public assistance and the child welfare system, and it focuses



on how the images and representations it produces impact the administration of welfare.

In the second chapter, I look at the issue of racial disproportionality (i.e., the overrepresentation of non-White families in the child welfare pool of recipients), interpreted by many civil rights organizations as a clear sign of structural racism. Using sector studies and statistics made available by the Administration for Children Services, I discuss the data on racial disproportionality, trying to reconstruct its genealogy in the child welfare debate and how this category became an object for policies, political claims, and activism. In doing so I present several accounts from my fieldwork in which the issue of race and racism was discussed, in both formal and informal settings, highlighting how it influenced the discourse in different ways. I use these examples to reflect on how racial disproportionality cannot be isolated by class, gender, and urban social geographies, and how much an intersectional lens can be crucial in disentangling the complex genesis of racial disproportionality and disparity.

The third chapter looks at the functioning of child welfare, describing the most apparent contradictions of the system. Drawing on my ethnographic experience, I illustrate its rigidities and counterintuitive paths and describe the consequences they have for families. For example, I illustrate the effects of the limited period planned for rehabilitation, the issues caused by the systematic medicalization of children's and adults' psychological reactions to separation, and the effects of a preventive and emergency-driven approach to the chances of having a case with ACS. My analysis focuses on the kind of commitment the system demands from parents and how the period of separation is reflected in long-term family relationships, a period often marked by conflict with social workers and sometimes foster families, impoverishment, and difficulties in adapting work rhythms to rehabilitation mandates. The final part of the chapter is an analysis of the internal labor structure of the child welfare system itself, which is also affected by the same dynamics of racialization and neo-liberalization that impacts its recipients. This analysis is then contextualized within the broader framework of different citizenship in New York, highlighting specific urban geography in which both families and caseworkers are inserted.

In the fourth chapter, I focus on the forms of resistance, negotiation, and manipulation families put into practice when confronted with the duties imposed on them by institutional agencies. In particular, I describe some of the counternarratives about the system's goals that circulate among recipients as well as social workers and policymakers. The widespread dissent circulating among recipients of the child wel-

fare system is particularly relevant to investigating how interactions between the population and state institutions become problematic, and what space such interactions create for signifying child welfare governance and the possibilities for changing it.

In the fifth chapter, I dwell on the parainstitutional realities, the archipelago of grassroots associations, communities, and advocacy projects defending the rights of families. With my research starting through this channel, it is necessary to highlight which areas of politicization they carve out and open up, their forms of organized protest, and which roles they have played in a welfare system fragmented into private contractors and increasingly inclined to delegate their tasks to the local and district-based management. In exploring the moral economies (Fassin 2009) that regulate the participation of civil society in both the provision and design of services, my main questions concern what dynamics of legitimacy are created by this space of mediation, what political and social demands it responds to, and how the different actors interpret and control a family's needs. Civil rights and social justice groups appeal for greater community participation in the needs of a family but, in doing so, they create discursive arenas and social practices that child welfare relentlessly attempts to incorporate and manage according to its priorities. This gives rise to a battle over the meaning of what community participation means, and which community figures should be eligible to act as mediators with institutions: in short, a moral and political space in which a fight takes place for primacy over the definitions of the terms that should guide public action.

In the conclusion, I retrace the evolution of my arguments, focusing on the intersection between neoliberal urban governance, racialization, and welfare institutions, while looking at possible future directions in child welfare practices.

## NOTES

1. The writing of this book was supported by FAPESP, São Paulo Research Foundation, grant n.2018/22947-3 and by the University of Bologna. The research was funded by my scholarship at the University of Bergamo (2011–14). This book represents a translated and substantially revised version of the book I published in 2018 with the Italian publishing house Junior, titled *Revolving door. I servizi per i minori e la riproduzione delle disuguaglianze a New York*.
2. In this volume I use both the terms “child welfare system” and “child welfare” to indicate the institutional apparatus made up of the government agency administering child protective services in New York (Administration of Children Services), the programs for parenting rehabilitation, the foster care agen-

- cies, and all the other public and private services that fall under the umbrella of child protection.
3. In this book I refer to the Black Lives Matter Movement and the Movement for Black Lives with the two combined acronyms BLMM/M4BL, following Barbara Ransby, “to refer to the movement as a whole encompassing both affiliated and unaffiliated forces that have emerged or gained traction post-2012, through their protests and organizing efforts against anti-Black racism, especially as it manifests in various forms of police, state, and vigilante violence” (Ransby, 2018: 4).
  4. In 2015, the Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System (CCWIS) was launched as an AI tool, fed on multiple data servers, which should guarantee an even more disembodied, exact risk assessment. The instrument has already sparked some criticism and is seen as problematic scientifically and ethically (Corrigan 2019; Hurley 2018).
  5. Particularly relevant is the parallel with the Italian context investigated by Carlotta Saletti Salza (2014), which sees the Roma population in Italy (around 0.15 percent of the total population) representing 2.6 percent of children available for adoption.
  6. With the phrase “parent advocates,” I refer to the professional figures recently introduced into child welfare, responsible for supporting parents in the rehabilitation process and defending their needs and rights in their interactions with institutions. The parent advocates I have dealt with also include former child welfare clients who have built their professional expertise on this experience.
  7. For the definition of *racism*, I use that of Leith Mullings: “Racism is a relational concept. It is a set of practices, structures, beliefs, and representations that transform certain forms of perceived differences, generally regarded as indelible and unchangeable, into inequality. It works through modes of dispossession, which have included subordination, stigmatization, exploitation, exclusion, various forms of physical violence, and sometimes genocide. Racism is maintained and perpetuated by both coercion and consent and is rationalized through paradigms of both biology and culture. It is, to varying degrees at specific temporal and spatial points, interwoven with other forms of inequality, particularly class, gender, sexuality, and nationality” (Mullings 2005a: 684).
  8. After eight months of research, a story told to the support group by a father in the presence of his child, a victim of abuse by an adult who was not there, left me morally and emotionally shaken for days, causing my temporary refusal to continue fieldwork and throwing me into a condition of doubt and consternation. Not that the other stories I had heard were less serious, but the terrified look I saw in the eyes of that little girl that morning had given a face to what remained unsaid. For a while I devoted myself to other tasks, working on my field diary and analysing interviews. After two weeks I returned to fieldwork but decided not to carry out two interviews I had previously planned, one of which was with the father of the girl I had met at CWOP.
  9. Children’s Bureau, “Child Maltreatment 2017,” U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2019. Available

from <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/research-data-technology/statistics-research/child-maltreatment>.

10. *Adoption and Safe Family Act, 1997*: an act that speeds up procedures for permanent placement of the child, reducing the time for parental rehabilitation to fifteen months. The consequences of this reform will be discussed in more detail in chapter 1.