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Odd Hospitality: Race, Kinship, and Rhetorics of Transnational Adoption

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ABSTRACT

Transnational adoption from Asia to the U.S. was institutionalized in the 1950s, when the Korean War left an estimated 100,000 Korean children orphaned or displaced. At the time, the practice was situated as a form of emergency rescue, an act of win-win humanitarianism in which average Americans could take part of rehabilitating the devastated Korean peninsula. Today, discourse explaining, justifying, and managing transnational adoption from Asia bears a surprisingly strong resemblance to that of the practice's earliest days, in which would-be adopted children in Asia and the global South are figured as abandoned or orphaned children in need of help through stranger adoption to the West. The practice is widely understood to be almost an entirely positive experience for all parties: abandoned children need parents, and parents want children. There is little critical examination in dominant public discourse of the widespread belief that transnational adoption is an uncomplicated good deed. This dissertation complicates that belief.

Odd Hospitality: Race, Kinship, and Rhetorics of Transnational Adoption critically examines dominant discourse on transnational adoption from its institutionalization in the 1950s to today, asking both how specific social, cultural, and historical conditions have shaped how Americans have talked about transnational adoption over time, and what lived realities these discursive practices create, for adoptees and non-adoptees alike, in terms of our capacities to imagine racial justice, kinship, and belonging. From continued reliance on the symbolic figure of the "waif" to the erasure of adoptees' racial difference as they are absorbed into white nuclear families as paragons of postracial optimism, transnational adoption discourse marginalizes, racializes, and objectifies Asian American and other nonwhite adoptees. This process is all the

more insidious because such adoptions are so often figured as a progressive and even radical practice.

As an examination of transnational adoption discourse as a form of durable, flexible, and adaptable symbolic violence, this dissertation provides crucial insight into discursive practices that shape racial and colonial regimes. Further, its analysis in its final chapter of adoptee-produced public discourse, in which adult Asian American adoptees deliberately engage in refusals to perform gratitude, express counternarratives, and begin to develop an alternate epistemology of adoption and transnational migration, offers a better understanding of worldbuilding in action, and points towards a way of thinking adoption in common that contributes a more just world.

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INTRODUCTION

Transnational Adoption Rhetorics and Resonances

In 2010, NPR host Scott Simon published a book called *Baby, We Were Meant for Each Other: In Praise of Adoption*, which discusses his and his wife's experiences adopting two children from China. To accompany the book's release, Simon went on a media tour that year, speaking to public radio and TV outlets about the book, his experiences, and adoption generally. Discussing the virtues of adoption in a conversation with public TV host Enrique Cerna, Simon said, "I think as powerfully as we are wired to procreate, I think we are also wired to take care of children who are abandoned, who need families and need to love, and to reach our arms down and out and to bring them into our lives. . . . It's not a trauma. It's something that's been going on for centuries, and it's a source of great joy."¹ Seven years later, professor and columnist Arthur C. Brooks wrote an opinion piece for *The New York Times* titled "Let's Restart the Adoption Movement," in which he similarly advocated for transnational adoption as a means to alleviate the global problem of child abandonment, thereby forming "blended international families" that reflect "an increasingly shared belief in a radical solidarity that [transcends] borders and biology."²

Though these are 21st century examples, their warmly positive attitude toward transnational adoption, characterized by a desire to do good and a belief that adoptive kinship can transcend national, biological, and racial borders, springs from a long lineage of U.S. public discourse around transnational adoption that has similarly framed the practice as an act of feel-good humanitarianism, though the material conditions contextualizing these statements in these

¹ Enrique Cerna, "Scott Simon," *Conversations at KCTS 9*, aired July 10, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NKLLJxdAtIY>.

² Arthur C. Brooks, "Let's Restart the Adoption Movement," *New York Times*, November 17, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/17/opinion/restart-the-adoption-movement.html>.

different periods are distinct. This dissertation critically interrogates this discourse, asking both how specific social, cultural, and (geo)political conditions have shaped how Americans have talked about transnational adoption over time, and what realities these discursive practices create, for adoptees and non-adoptees alike, in terms of our capacities to imagine race, kinship, and belonging. Since the 1950s, when transnational adoption was institutionalized as a response to the Korean War orphan crisis, “abandoned” or “orphaned” foreign children, particularly Asian children, have been figured as unfortunate waifs in need of help specifically through stranger adoption to the West. These children are then incorporated into U.S. life as paragons of postracial optimism, their apparent full assimilation and subsequent erasure of their racial difference taken as proof that love within the (white) nuclear family can transcend differences of race or nation. The result of both processes, I argue, is the ongoing marginalization, racialization, and objectification of Asian American adoptees, and, as long as transnational adoption continues to be upheld as a progressive and even radical practice, a corresponding containment of our collective capacity to move towards racial, anti-patriarchal, or decolonial justice.

The problem of the continued use and relevance of discourse that has racialized and othered Asian American adoptees for decades is one that rhetoric is capably positioned to explore. As a discipline that asserts that communication is not just expressive but constitutive, shaping our realities and the possibilities available for imagining our subjectivities,³ rhetoric offers fertile conceptual ground for both accounting for rhetorical justifications of transnational adoption *and* for grasping the ways in which these discourses shape the possibilities for Asian adoptees—and others—to imagine their state of belonging in the U.S. body politic. This dissertation represents the first study of its kind that tracks major themes in transnational

³ See Maurice Charland, “Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the Peuple Québécois,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73, no. 2 (1987): 133-150.

adoption discourse—particularly surrounding adoption from Asia—from the institutionalization of the practice in the 1950s to today, and is the first rhetorical account to date of discourse that has been deployed to explain, manage, and justify the practice of transnational, transracial adoption from Asia. By bringing together archives of public discourse that span the full lifespan of the practice, I have been able to identify foundational recurring themes that have continued to structure public knowledge about transnational adoption from Asia, themes whose roots in the geopolitics of the Korean War and the Cold War have long disappeared, but whose vestiges remain the beating heart of adoption discourse, influencing how adoptees are seen, discussed, and treated, inside their families and without. Kit W. Myers has identified what he calls the “violence of love” in adoptive parents’ erasure of history and reification of “real” and “unreal” families in a popular *New York Times* blog series about adoption;⁴ this dissertation extends Myers’ inquiry back through time and widens the scope, taking in the full scale of political, social, cultural, and historical forces that have structured adoption discourse since the 1950s, and fully mapping its complex terrain. What I demonstrate in these pages is that themes of Christian paternalism, charity and rescue, postracialism, and multicultural diversity in adoption discourse have operated since said discourse’s beginnings as a type of symbolic violence, a means of objectifying and racializing Asian American adoptees, reifying the superiority of the West over the East, and constraining the possibilities for Asian American adoptees to imagine their own identities and sense of belonging. My study of these archives demonstrates the coalescing a unique form of Asian racialization and othering in a historically grounded context, and, perhaps even more importantly, illustrates its ideological staying power, and the “stickiness” of marginalizing discourses for this understudied group of Asian American immigrants as political,

⁴ Kit W. Myers, “‘Real’ Families: The Violence of Love in New Media Adoption Discourse,” *Critical Discourse Studies* 11, vol. 2 (2014): 175-193.

social, and cultural conditions change. These findings have ramifications for rhetorical scholarship particularly on race, migration, and post-colonialism, introducing a new arena of study that sheds further light on the lasting impacts of colonial expansion and foreign wars in Asia on the lives of Asian Americans today, and on the persuasive power of rhetorics that originate in such projects to shape Asian American subjectivities.

This dissertation also offers a unique account of adoptee cultural production, examining themes in adoptee writings that have attempted to counter dominant narratives of transnational adoption. This analysis demonstrates the impact of these discourses on Asian American adoptees as expressed through their deliberate counternarratives, and identifies the contours of an alternate adoptee epistemology, onto whose foundations a nascent transnational, transracial adoptee community identity is being built. This act of creation, uneven, non-linear, and complex, joins a lineage of Asian American worldbuilding that traces its origins to the Third World Liberation Front strike at San Francisco State University that demanded, in solidarity with multiple minority student groups and anticolonial movements around the world, self-determination, particularly in their own education—strikers wanted the instruction of their communities to benefit their communities. The result of the strike was the establishment of the first School of Ethnic Studies, as well as the development of “Asian American” as a political term of pan-ethnic solidarity.⁵ Grace Lee Boggs and Scott Kurashige have written of the need, in the face of ongoing political, social, and environmental crises, to “grow our souls”: “constantly expanding our imaginations, sensitivities, and capacity for wonder and love, for hope rather than despair, for compassion and

⁵ Daryl J. Maeda, *Chains of Babylon: The Rise of Asian America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Glenn Omatsu, “The ‘Four Prisons’ and the Movements of Liberation: Asian American Activism from the 1960s to the 1990s,” in *Asian American Studies Now: A Critical Reader*, eds. Jean Yu-wen Shen Wu and Thomas C. Chen (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 298-330.

cooperation rather than cynicism and competition, for spiritual aspiration and moral effort.”⁶ Minority activists, in other words, have always understood that radical justice is as much an act of creation as it is one of destruction of old structures and hierarchies; it entails the creation of new worlds, new forms of knowledge, new communities, new identities in common. At a time when the label “Asian American” has become a watered-down identity category,⁷ or worse, a helpful category to target various forms of capitalist consumption, Asian American adoptee rhetoric is one of many crucial sites where Asian Americans are engaged in the energetic, challenging, radical act of creating a world anew. The study in this dissertation, which centers the themes that adoptees employ to articulate their experiences, not only helps us to understand how that worldbuilding is taking place—it also points the way toward recognizing, and aiding in, the growth of similar movements, in the U.S. and around the world.

Beginning with the influence of Christian evangelical organizations and narratives on the massive popularity of Korean adoption during the Korean War, I trace the vestiges of Christian paternalist themes of charity and orphan rescue in adoption discourses through the decades,⁸ focusing on the persistent and stable figure of the Asian orphan, or waif, that recurs continuously in adoption discourse. I investigate the unique historical context that informed the initial development of the master narrative of transnational adoption as Christian-influenced orphan rescue, and account for its evolution over time in response to changes in structuring historical,

⁶ Grace Lee Boggs and Scott Kurashige, *The Next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the Twenty-First Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 40.

⁷ Maeda, *Chains of Babylon*.

⁸ See Catherine Ceniza Choy, “Institutionalizing International Adoption: The Historical Origins of Korean Adoption in the United States,” in *International Korean Adoption: A Fifty-Year History of Policy and Practice*, edited by Kathleen Ja Sook Bergquist et. al (Binghamton, NY: The Haworth Press, 2007), 25-42; Arissa Oh, “A New Kind of Missionary Work: Christians, Christian Americanists, and the Adoption of Korean GI Babies, 1955-1961,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 3-4 (2005): 161-188; Arissa H. Oh, *To Save the Children of Korea: The Cold War Origins of International Adoption* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015); Susie Woo, *Framed by War: Korean Children and Women at the Crossroads of US Empire* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

social, and political forces. Ultimately, I conclude that Christian paternalist narratives of adoption during the Cold War taught Americans to understand foreign adoption as a matter of altruism, occluding the imbalances in power between nations and people that make such adoptions possible, and capturing and containing Asian adoptees as objectified subjects. I then consider the issue of race more directly: examining expressions of transnational adoption as a postracial or racially colorblind practice, I contend that what emerges is not an obliteration or minimization of the significance of race, but rather, an attempt to politicize it for new ends. Asian and nonwhite adoptees have for decades been upheld as exemplars of postracialism and progressive kinship formation across racial, biological, and national boundaries; yet this insistence, far from moving closer to achieving racial justice, has only further entrenched the status quo of white privilege. Indeed, the processes in which the private Christian family has been wielded to obscure the complex geopolitical forces and power imbalances that have made institutionalized transnational adoption possible exemplify an intimization of power that has long found an expression in attitudes of assimilationism and postracialism, ensuring a perpetually racialized relationship between white American and the people who become Asian American through transnational adoption.

The costs of these complex and interlocking justifications and discursive formations around transnational adoption fall on adoptees themselves. This dissertation, in providing the first rhetorical account of adoptee knowledge as expressed through adoptee cultural production, draws out the dominant themes in the Asian adoptee experience as expressed through their writings, taking those writings as refusals to perform the role of “the happy, grateful adoptee”⁹ and instead as expressions of an alternate epistemology that embraces incommensurability,

⁹ Kimberly D. McKee, *Disrupting Kinship: Transnational Politics of Korean Adoption in the United States* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 11.

making room for the full expression of the Asian adoptee experience in a white U.S. culture that disavows adoptee difference. Moreover, the themes that emerge through adoptee writings demonstrate through their reiterations the development of experiences in common on which to build the shared history and common identity that has been involuntarily taken from them. This dissertation therefore contributes to the development of alternate ways of understanding transnational adoption and to research that explores the complex nature of our investments in family, origins, and empire, and the ongoing significance of race in a society that often claims to be colorblind.

Temporally, I organize observable discourse generally around three time periods: the 1950s and '60s, the period in which transnational began in earnest as a solution to the post-Korean War "orphan crisis," and in which foreign adoption was institutionalized in the U.S.; the 1980s and '90s, the peak of Korean adoption to the U.S. and also a period of heightened marketization and commodification of foreign adoption and adoptable children from around the world; and the 2010s to the present, a period in which progressive postracial optimism has met adoptees increasingly challenging mainstream adoption discourse. This periodization shares similarities with Young's assessment of the phases of intercountry adoption: Young's first phase, humanitarian response, occurs from 1945-1975; the second, a period of "mutual" processes developing between sending and receiving countries, from 1976-1991; and the third phase, that of market-driven policy and the emergence of a "market mentality" around intercountry adoption, occurring from 1991-2005.¹⁰ The first phase in my periodization is meant to encompass the era of Asian adoption that emerged as a response to a string of wars and crises precipitated by the U.S.' war against communist influence in Asia, initiated by the Korean War

¹⁰ Alexandra Young, "Developments in Intercountry Adoption: From Humanitarian Aid to Market-Driven Policy and Beyond," *Adoption & Fostering* 36, no. 2 (2012): 70, 73.

and followed by Chinese refugees fleeing communist rule into Hong Kong and afterwards, the Vietnam War, which displaced children in Vietnam and Cambodia. The second phase of my periodization, the 1980s and '90s, encompasses the development of robust processes facilitating transnational adoption between the U.S. and sending countries, a rapid diversification of the number of countries sending children to the U.S. for adoption, including the spread of the practice to Central and South America, countries in Africa, and former communist bloc countries, and a huge increase in the marketization of adoption and the commodification of adoptable children, including adoption's development into a multifaceted and highly consumer-driven industry and a permanent feature of child welfare.¹¹ The final phase that I address in this work is an open-ended one; I begin roughly around the 2010s in my chronicle of dominant discourse, as I consider the inauguration of President Barack Obama to be an important historical marker for a shift in popular U.S. discourse around race as it converged with liberal optimism around globalization more broadly, but the "end" of this period remains open-ended, signaling that dominant discourse still remains infused with the characteristics of paternalism, white saviorism, and denials of racial difference that first constituted the discursive field around transnational adoption during the Korean War.

In each period, I investigate the unique historical context informing popular rhetorics of adoption, offering an account of justifications around transnational adoption and linking them to the historical, social, and political formations at the time and in the present. Historically, those representing the "receiving" end of the adoption triad of birth parent(s), adoptee, and adoptive parent(s)—that is, adoptive parents and those advocating for them or on their behalf—have enjoyed disproportionate access to the mainstream outlets that shape our discursive landscape,

¹¹ Young, "Developments in Intercountry Adoption."

and we will see that this access has dramatically affected the appearance and role of transnational adoption in the U.S. cultural imagination. This study is therefore concerned with publicly-oriented discourse that has contributed to a durable dominant cultural narrative of adoption, and the selection of archives on which it draws consists exclusively of examples of public discourse. The majority of the objects analyzed in this project from the earliest historical periods are drawn from the collections of the Social Welfare History Archives at the University of Minnesota Libraries, in particular the International Social Service American Branch records, William Pierce papers, and records from the Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota and Children's Home Society of Minnesota. These collections are crucial to the work of many critical adoption scholars, myself included. Though they contain a wealth of private documents, including correspondence, meeting minutes, and internal newsletters, this dissertation makes use of the large number of newspaper clippings and documents published for public consumption saved in these collections. Freely available online digital archives of *Life* magazine also play a central role in my analysis of earlier historical periods.

For the second temporal phase of my study, I rely both on materials drawn from the Social Welfare History Archives collections and from the private archive of *Adoptive Families* magazine, kept, at the time of my conducting research, at the offices of New Hope Media in New York, NY. I am the first scholar to delve into these archives and, given the recent closure of the magazine and the uncertain future of its archives, potentially the last. *Adoptive Families*, originally *OURS* magazine, began with the founding of an adoptive parent organization called *OURS* in Minnesota in 1969 that served the parents of the first adopted Korean children to arrive in Minnesota.¹² It began as a quarterly newsletter, changing its name to *Adoptive Families* in

¹² Margaret Larson, "OURS 1967-1977," *OURS*, 1977, New Hope Media, 108 W. 39th Street Suite 805, New York, NY 10018.

1994 and eventually growing into a full-fledged magazine. I draw on *OURS/Adoptive Families* as a source of progressive discourse about transnational adoption in this period, one whose general attitude toward the practice is illustrative of the racially “colorblind” optimism of the period as well as occasionally a source of critical views of the same. Additionally, the magazine’s ads section, which expanded considerably over the course of its publication, reveals much about the changing nature of transnational adoption as an industry, as do the changing nature of the contents of the magazine itself, particularly with regards to the “opening up” of new parts of the world as sources of babies for adoption. A wide-angle view of the magazine over its run reveals an increasingly booming industry for agencies placing children from all over the world, often specializing in certain regions; for tour operators running “homeland” tours for adoptees and their families; and for vendors selling culturally specific items and mementos to adoptive parents. It also reveals the shifts in popular interest in various sending countries, from Central and South America to China to African countries to former Soviet countries like Russia, Romania, and Belarus. The magazine’s regularly published lists of vetted adoption agencies, which also increased in huge numbers throughout the 1980s and ‘90s, also reveal the explosive growth of a verifiable industry around the adoption of children from around the world to the United States. Analysis of *OURS/Adoptive Families*, in combination with sources from more mainstream media outlets drawn from the Social Welfare History Archives’ collections, reveals both the large-scale development of transnational adoption as a practice during this middle period, and the evolution of discourses of rescue and postracial multiculturalism in an era of increasing globalization, neoliberalization, and transnational movement of goods and capital.

For adoptee discourse, my archive begins in the 1990s. This is for the very simple reason that there are limited to no examples of adoptee writings or public discourse before that time.

Although adoptees who had been adopted as children in the 1950s had grown into adulthood long before this time, it was not until the late 1990s, as waves of transnational adoptees began to come of age, that more work began to appear. The first adoptee-written and adoptee-edited anthology, *Seeds from a Silent Tree: An Anthology of Korean Adoptees*, appeared in 1997.

Korean adoptee Thomas Park Clement's *Dust of the Streets: The Journey of a Biracial Orphan of the Korean War*, was published in 1998 under the title *The Unforgotten War: Dust of the Streets*.

In 2000, Korean adoptee Deann Borshay Liem's documentary film *First Person Plural*, about her journey reconnecting with her birth family, was released, becoming a cornerstone of adoptee cultural production and examples of adoptee-driven narratives about transnational adoption.

Since the 2000s and especially into the 2010s and beyond, adoptee cultural production has rapidly increased in output, diversifying in media format as new technology has become available. In recent years, adoptees have begun telling their stories through podcasts, blogs, TikTok and Instagram, stand-up comedy, and more. In this dissertation, I limit my analysis to written works, as despite the recent proliferation of other forms of media, written and published works still represent the largest proportion of adoptee-created media. This includes articles published in reputable online or print outlets, and published memoirs, autobiographies, and anthologies. Because this project emphasizes public discourse as a means to circulate both dominant and counter-narratives, I focus my analysis of adoptee-written books on memoirs and anthologies that have been published by reputable and recognizable publishers, those that are widely recognized and referenced within the adoptee community, or both. All of the adoptee-written works analyzed herein are by Asian adoptees, largely Korean, and all but Jenny Heijun Wills' *Older Sister: Not Necessarily Related*. are stories of people adopted to the United States (Wills was adopted to a family in Canada). These delimitations are meant to underscore the

marginalizing effects specifically on Asian (North) American adoptees of decades of white Western discourse that insists that they had been rescued from Asia, and to more rigorously explore the effects of these rhetorics as described by this population of adoptees themselves.

Transnational adoption is a diasporic and global phenomenon, and is certainly not limited to the United States; its effects resonate in sending and receiving countries around the world. Tobias Hübinette has written extensively about the effects of Korean adoption to Sweden, as has Barbara Yngvesson.¹³ Laura Briggs and others have written about transnational adoption from a variety of other sending countries in eastern Europe and the global South.¹⁴ Others have written about transnational adoption from Asia from sending country and birth mother perspectives.¹⁵ Moreover, Asian adoption to the U.S. is only one element of the story of transnational, transracial adoption in this country: as a region, and not one particular country, Latin America was the largest sending region for intercountry adoptions in the 1970s and 1980s,¹⁶ adoption from Romania and Russia escalated in the 1990s after the fall of the Soviet Union and the Ceaușescu regime,¹⁷ and adoption from countries in Africa and the Caribbean became increasingly popular from the 1980s onwards. I wish to acknowledge this varied and complex terrain of international adoption. This dissertation does not seek to flatten the differences between sending and receiving countries in transnational adoption. I focus on the United States as a receiving country and Asia

¹³ See Tobias Hübinette, *Comforting an Orphaned Nation: Representations of International Adoption and Adopted Koreans in Korean Popular Culture* (Stockholm, Sweden: Stockholm University Department of Oriental Languages, 2005); and Barbara Yngvesson, *Belonging in an Adopted World: Race, Identity, and Transnational Adoption* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010).

¹⁴ See Laura Briggs, *Somebody's Children: The Politics of Transracial and Transnational Adoption* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012); and Diana Marre and Laura Briggs, eds, *International Adoption: Global Inequalities and the Circulation of Children* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

¹⁵ See Dong Soo Kim, "A Country Divided: Contextualizing Adoption from a Korean Perspective," in Bergquist et al., *International Korean Adoption: A Fifty-Year History of Policy and Practice*; and Hosu Kim, *Birth Mothers and Transnational Adoption Practice in South Korea: Virtual Mothering* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

¹⁶ Briggs, *Somebody's Children*, 11.

¹⁷ Young, "Developments in Intercountry Adoption."

as a sending region for this very reason: the U.S.’ management of transnational adoption from Asian countries is inextricably informed by its very specific historical relationship with Asia, its geopolitical anxiety as a self-perceived leader of the free world in the global fight against communism, and its own racialized histories of exclusive immigration laws and deeply entrenched anti-Blackness. I do not contend that U.S. treatment of, and discourses around, transnational adoption from Asia or any other sending region are necessarily deserving of more attention than other receiving countries, or that Asia is more important as a sending region than any other; rather, the delineations of my archives and my analysis are a testament to the highly situated nature of rhetorical analysis. Adoption discourse is not universal, much as adoptees themselves are not; my contention is that Asian adoptees are marginalized and racialized in the United States in a particular way, owing to the unique set of circumstances—geopolitical, social, cultural, historical—that brought them to the U.S. and explained their belonging here.

Additionally, sending countries within Asia are unique, all with their own particular histories of transnational adoption. With Asian adoption to the U.S., sending countries and their numbers have changed drastically over time, for a variety of reasons. The origins of the Vietnam War the United States’ involvement in it is unique from the war a decade earlier in Korea, although they shared a nation divided into communist versus anti-communist forces, the latter occupied and backed by the United States; and both wars, which triggered a subsequent “need” for adoptive families for Korean and Vietnamese orphans, are decidedly unique from the circumstances behind the enormous increase in Chinese adoptions to the U.S. beginning in the 1990s, when China’s one-child policy was implemented and formal adoptions of Chinese children to the U.S. began. (Korea fell behind China and Russia as the number one sending

country to the U.S. in intercountry adoptions in 1995.¹⁸) My intent is not to assert that these countries' situations with regard to U.S. involvement and transnational adoption are interchangeable, but rather, that they have been *treated* interchangeably in U.S. discourses that have called for, justified, and framed adoption from countries in east Asia from the Korean War onwards. That highly persuasive discursive formations have flattened differences in countries and circumstances over time in order to champion international adoption of nonwhite children from the global South to the United States—a flattening which, indeed, is not limited to Asian countries—is a central point of interest in this dissertation. This dulling of structural differences serves a purpose in each period, for each wave of adoptions, and has consequences for each adoptee who arrives in the U.S. under the umbrella of those justifications and explanations.

It is for future work that I reserve further investigation into some of these nuances, in particular the rapid commodification and marketization of transnational adoption from the 1980s onwards and the concurrent rise of a wider “rainbow” of children from around the globe available for U.S. adoption; and the development of welfare systems in Korea that responded to U.S. demand. In the meantime, I hope to lay foundations for future rhetorical work in adoption studies, which seeks to better understand the causes and consequences of discourse that has served as a call to action to adopt internationally for more than 70 years.

As a study of the evolution and adaptation of paternalistic and postracial attitudes around adoption, and their function in both obscuring global power inequities and in marginalizing adoptees through racialization, *Odd Hospitality* sits at the intersection of scholarship on adoption, Asian American studies, race, and rhetoric. Scholarship in critical adoption studies

¹⁸ Oh, *To Save the Children of Korea*, 2.

provides necessary historical context for the practice of transnational adoption and foregrounds critiques of the practice's origins as emerging from a colonial relationship between the United States and South Korea. Work in Asian American studies more broadly, particularly scholarship that touches on migration from Korea to the United States, informs the critical stance this project takes on historical and ongoing relations between the US and Asia, and especially between white America and Asian America. Asian American studies illuminates the broader context of Asian American marginalization in which this project is situated—as well as the perhaps even more important context of Asian American community- and world-building to which the final chapter of this dissertation speaks. This project, an important building block in the ongoing consciousness-raising of rhetoric and communication studies' reckoning with race and, especially, its awareness of issues specific to Asian Americans and the Asian diaspora, is also the first to bring together critical adoption studies and rhetoric, to what I hope is the benefit of both.

Rhetoric helps to understand race as contingent, constructed through discursive formations that are unique in their historical, social, and political contexts. Additionally, both rhetoric and sociology offer fruitful criticisms of post-racialism, or the assertion that racial inequality is no longer a defining feature of U.S. culture and society. This project speaks to a heretofore underexamined case of alleged postracialism in rhetorical studies: the transracial, transnational adoptee. It builds on scholarship on post-racialism by suggesting that, in the case of transnational adoption, postracial attitudes carry with them the seeds of a colonial relationship between white America and the already-racialized Asian other; and it builds on rhetorical scholarship on race by proposing one avenue for the adaptation and transformation of racially marginalizing processes over time.

Critical Adoption Studies and Asian American Studies

Odd Hospitality engages deeply with critical adoption studies and scholarship in Asian American studies on adoption. This area of scholarship has grown significantly since the early- to mid-2000s, offering historical accounts of the origins of institutionalized adoption in Korea from both the US and Korean sides,¹⁹ accounts of contemporary adult adoptee identities and experiences,²⁰ and accounts of the Christian missionary and family-based justifications in the US for Korean adoption in the early days of the Cold War.²¹ As Tobias Hübinette notes, until the emergence of this scholarship in the last 20 to 25 years, most scholarship on transnational adoption in the West took the form of adoptee studies in the fields of psychology or social work.²² It is only recently that scholars in disciplines like history and ethnic studies have begun to craft critical histories of adoption and critical accounts of the conditions that made possible its enormous popularity in the 1950s and '60s.

Many of these critiques adopt a postcolonial perspective which inspires this project. Arissa Oh and SooJin Pate attribute the popularization of international adoption starting in Korea during and after the Korean War (1950-1953) to the U.S. military occupation of the Korean peninsula prior to the war itself, which created a colonial relationship of dependency between the U.S. and Korea and eventually led to the adoption of primarily mixed-race GI babies after the

¹⁹ See Choy, "Institutionalizing International Adoption"; Hübinette, *Comforting an Orphaned Nation*; Dong Soo Kim, "A Country Divided"; Oh, *To Save the Children of Korea*; SooJin Pate, *From Orphan to Adoptee: U.S. Empire and Genealogies of Korean Adoption* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); and Woo, *Framed by War*.

²⁰ See Eleana Kim, *Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); and Jane Jeong Trenka, Julia Chinyere Oparah, and Sun Yung Shin, eds., *Outsiders Within: Writing on Transracial Adoption* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2006); and Woo, *Framed by War*.

²¹ See Christina Klein, "Family Ties and Political Obligation: The Discourse of Adoption and the Cold War Commitment to Asia," in *Cold War Constructions: The Political Culture of United States Imperialism, 1945-1966*, edited by Christian G. Appy (Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 35-64.

²² Hübinette, *Comforting an Orphaned Nation*.

war.²³ Hübinette sees the ongoing practice of international adoption from Korea as “one of the ever-present colonial projects of the West,” citing the (to the children and, often, to their birth mothers) involuntary transfer of hundreds of thousands of children from non-Western countries to the West as “a clear reflection of a global colonial reality and racial hierarchy, and a grim reminder of the still existing astronomical power imbalance between the West and its former colonies.”²⁴ Certainly the role of the U.S. in the widespread destruction wrought in the Korean Peninsula during the Korean War, and its role in Korea’s rehabilitation, lay a striking foundation for a critique of Korean adoption as a colonial practice. Adoption was a solution for the social problems created first by the Korean War, which orphaned 100,000 Korean children, and then by rapid industrialization and massive upheavals in traditional Korean society and family structure, yielding many children at risk of abandonment. In the process, what had been a temporary solution to a crisis became permanent infrastructure for Korean child welfare.²⁵ The role of the U.S. military as it remained on the ground to help rebuild the country is also significant: building orphanages, running fundraising drives, and bringing orphaned children under their care at military bases as “mascots, houseboys or interpreters” in an arrangement that developed “into a kind of informal adoption,”²⁶ the U.S. military both generated a positive, humanitarian view of U.S. intervention in Korea to Americans back home and laid the foundations for U.S. adoption of Korean orphans.²⁷

Furthering postcolonial critiques of adoption is scholarship that notes how well sentimentalized portrayals of Korean adoption serve U.S. foreign policy interests in the early

²³ Pate, *From Orphan to Adoptee*; Oh, *To Save the Children of Korea*.

²⁴ Hübinette, *Comforting an Orphaned Nation*, 28.

²⁵ Dong Soo Kim, “A Country Divided.”

²⁶ Hübinette, *Comforting an Orphaned Nation*, 53.

²⁷ Pate, *From Orphan to Adoptee*.

days of the Cold War, as the U.S. fought to gain a foothold in Asia in its fight against the spread of communism. The deployment of family frames, or framings of Koreans as family to whom the average American bore a familial responsibility to help, softened the optics and effects of U.S. empire in this period.²⁸ Americans were encouraged to see their relationship to Korea as an aid-based relationship that fostered a feeling of “kinship with and responsibility for Koreans”²⁹ in an effort to manage the contradiction between the U.S.’ expansionist/anti-communist aims in Asia and the desire to “uphold the liberal representations of the United States as an altruistic leader of the world.”³⁰ Christina Klein deftly notes that in an era in which little knowledge about Asia and Asian people was known in the U.S. due to years of restrictive immigration laws, early Cold War middlebrow cultural narratives “imaginatively created and sustained the ties to Asia” that were needed in order to figure “Americans as protectors of Asia while denying any imperial aspirations.”³¹ Yuri Doolan adds to Klein’s analysis by noting that the “Amerasian,” a Cold War rhetorical construct that described a mixed race Asian person fathered by a U.S. serviceman in Asia to an Asian mother, was a political tool used to further Americans’ investment in Asia and in the U.S.’ Cold War mission there, and to recast the U.S.’ imperialistic ambitions into altruistic motivations to spread democracy around the world.³²

As the next chapter demonstrates, religion—particularly evangelical Christianity—played a crucial role in both the early implementation of foreign adoption and the narratives created to sustain and popularize it. In fact, we can see the roots of these family-based narratives or justifications for adoption in the relationship of paternalistic care through adoption perpetuated

²⁸ Oh, *To Save the Children of Korea*; Klein, “Family Ties and Political Obligation”; Woo, *Framed by War*.

²⁹ Oh, *To Save the Children of Korea*, 8-9.

³⁰ Woo, *Framed by War*, 21.

³¹ Klein, “Family Ties and Political Obligation,” 38.

³² Yuri Doolan, *The First Amerasians: Mixed Race Koreans from Camptowns to America* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming), manuscript provided by the author.

by organizations like the Christian Children's Fund, World Vision, and Holt International, all private agencies founded by evangelical men on the premise of raising money for, sponsoring, or facilitating adoptions of Asian children in need in China or Korea.³³ Oh's proposal of the "Christian Americanist" fusion of popular Christianity and American individualism and her argument for its role in Cold War politics of adoption deeply informs this work.³⁴ The close relationship between U.S. Christian paternalism and the intimization of a colonial relationship between Korea and the U.S. form a fundamental basis for this project's perspective on transnational adoption.

In its engagement with words and work by adoptees themselves, this project is inspired particularly by Eleana Kim's 2010 ethnography, *Adopted Territory*, which adapts Michael Warner's concept of the counterpublic to the form of contingent kinship developed by transnational adoptees. The adoptee counterpublic, for Kim, is the "social imaginary" that establishes kinship through mutual identification, a "shared acknowledgement of the instability and uncertainty of origins and the involuntary forfeiture of historical and cultural connections."³⁵ Kim's consideration of the adoptee in the contexts of racial identity, kinship, and citizenship represents an important step in scholarly writing on adoption, offering a well-studied perspective of the adoptee experience that takes into consideration the adoptee's "daily confrontations with the problematics of belonging."³⁶

Odd Hospitality seeks to bring together these varied literatures on adoption by tracing the genealogies of elements of discourse that have characterized transnational, transracial adoption from its inception; and highlighting ways that contemporary adult adoptee cultural production

³³ Klein, "Family Ties and Political Obligation"; Choy, "Institutionalizing International Adoption."

³⁴ Oh, *To Save the Children of Korea*.

³⁵ Eleana Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 96-97.

³⁶ Eleana Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 130.

seeks to make a clean break from this long lineage of colonialist, paternalist discourse that has shaped adoptees' realities for decades. I extend the existing literature through time, mapping discursive formations from their beginnings in the 1950s to the 2010s, and connect present-day adoptee discourse to a rejection of concrete patterns, themes, and arguments that have characterized transnational discourse since the Korean War.

Race, Postracialism, Colonialism, and Rhetoric

This dissertation approaches race rhetorically, from a perspective that understands race as a discursive phenomenon that emerges as subjects and subject positions are constituted through discourse.³⁷ Like Kelly E. Happe, I consider race a *practice* that is reiterated through daily performative acts that function both to constitute the racialized other and the privileged positionality of the speaker.³⁸ And like Michael G. Lacy and Kent A. Ono suggest, *Odd Hospitality* is, in part, a critical rhetoric of race, rooted in McKerrow's call for critiques of domination; it seeks to rigorously analyze and unearth discourses that operate within culture to create and perpetuate categories of racial difference.³⁹ This project, in mapping the evolution and adaptation of Asian adoptee racialization and othering over the course of half a century, is deeply concerned with the ways that race and racialization is performed, practiced, reiterated, and made as it interacts with varying cultural, social, and political contexts.

Further, this dissertation responds to Lisa A. Flores' urgent call for racial rhetorical criticism, contributing to our understanding of how raced bodies circulate rhetorically in ways

³⁷ Kelly E. Happe, "The Body of Race: Toward a Rhetorical Understanding of Racial Ideology," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 99, no. 2 (2013): 131-155; Michael G. Lacy and Kent A. Ono, eds., *Critical Rhetorics of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

³⁸ Happe, "The Body of Race," 138.

³⁹ Lacy and Ono, *Critical Rhetorics of Race*; Raymie E. McKerrow, "Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis," *Communication Monographs* 56, no. 2 (1989): 91-111, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03637758909390253>.

that “signal them as excessive and chaotic—bodies to be disciplined, or excessive and exotic—bodies to be consumed.”⁴⁰ 2020’s Black Lives Matter protests targeted the depoliticization of race and the harms of claims to colorblindness, arguing for a stronger popular awareness of race as a structuring force of privilege and power. Activists and scholars alike have critiqued inclusion as an insufficient means of redress for racial inequality.⁴¹ This dissertation elaborates on these strategies and critiques, suggesting that racial inclusivity is both necessary and insufficient; what is needed is a fuller and more complex account of the ways in which racial difference is historically constructed and maintained. Though transnational adoption has been a growing area of scholarly interest in other humanities-aligned disciplines for the last 15 years or more, it has yet to reach the realm of rhetorical studies; and at a time when rhetoric is under pressure to consider how “[r]hetorical meanings, as they circulate on and around bodies, are already raced,”⁴² the case of transnational adoptees and the disavowed racialized meanings that have attached themselves in various ways to adoptees and adoption over the decades presents an ideal case for this line of inquiry.

Specifically, this dissertation is concerned with the belief, as an account of racialization, that race is no longer a foundational element of U.S. life, society, and politics—a belief often referred to as “postracialism” or “racial colorblindness.” Scholars have argued that claims to

⁴⁰ Lisa A. Flores, “Between Abundance and Marginalization: The Imperative of Racial Rhetorical Criticism,” *Review of Communication* 16, no. 1 (2016): 13.

⁴¹ See Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” *Atlantic*, June 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>; David L. Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Rona Tamiko Halualani, “Abstracting and De-Racializing Diversity: The Articulation of Diversity in the Post-Race Era,” in Lacy and Ono, *Critical Rhetorics of Race*; Abraham Iqbal Khan, “A Rant for Good Business: Communicative Capitalism and the Capture of Anti-Racist Resistance,” *Popular Communication* 14, no. 1 (2016): 39-48; Jared Sexton, “People-of-Color-Blindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery,” *Social Text* 28, no. 2 (2010): 31-56; João H. Costa Vargas, *The Denial of Antiracism: Multiracial Redemption and Black Suffering* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018); and Karrieann Soto Vega and Karma R. Chávez, “Latinx Rhetoric and Intersectionality in Racial Rhetorical Criticism,” *Communication & Critical/Cultural Studies* 15, no. 4 (2018): 319-325.

⁴² Flores, “Between Abundance and Marginalization,” 7.

racial colorblindness only further entrench the centrality of race in structuring all aspects of life in the US,⁴³ as “[t]o outlaw *de jure* segregation did not prevent the preservation of segregation *de facto*.”⁴⁴ *Odd Hospitality* explores rhetorics of postracialism, colorblindness, and multiculturalism to articulate the mechanisms of racialization of Asian adoptees that have worked over time to both create and simultaneously disavow racialized meanings attached to these Asian American bodies.

Scholars of postracialism and racial colorblindness broadly understand the period in the U.S. from the 1970s to the present (inaugurated by retrenchment against the social movements in the 1960s and exacerbated by the election of President Barack Obama) as a period in which overt racism, including racism sanctioned by law, went “underground,” subsumed by discourses of multiculturalism, diversity, and inclusion. These discourses, critics of colorblindness claim, have functioned to shore up racial hierarchies and white hegemony through their capacity to disavow the presence of racism in the presence of liberal ideals, upholding “white privilege without fanfare” and allowing whites to “enunciate positions that safeguard their racial interests without sounding ‘racist.’”⁴⁵ The result has been a state of “racial neoliberalism,”⁴⁶ in which race, racism, and racial difference have been so depoliticized as to become naturalized. Criticisms of the liberal state as either itself an actor in colorblind racialization, or as an insufficient entity for

⁴³ See Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America* (5th ed. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018); Halualani, “Abstracting and De-Racializing Diversity”; Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (3rd ed. New York: Routledge, 2015); and Darrel Wanzer-Serrano, *The New York Young Lords and the Struggle for Liberation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015).

⁴⁴ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 15.

⁴⁵ Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists*, 4.

⁴⁶ Wanzer-Serrano, *The New York Young Lords*, 174.

redress due to its sole emphasis on individual rights and legal recognition, further our understandings of the limits of celebratory multiculturalism.⁴⁷

I am specifically concerned with the phenomenon that David Eng calls the *racialization of intimacy*, the occlusion of race within the “private domain of family and kinship” which reinscribes racialized subjects “into a discourse of colorblindness.”⁴⁸ According to Eng, this leads to the disavowal of racial inequality and conflict by “state policies that refuse to see inequality as anything but equality, and by a pervasive language of individualism, personal merit, responsibility, and choice.”⁴⁹ In transnational adoption, the intimization and sentimentalization of racial and political dynamics, and the insistence that familial love has the power to overcome racial difference if the love is strong enough, bears out this phenomenon as a means of dismissing racism against isolated Asian American adoptees who are minorities in their own families and in their communities.

Eric King Watts distinguishes between postracial rhetoric and rhetorics of colorblindness, where the latter represents an attempt to “nullify the pernicious effects of racial thinking and judging,” effectively arguing that racial difference has *no* significance.⁵⁰ Postracialism, on the other hand, is posited as a step further along the trajectory of progressive attitudes towards race: with President Obama’s election, people came to believe that “color-blindness is no longer a

⁴⁷ See Genevieve Carpio, *Collisions at the Crossroads: How Place and Mobility Make Race* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019); Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship*; Halualani, “Abstracting and De-Racializing Diversity”; Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Marouf Hasian Jr. and Fernando Delgado, “The Trials and Tribulations of Racialized Critical Rhetorical Theory: Understanding the Rhetorical Ambiguities of Proposition 187,” *Communication Theory* 8, no. 3 (1998): 245–70; Karen Shimakawa, *National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); and Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

⁴⁸ Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship*, 10.

⁴⁹ Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship*, 5.

⁵⁰ Eric King Watts, “A Monstrous Genre--Violent ‘Man,’” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 107, no. 2 (2021): 236.

necessary fiction we should tell ourselves because racialism can serve progressive purposes.”⁵¹ Following Watts, I understand postracial discourse as differing from colorblind discourse in a significant way: postracialism, I suggest, involves an acknowledgement of racial difference, but one accompanied by the belief that U.S. society and politics has moved beyond the “old” racial hierarchies, entering instead “into new relations of power.”⁵² In other words, postracialism signifies the operationalizing of race for new ends—not the end of old racial hierarchies, but an attempt to discursively reframe them.

While postracialism has only emerged as a commonly named attitude since the 2000s, this dissertation takes the “postracial” to be a rhetorical mode that creatively deploys race to marginalize minorities in novel ways, much as Watts notes the “undead character of the postracial.”⁵³ Since its institutionalization during the Korean War in the 1950s, transnational adoption has represented as an “actualization of ideals of humanitarianism and the promises of multiculturalism,”⁵⁴ hailed as a practice that exemplifies the promises of globalization, the dissolution of borders in a neoliberal age, and the dismantling of old categories of race, ethnicity, nation, and class. Asian adoptees’ physical differences have been meticulously categorized yet dismissed; they have been celebrated as the element that makes an otherwise white family a “rainbow family”; the racial prejudice they experience has been inadequately met with assurances that love overcomes racial difference. The postracial therefore marks an attempt to reframe existing racial meanings in a way that attempts to cover over the violence and harm perpetuated by still-existing racial hierarchies, one that obscures the objectification and othering

⁵¹ Watts, “A Monstrous Genre,” 236.

⁵² Watts, “A Monstrous Genre,” 236.

⁵³ Eric King Watts, “Postracial Fantasies, Blackness, and Zombies,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 14, no. 4 (2017): 318.

⁵⁴ Eleana Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 8.

of Asian American adoptees. Further, the attempt to incorporate Asian Americans into honorary whiteness as a salient symbol of racial progressivism has been wielded as a wedge to further entrench anti-Black sentiment and policy in U.S. life, perpetuating artificial divisions between “good” and “bad” minorities, where Asian Americans, as assimilated and obedient minorities, have been favorably compared to Black Americans, who are depicted as unassimilable by contrast.⁵⁵ Adoptees, visibly Asian but still children, malleable, moldable, and perhaps most importantly, non-threatening, presented an opportunity to construct the ideal assimilated subject, whose simultaneous racial difference and proximity to whiteness allowed white America to claim them as a sign that the country was triumphantly tolerant.

In this dissertation, examining transnational adoption discourse as a durable racializing discourse through a rhetorical lens entails attention to the performativity and persuasiveness of speech acts and their role in defining and shaping the reality of our experiences. Framing, filtering, situating, providing the matrix of beliefs through which others can interpret a situation, or setting the definition for a condition or a situation is, according to rhetorical scholars, a persuasive act, and it is this genre of persuasion with which this dissertation is primarily preoccupied. Kenneth Burke, David Zarefsky, Jim A. Kuypers, and Edward Schiappa demonstrate the power of acts of discursive framing in shaping our experiences of reality⁵⁶:

⁵⁵ See Sara Dorow, “Why China? Identifying Histories of Transnational Adoption,” in Wu and Chen, *Asian American Studies Now: A Critical Reader*; Robert G. Lee, “The Cold War Origins of the Model Minority Myth,” in Wu and Chen, *Asian American Studies Now: A Critical Reader*; Maeda, *Chains of Babylon*; Oh, *To Save the Children of Korea*; and Glenn Omatsu, “The ‘Four Prisons’ and the Movements of Liberation: Asian American Activism from the 1960s to the 1990s,” in Wu and Chen, *Asian American Studies Now: A Critical Reader*.

⁵⁶ Kenneth Burke, “Language as Action: Terministic Screens,” in *Kenneth Burke: On Symbols and Society*, edited by Joseph R. Gusfield (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 114-125, previously published in *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966); Jim A. Kuypers, *Rhetorical Criticism: Perspectives in Action* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009); Edward Schiappa, *Defining Reality: Definitions and the Politics of Meaning* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003); David Zarefsky, “Definitions,” in *Rhetorical Perspectives on Argumentation: Selected Essays by David Zarefsky*, edited by David Zarefsky (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2014), 115-128, previously published in *Argument in a Time of Change: Definitions, Frameworks, and Critiques*, edited by James F. Klumpp (Annandale, Virginia: National Communication Association, 1998), 1-11.

Burke's theory of terministic screens, Zarefsky's and Schiappa's conceptualization of definitions, and Kuypers' concept of frames all describe acts of rhetorical delineation that "provide the interpretive clues" to help us "negotiate the massive amounts of information that comes to us everyday."⁵⁷ As Burke writes, "much that we take as observations about 'reality' may be but the spinning out of possibilities implicit in our particular choice of terms."⁵⁸ My analysis, therefore, focuses on the role of public discourse around adoption in framing transnational, transracial adoption in very particular terms: as a form of rescue that implicitly denigrates Asian nations and countries in the global South, as an act of progressive racial acceptance, as a type of frictionless transnational migration in a globalized world. I trace how these acts of framing, of defining problems and solutions, persuasively shape reality, favoring certain simplistic interpretations of transnational adoption, and limiting or closing off alternate ways of knowing rooted in knowledge of the potential harms, trauma, profoundly unequal power relations, and exploitations at all levels—colonial to intimate—that all intersect in the practice.

Similarly, performativity helps me to understand the nature of race as a discursive practice, and the interpellation of subjects into racialized and unequal hierarchies. If performativity is the constitution of an identity through "a *stylized repetition of acts*,"⁵⁹ we can understand the performativity of language as symbolic action through performative speech acts that "constitute the subjectivity of the person addressed" and "enact *subjects*."⁶⁰ This perspective owes much to Charland, who demonstrated that interpellation into a discourse "occurs at the very moment one enters into a rhetorical situation, that is, as soon as an individual recognizes and

⁵⁷ Kuypers, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 182.

⁵⁸ Burke, "Language as Action," 116.

⁵⁹ Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1998): 519-531.

⁶⁰ Happe, "The Body of Race," 135.

acknowledges being addressed.”⁶¹ I therefore approach the cultural texts in this dissertation as repetitions of speech acts that *perform* race—that is, they interpellate speaker, subject, and audience simultaneously into racial and colonial hierarchies, shaping the material realities of those conditions. Race is a practice, therefore, that is reiterated daily, that *must* be reiterated daily through repetitive speech acts in order to survive. My analysis therefore draws on the speech acts in cultural texts around transnational adoption as rhetorical strategies that constitute subject positions and identities, for adoptees and non-adoptees alike.

Odd Hospitality is an examination of how we are shaped by, and live within, discourses. This critical analysis of the evolution of processes of racialization in the U.S., particularly the racialization of Asian Americans, through discourses of transnational adoption bring into sharp relief the profound consequences of rhetoric as performative and constitutive act. It is not a small point that at the outset of institutionalized transnational adoption, figurations of Asians in a familial or adoptive relation to Americans was the primary form of education for most Americans about Asia, thanks to the long period of restrictive Asian immigration laws to the U.S. (Klein 2000). The racialization of adoptees therefore took place on a relatively blank and receptive public canvas. It is also intricately tied up with the racialization of Asians in the U.S. in general. Discourses of postracialism, paternalism, and intimate kinship are a significant way that race is made, reiterated, and maintained in the present day, and the examination of discourses of transnational adoption from Asia is illustrative of just how these discourses have worked, and continue to work, in American life.

⁶¹ Charland, “Constitutive Rhetoric,” 138.

Chapter Overview

Though *Odd Hospitality* seeks to understand the evolution and means of racialization in adoption discourse over time, it is not a history. Therefore, in keeping with its grounding in rhetorical analysis, the chapters in this dissertation are organized not by chronological time period, but by theme. The first two analytic chapters focus on a theme or vector of transnational adoption discourse and traces its permutations and transformations from adoption's origins in the 1950s and '60s, through the height of transnational adoption in the 1980s and 1990s, and into today. In each chapter I analyze the relationship between historical and political contexts and the theme in adoption discourse at each of these three chronological stages, unearthing the ways that different historical conditions affect the expression and framing of these core ideas over time. What these chapters seek to demonstrate is that racial exclusion takes many rhetorical forms, and that those forms are durable, adaptable, and flexible enough to respond to highly varied historical, political, and social changes.

Chapter Two, "Orphans, Waifs, and Saved Children: Paternalism in Adoption Discourse, 1950s-Present," focuses on the relationship between ideologies of charity, Christianity, and paternalism that have fundamentally informed adoption discourse since its beginnings. Taking as its starting point the durable figure of the Asian "waif," or unfortunate child orphan, in need of rescue in discourse around adoption since the Korean War, this chapter maps the evolution of themes of white Western rescue of the abandoned orphan from an impoverished, developing, and/or war-torn Asian country as it evolved, yet lingered, over the ensuing decades. I examine the crucial structuring role that evangelical Christian organization and figures like Harry Holt, the Christian Children's Fund, and World Vision played in positioning white Western families as rescuers of poor foreign children, arguing that justifications for their adoption were rhetorical

sites around which dovetailed Christian paternalism and Cold War political needs to spread democracy to imperiled nations. The result was a set of themes that proved to have lasting staying power, characterizing adoption discourse through several successive “orphan crises” in Asia into the 1970s, then into the period of massive popularization of foreign adoption globally and the rapid industrialization of South Korea in the 1980s and 1990s, and through to the present day. I analyze a wide breadth of samples of popular discourse over international adoption’s 70-year history, identifying several themes that constitute this lasting discursive formation: the figure of the waif/orphan in need of saving; adoption as altruism and a form of foreign aid; the objectification of the child; the obliteration of his or her past in the act of adoption to the US; and the framing of (Asian) birth countries as inferior, unfit, and incapable of caring for its own children. Ultimately, I argue, these discourses rhetorically constructed Asian adoptees as perpetual waifs and orphans, forcing them into the impossible position of being both treasured foreign object and fully Americanized subject and occluding the massive imbalances in power that have always made such adoptions possible.

Chapter Three, “‘Korean-born, not Korean anymore’: Transnational, Transracial Adoptees and the Myths of Postracialism,” zeroes in on an essential piece of transnational adoption discourse: the celebration of what such adoptions represent for racial tolerance and “postnational cosmopolitanism.”⁶² In this chapter, I work through the complex themes of adoption discourse that touch on race, teasing out the contradictions in praise of adoptees’ integration into “blended international families” or “rainbow families”: the simultaneous celebration of their successful assimilation, and the perpetual salience and significance of their racial difference and what it means for the cause of progressivism and (neo)liberal democracy.

⁶² Eleana Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 267.

This chapter grapples directly with the lack of clarity in the literature around the terms “colorblindness” and “postracialism,” drawing a clear distinction between them and identifying postracialism not as an assertion that racial difference no longer has any meaning at all, but rather as an attempt to operationalize race for new ends by claiming that new racial hierarchies have supplanted old ones. This act of persuasion is accomplished, I argue, through the deployment of certain consistent and persistent themes in transnational adoption discourse which, despite the fact that the term “postracialism” would not be coined for another 40 years, can, in fact, be traced to the 1950s Korean War orphan crisis: the simultaneous fixation on and dismissal of physical difference, including references to “rainbow children” or the creation of “rainbow families”; the changing of adoptees’ original names, which is rhetorically associated with Americanization of the child; an emphasis on cultural education; and the idea that love can overcome prejudice. Ultimately, I argue that this dominant discursive formation, in its insistence on minimizing the “old” meanings of racial difference in favor of celebrating adoption’s contribution to multicultural diversity, upholds those same “old” racial meanings, further entrenching Asian American and nonwhite adoptees in a status quo that results in their continued objectification, othering, and racialization.

Chapter Four, “A Commonography of Souls: An Overview of Asian Adoptee Rhetoric,” marks a turning point. This chapter contends not with dominant discourses that have structured popular understandings of transnational adoption since the Korean War, but the growing body of adoptee rhetoric by adoptees that have, since the late 1990s, attempted to speak their own experience as it runs counter to dominant narratives, to complicate the simplistic portrayal of adoption that has structured their lives and their most intimate relationships, and to begin to narrate the elements that adoptees, a deterritorialized and rootless group with no established

community in the traditional sense, identify as shared parts of their experiences, in order to begin to build something like a group identity. I examine the published and publicly-available writings of adoptees as political acts, refusals to embody the “happy, grateful adoptee”⁶³ and ready subject, and as such, they frequently present important critiques of the process of transnational, transracial stranger adoption itself; but even more than this, I take them as tentative steps toward the affirmation and production of group and community solidarity, attempts that articulate feelings and experiences in common, despite the extreme isolation and loneliness that transnational adoption often endows upon the adoptee, to create a “sense of home within.”⁶⁴ I understand adoptee rhetoric as a rhetoric of difference, a rhetoric that, as Flores has described, both repudiates mainstream discourse and works to define group identity for a group who feels themselves torn between groups and not quite fitting in anywhere.⁶⁵ This “commonography of souls,” to use an expression from adoptee Jane Jeong Trenka,⁶⁶ is characterized by many complex and overlapping themes, and like the previous chapters, I tackle only some of the major themes that are available for analysis in this dissertation: here, the acknowledgment of erased histories and attempts to validate and reclaim them; feelings of deformity, monstrosity, and alienness; the role adoptive family and loved ones play in perpetuating harms through racist stereotypes or disregard for the importance of racial difference; the “coming out of the fog” journey; returns to Korea and to birth families; and the subsequent realizations that one has to forge one’s own sense of belonging.

⁶³ McKee, *Disrupting Kinship*, 11.

⁶⁴ Lisa A. Flores, “Creating Discursive Space through a Rhetoric of Difference: Chicana Feminists Craft a Homeland,” *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 82, no. 2 (1996): 146.

⁶⁵ Flores, “Creating Discursive Space.”

⁶⁶ Jane Jeong Trenka, *Fugitive Visions: An Adoptee’s Return to Korea* (St. Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2009), 166.

In the conclusion, I first address several recent incidents involving Asian adoption by white influencer couples with popular family vlog channels, indicating the rise of a new form of outright objectification of Asian American adoptees: as a money-making element of content creation. I also examine the recent legal battles centered around adoptee deportation and contingent citizenship as powerful indicators of the precarity of Asian American adoptee belonging in white America. Finally, I discuss the implications for the findings in this dissertation for broader questions of racial justice and abolition. The complex forces of coercion and manipulation informing transnational adoption on all scales, I argue, point to both the need for cross-racial, multiethnic, global, and transnational solidarities, and to an approach to adoption informed by the modern day abolition movement, which would consider adoption as one element in a fabric of unjust systems and processes that must be acknowledged and addressed. This would include, I posit, compassionate immigration policies, extensive social welfare to ensure that more families can care for their children, and the establishment of communities of care that are not rooted in Western stranger adoption models. Ultimately, I conclude that for adoptees, progress toward a more just world must happen in multiple registers, from the intimate all the way to the global.

Like many of the critical adoption scholars whose work has inspired this project, I approach this material as an adoptee myself. I was born in South Korea in 1986 and adopted only a few months later to white parents in southwestern Pennsylvania. My brother, also an adoptee from South Korea and not biologically related to me, came two years later. I choose to assume that the birthdate listed in my adoption file, May 26, is accurate; but like everything else about my file, it is an exercise in faith. My way into this work was personal, having read one article

and op-ed too many about adoption written by white adoptive parents, finally reaching a point of frustration and saturation with white adoptive parent control over how this complex practice is understood. The consequences of this historical control have made themselves felt throughout my life and in my experiences: my isolation in my racial difference and in my experiences of prejudice; the way strangers respond with vitriol to adoptees asking for more nuanced understandings of transnational, transracial adoption in my social media circles; my third grade teacher, who has known me my whole life, remarking that I “don’t realize how lucky I am” after I said something critical of some U.S. political norm on Facebook. My experiences dictated my orientation toward critical rhetoric in my approach to this project, and my interest in offering a well-grounded critique of domination⁶⁷—in this case, of the dominant rhetorics that have constrained my abilities to speak honestly about what it’s like to be a transnational, transracial adoptee, even to myself.

This project is therefore inescapably both personal and political. It is an attempt to both rigorously examine the discourse supporting a practice that has, for over 70 years, been presented as an unalloyed good at the expense of actual Asian American adoptees, and especially, to further legitimize Asian adoptee rhetoric and the knowledge that adoptees possess about the experiences of transnational adoption. From media coverage of impoverished Korean waifs orphaned by war to modern-day insistences by adoptive parents that adoption is “not a trauma” but a “source of great joy,” adoptees have long been merely the objects of discourse around the very practice that involuntarily removed them from their birth countries and placed them halfway around the world. *Odd Hospitality* attempts to re-realize Asian American adoptees as fully thinking, feeling, and perhaps most importantly, *speaking* subjects.

⁶⁷ McKerrow, “Critical Rhetoric.”

CHAPTER TWO

Orphans, Waifs, and Saved Children: Paternalism in Adoption Discourse, 1950s-Present

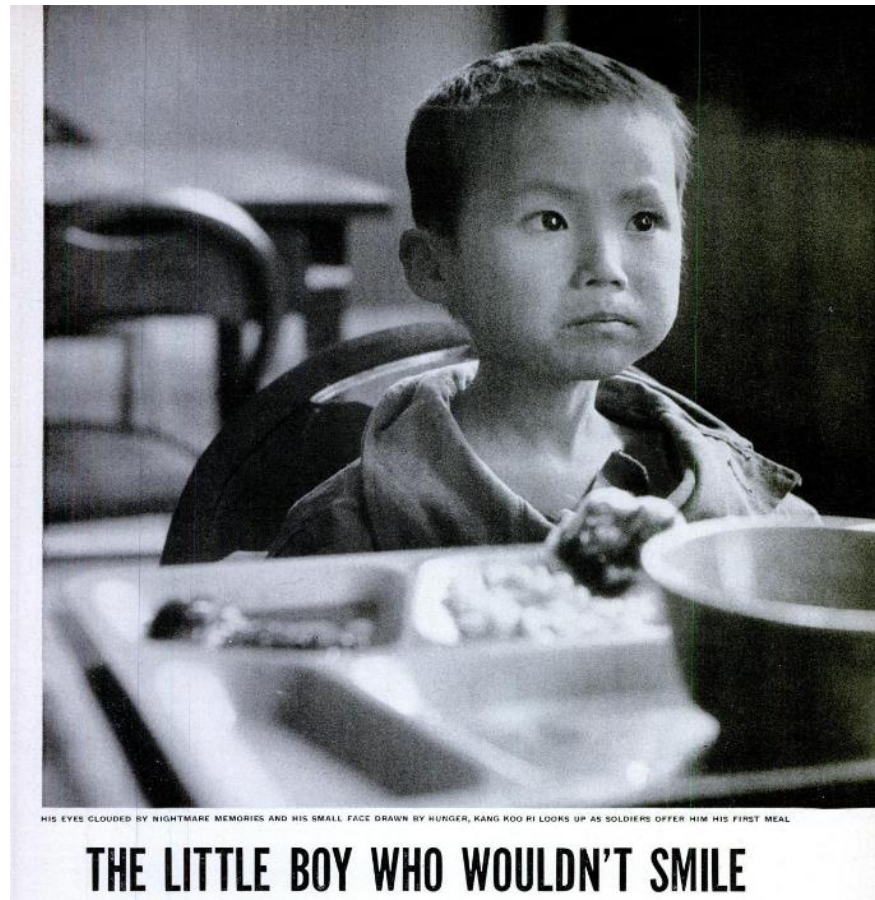


Figure 1.1. Photo and headline from *Life*, July 23, 1951, *Life* Digital Archive, published by Time Inc.

In a July 1951 issue of *Life* magazine, there is a large black and white photo of a serious-faced Korean boy sitting at a table. The headline declares him “The Little Boy Who Wouldn’t Smile.” The caption describes the child, a Korean War orphan named as Kang Koo Ri, as having “eyes clouded by nightmare memories and his small face drawn with hunger.” His story has a happy ending, however: a follow-up story five years later titled “A Famous Orphan Finds a Happy Home” shows the same child, having just been adopted by an American couple, dressed in a checkered shirt and smiling while holding onto a carousel horse. “Wearing new American

clothes, smiling Kang enjoys Los Angeles carrousel ride on first day in U.S.,” the caption reassures.

In a newspaper clipping circa 1959, the word “ABANDONED” is splashed across a



Figure 1.2. Article, publication unknown, Box 16, International Social Service Archives, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries.

spread accompanied by several black-and-white photographs of a small Chinese child, the largest of which depicts her standing barefoot in the middle of a street with shops and signs crowding in from both sides. “Abandoned by her parents on a Hong Kong street, Ling Kuen’s sobs finally bring her to the attention of a

policeman,” the caption reads. In a photo essay spanning several pages, photographs and text tell the story of Ling and her eventual adoption by a white Massachusetts couple, who renamed her Lori. “Lori is now a full-fledged member of the family and participates fully in its doings,” the article announces.

In 2010, NPR host Scott Simon was interviewed on public television about adopting two little girls from China. Simon expresses his optimism that his daughters will actually better understand the “majesty and grandeur of Chinese civilization” by growing up in the U.S. with him and his wife. He adds that he’s glad his children won’t have to “[spend] their lives in an

orphanage” or be “slotted into factory or farm work by the age of twelve.” Indeed, he contemplated, it “could have been worse than that. That would have been if they were lucky.”

Spanning six decades, these examples present their stories of Asian adoption in a similar way: an orphaned child, victim of terrible misfortune, is saved from their dire conditions and certain grim futures in their native country through adoption to white families in the U.S. and their introduction to a white Western life that promises a much brighter future. Since the institutionalization of international adoption in the 1950s and ‘60s, this common narrative has represented dominant discourse in the United States on transnational adoption, particularly from Asia, one in which warmly positive portrayals of the practice have been based on relatively simplistic notions of the transfer of orphans from developing nations in Asia to uncomplicated, happy endings in the U.S. At the center of such stories is the figure of the Asian orphan as pitiable waif, their existence and condition a justification for this intimate form of U.S. intervention. The figure of the impoverished and abandoned Asian orphan, barefoot, hungry, alone, hopeless and helpless, wandering the streets, possibly disfigured, has motivated calls to rescue through adoption for decades.

The forces that structured and continue to reinforce this master narrative are complex and have changed over time. Evangelical Christian organizations like the Christian Children’s Fund and World Vision, in addition to the enormously influential Evangelical pastor-turned-private-adoption-advocate Harry Holt, played an indispensable role in popularizing Asian adoption in its earliest days, introducing Americans to the notion of “sponsoring” and symbolically—later, legally—adopting foreign children in need of assistance who had been affected by war or poverty. These organizations and figures, Holt especially, emphasized the urgent need to “save” these children, who, in the case of Korean war orphans, were orphaned (or otherwise separated

from their parents) by the tens of thousands in a country devastated by war. Their calls were aided both in their own publications and in the media by detailed descriptions and photos of the physical and situational misfortune suffered by the children, from descriptions of war-induced trauma to photos of physical deformity. At a time when most Americans knew little about Asia or people from Asia due to a long history of exclusionary immigration laws, these stories about waifs and orphans in need of rescue served as a form of education to Americans about Asia, a continent that, according to U.S. foreign policy needs, was in desperate danger of falling to communism if the U.S. didn't find ways to intervene. The children's countries of origin, therefore, whether Korea, China, or Vietnam, became places unfit to raise them, not only communist and dangerous but culturally backward. These orphaned waifs—many of whom were not, in fact, actually orphaned, and had at least one parent living¹—became potent objects around which crystallized attitudes of paternalism stoked by calls to rescue, for God, for country, and for freedom. And upon “rescue”—their adoption to predominantly white U.S. families—those children's traumatic pasts were rhetorically obliterated, replaced with descriptions of their quaint fascination with American food and TV, their positioning as “as American as any other” child, and promises of a bright American future.

This early discourse introduced themes that turned out to have lasting staying power. Through one “orphan crisis” after another into the 1970s—first Korea, then Chinese refugee children in Hong Kong, then Vietnam—then into a period of massive popularization of foreign adoption globally and the rapid industrialization of South Korea in the 1980s and 1990s, and through to the present day, a period characterized by progressive and globalist attitudes toward international adoption, the themes that were introduced around Korean adoption in the 1950s and

¹ SooJin Pate, *From Orphan to Adoptee: U.S. Empire and Genealogies of Korean Adoption* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

'60s by overt forces of Christian paternalism still remain. This chapter explores those themes—the figure of the waif/orphan in need of saving; adoption as altruism and a form of foreign aid; the objectification of the child; the obliteration of his or her past in the act of adoption to the US; and the framing of (Asian) birth countries as inferior, unfit, and incapable of caring for its own children—as they developed in foreign adoption discourse at its outset, and traces their evolution through the enormous changes globally and locally throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the high point for Korean adoption to the U.S. in numbers, until today.

If, as Karen Shimakawa has written, a contradictory relationship has always existed between white and Asian America, one in which Asian Americans are incorporated under the mark of multicultural diversity while at the same time being “[r]acialized as (always potentially) foreign,”² this chapter asks how popular rhetorical constructions of Asian adoptees through the construction of Asian waifs and orphans has resulted in Asian American adoptees being forced to maintain the impossible position of being both treasured foreign object and fully Americanized subject. I theorize how Christian paternalist narratives of adoption during the Cold War taught Americans to understand foreign adoption as a matter of altruism, occluding the imbalances in power between nations and people that make such adoptions possible, and taught Americans to understand Asian American adoptees as perpetual waifs, refugees from countries where bad things happen, objects who can be moved as simply as one moves a chess piece.

Transnational adoption did not begin in the 1950s, but it was institutionalized following the Korean War (1950-1953), a devastating conflict that wrought extraordinary loss, creating four

² Karen Shimakawa, *National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 9-10.

million casualties, about half of which were civilians.³ A “battleground between the Soviets and the Americans,”⁴ who had divided the Korean peninsula, occupied it, and sought to develop it, the war left behind two million refugees, 200,000 widows, and 100,000 orphans on the Korean peninsula.⁵

The emergency needs of Korean orphans became a focus of Western and, especially, U.S. private aid even before the end of the war. By this time, Americans had already been educated in how to feel about depictions of foreign children through aid appeals by the China Children’s Fund (later the Christian Children’s Fund). Founded by Presbyterian minister J. Calvitt Clarke in 1938, CCF was one of the first organizations to use the metaphorical “sponsorship” or “adoption” of orphans—in its earliest days, for Chinese children orphaned in the Sino-Japanese War—to successfully fundraise.⁶ This innovation, Klein writes, imagined an intimate relationship between sponsor and foreign child that offered white Americans the opportunity to take responsibility for a global problem—orphans and their susceptibility to Asian communism—through a simple, familial solution.⁷ For Americans, this early logic of adoption was popular and easy to understand. By the time the Korean War was under way, creating both mixed-race GI babies and full-Korean children rendered parentless or displaced, the evangelical Christian

³ Daniel Y. Kim, *The Intimacies of Conflict: Cultural Memory and the Korean War* (New York: New York University Press, 2020).

⁴ Pate, *From Orphan to Adoptee*, 23.

⁵ Catherine Ceniza Choy, “Institutionalizing International Adoption: The Historical Origins of Korean Adoption in the United States,” in *International Korean Adoption: A Fifty-Year History of Policy and Practice*, edited by Kathleen Ja Sook Bergquist et al. (Binghamton, NY: The Haworth Press, 2007), 25-42; Tobias Hübinette, *Comforting an Orphaned Nation: Representations of International Adoption and Adopted Koreans in Korean Popular Culture* (Stockholm, Sweden: Stockholm University Department of Oriental Languages, 2005); Pate, *From Orphan to Adoptee*.

⁶ Laura Briggs, *Somebody’s Children: The Politics of Transracial and Transnational Adoption* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Catherine Ceniza Choy, *Global Families: A History of Asian International Adoption in America* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2013).

⁷ Christina Klein, “Family Ties and Political Obligation: The Discourse of Adoption and the Cold War Commitment to Asia,” in *Cold War Constructions: The Political Culture of United States Imperialism, 1945-1966*, edited by Christian G. Appy (Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 35-64.

missionary service organization World Vision (founded by Youth for Christ minister Bob Pierce in 1950) had joined CCF in advertising for the sponsoring of Korean war orphans in order to raise aid money in the United States. The Korean orphan crisis was a “key crisis area” for World Vision’s founding, and their sponsorship program, which encouraged Americans to provide monetary assistance to “sponsor” a “precious little one” in need,⁸ crafted a sense of intimate and parental responsibility for Asian orphans in popular discourse—a sense that extended to Asia more broadly, in a complement to the U.S.’ Cold War agenda in the region, as we will see.

Then, in 1954, Oregon farmer Harry Holt and his wife Bertha attended a lecture by Pierce, where he screened a documentary called *Other Sheep*, which focused on Korea’s war widows and orphans, including “amputees, lepers, and children who had been left blind, deaf, or dumb by the trauma of war.”⁹ Moved by the “tragic plight” of these children, especially unwanted babies fathered by US servicemen to Korean women, the couple arranged to fly to Korea to adopt eight war orphans, plus four additional children for other Oregon couples. Special legislative action had to be undertaken by Congress to speed what Senator Richard L. Neuberger called Holt’s “humanitarian endeavor.” The media attention when they arrived home in October 1955 was celebratory and widespread, hailing Holt as a “Pied Piper” shepherding the children, whom Mrs. Holt described to a newspaper as among the “least fortunate” of the GI babies they’d seen, as they were malnourished and “aren’t so attractive,” to their new homes.¹⁰ Interest in adopting Korean orphans skyrocketed, leading the Holts to establish their own private adoption

⁸ Choy, “Institutionalizing International Adoption,” 29.

⁹ Arissa H. Oh, *To Save the Children of Korea: The Cold War Origins of International Adoption* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 90.

¹⁰ Photocopies of clippings, Gene Kramer, “‘Pied Piper’ Corrals 12 Korean Babies, Flies Them to America for Adoption,” *Washington Post*, October 14, 1955; “Creswell Man-Father of Six-To Adopt Korean War Orphans,” unknown publication, n.d.; “Mr. Holt ‘Moves the World,’” *The Oregonian*, April 9, 1956. Box 10, International Social Service Archives, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries.

agency. Demand was high: between 1953 and 1959, of the 2,899 Korean children adopted overseas, more than half were adopted through Holt.¹¹



Figure 1.3. Photocopy of clipping, *Washington Post*, October 14, 1955, Box 10, International Social Service Archives, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries.

Though scholars of critical adoption studies have pointed out the role of multiple organizations,¹² both in the U.S. and in Korea, in popularizing and institutionalizing Korean adoption, Harry Holt's dominant role is both undeniable and significant for discourse. Hübinette notes that without Holt, it is likely that "international adoption from Korea would never have developed into such gigantic dimensions,"¹³ and others have described Holt's role as the "father of what became the international

adoption industry."¹⁴ The popularity of Holt's adoption agency is especially attributed to his two major "innovations" in the adoption process: charter flights and proxy adoptions. These allowed, respectively, for large numbers of babies to be moved at once, and for a representative to adopt children in Korea in lieu of the adoptive parents having to be physically present.

Holt and his wife did not have child welfare experience, and, until they adopted eight Korean war orphans, they had no experience of adoption. They were instead driven by a sense of

¹¹ Hübinette, *Comforting an Orphaned Nation*, 62.

¹² Choy, "Institutionalizing International Adoption."

¹³ Hübinette, *Comforting an Orphaned Nation*, 61.

¹⁴ Oh, *To Save the Children of Korea*, 8.

Christian mission to help Korean orphans and to save them for God, two missions that were, for the Holts, inextricably linked. Holt described their work as “the Lord’s work” in a newsletter to his mailing list of supporters and prospective adoptive parents, and in one 1955 newsletter, explicitly stated, “It is our desire that these children go into homes of born-again believers when it is possible. . . . If you are an unsaved person perhaps we can help you to get a child from a non-Christian orphanage.”¹⁵ In a later newsletter, Holt wrote:

We feel, of course, that this placing of children is a ministry and we are responsible to God to see that wherever possible they be placed where they will receive fundamental teaching. To do otherwise would be against our convictions. Please understand that we believe that their spiritual training is the important thing.¹⁶

Holt goes on to explain that he and his wife have decided not to place any children in homes where the adoptive parents are members of non-fundamentalist Christian religious denominations. It is clear from the Holts’ own writings, then, that Christian evangelism was a driving force behind their work assisting Korean war orphans, and that for the couple, this work quickly became highly visible missionary work, in which they saved Korean orphans for Christ.

Hübinette has described the Holts as “driven by a Christian fundamentalist zeal to rescue, Christianise and civilise the children of Korea.”¹⁷ Indeed, there was no hesitation, either on the

¹⁵ Newsletters, Harry Holt, “November-December Newsletter,” Creswell, Oregon, n.d.; Harry Holt, “Dear Friends . . .,” Creswell, Oregon, December 14, 1955. Box 10, International Social Service Archives.

¹⁶ Newsletter, Harry Holt, “Dear Friends . . .,” Creswell, Oregon, n.d., Box 10, International Social Service Archives.

¹⁷ Hübinette, *Comforting an Orphaned Nation*, 61.

FAMILY INFORMATION

Father's Name _____ Birth Place _____ Birth Date _____ Race _____

Mother's Name _____ Birth Place _____ Birth Date _____ Race _____

Marriage Date _____ Place _____ Husband's Occupation _____

Present Address _____ City _____ State _____

If you have children, give names and ages

Give names and addresses of two people for reference

Child desired _____ sex _____ age _____ color _____

Child desired _____ sex _____ age _____ color _____

If you are Christians, please give brief statement
of personal faith on back of card.

Figure 1.4. Interest card for Holt Adoption Program, Inc., n.d., International Social Service Archives, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries.

part of the Holts or the media, to depict these adoptions as a form of “baby saving.” A 1957 review of Bertha Holt’s memoir proclaimed: “Baby Saving’s Lots of Fun,”¹⁸ and descriptions of Holt as a “shepherd” and savior figure were abundant, often accompanied by reminders of the orphans’ dire circumstances. One adoptive mother said she was inspired to write to Holt after reading that “[orphans] were dying,”¹⁹ while an article in which Bertha Holt advocated for a renewal of the 1953 Refugee Relief Act insisted “Korea Tots Dying” while Congress quibbles.²⁰ This created a sense of urgency to the adoptions, linking the fatal conditions of the children’s surroundings to a need to be removed from them as quickly as possible, specifically through

¹⁸ Clipping, “Baby Saving’s Lots of Fun,” unknown publication, 1957, Box 10, International Social Service Archives.

¹⁹ Clipping, “Joy in Arrival of 5 Korean Orphans,” *Kansas City Times*, December 20, 1956, Box 10, International Social Service Archives.

²⁰ Clipping, “Mrs. Holt Says Korea Tots Dying,” *Daily Journal Oregon*, July 24, 1957, Box 10, International Social Service Archives.

adoption to the U.S. Most charity and aid organizations focused on describing the most unfortunate circumstances of orphans in Korea to explain and justify calls for aid and rescue. In a 1957 newsletter, the International Social Service, an independent social service organization, described the conditions in Korean orphanages:

We saw children with the swollen bellies and match-stick legs of malnutrition. . . . with sores and skin diseases on faces and heads and with eye infections. . . . children dressed in thin rags, their feet and hands purple from the cold. We saw dying babies lying in rags on cold floors.²¹

My interest is not in countering these accounts of the conditions under which Korean orphans lived during and after the war; the accounts are rhetorically significant because detailed knowledge of orphans' suffering was a crucial element in the constitution of the figure of the orphan waif in need of saving. Such descriptions elicited sympathy and urgency to act and illustrated the need for adoption as a form of altruistic foreign aid. Popular stories about Korean orphans presented adoption as a primary solution, persuasively individualizing the utter devastation of war on the Korean peninsula onto the decidedly non-political bodies of sickly children—and obscuring U.S. complicity in the war's devastation from popular discourse. The story of the child *Life* called Kang Koo Ri is an apt illustration of how Americans saw children like him and how they imagined the solution. According to the article, Kang's village north of Seoul was destroyed by both UN and North Korean artillery, leaving Kang alone in a destroyed home with a dead parent. Upon being discovered by U.S. soldiers, he was "too weak to walk" and "cried silently," unspeaking. He was taken to the soldiers' base as the newest member of "Operation Mascot," an informal program in which "scores of orphaned children found wandering aimlessly about had been picked up by [GIs] and taken back to camp where they

²¹ ISS Public Relations Newsletter, February 1957, Box 5, Folder 26, "Public Relations ISS Newsletters, 1957-1971," International Social Service Archives.

became mascots or houseboys.” There he joined children whose parents or whole families had been killed, sometimes in front of them; but despite the trauma they’d experienced, their care under the U.S. military had improved them: “[T]heir voices were husky and bodies undersized, although their spirits seemed to be recovering.” The first smile they’re able to coax out of Kang Koo Ri, according to the reporter, is at the possibility of going for a ride in an army “jeepu.”²² The U.S., therefore, already played a crucial role in his rehabilitation. Five years later, the same



Figure 1.5. Photos and headline from *Life*, May 14, 1956, *Life* Digital Archive, published by Time Inc.

child, now described as “10-year-old Ri Kang Yong,” was declared to have found “a happy home” in Los Angeles with a white widow who saw his photos, “got down on my knees and prayed and was told to adopt him.” The accompanying photos show him wearing a checkered shirt and smiling as he rides a carousel. He’s shown as being “mystified and delighted” by the telephone, and “fascinated” by television.²³

The story of “Kang”—the accuracy of whose Korean name is apparently so unimportant that it is written two different ways across these stories without remark as to the inconsistency—illustrates the prevailing preoccupation with Korean orphans’ physical and situational misfortune, and with the American

hallmarks of their eventually happy adoptive endings, the satisfaction provided by such uncomplicated endings seeming like vindication of the child’s rescue. Only a few years later,

²² Michael Rougier, “The Little Boy Who Wouldn’t Smile,” *Life*, July 23, 1951, *Life Magazine Digital Archive*, https://books.google.com/books?id=104EAAAAMBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false.

²³ “A Famous Orphan Finds a Happy Home,” *Life*, May 14, 1956, *Life Magazine Digital Archive*, https://books.google.com/books?id=p0wEAAAAMBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false.

when Chinese refugees begin pouring into Hong Kong to escape China's communist regime, the same public cries for aid and orphan rescue would be repeated, with ISS newsletters describing Hong Kong orphanages as full of "Chinese children who face bleak and uncertain futures unless adopted."²⁴ Some of these children, too, would find homes in the U.S., and their happy new lives would be described in the media in detail: "dressed in blue jeans and cowboy regalia . . . Except for the Oriental slant to his eyes, he was as American as any little boy"; "Suk Wah tasted iced cream and became fascinated with television, the first time she had apparently seen it"; "She eats everything—meat, potatoes, and salad . . . She's just like any other American youngster;" "The Chinese orphan who spoke no English is the beloved little chatterbox who loves spaghetti and meatballs."²⁵ The children were praised for their abilities to adjust quickly and to learn English. Popular media constructed these adoptees as success stories with a narrative that was by now recognizable as a genre: they had transitioned from nameless, hungry orphans, starving in an orphanage or on the street, to happy and content American subjects with stable nuclear families and all the American food and toys they could want—but not so American that their fascination with things like American phones and television couldn't be affectionately singled out. Their happy endings were important justifications for past and future adoptions, as well as compelling evidence that such adoptions were needed. That the children had lucked into the best possible outcome for their situations was a given. After all, who wouldn't wish such an all-American life for a destitute child from communist Asia? Americans were well-schooled by now in the conditions such children faced. Thus, the durable foundations for a rhetoric of "lucky" adoptees

²⁴ "I.S.S. Urges New Legislation as Pre-Deadline Adoptions Increase," ISS Public Relations Newsletter, Summer 1959, Box 5, Folder 26, "Public Relations ISS Newsletters, 1957-1971," International Social Service Archives.

²⁵ Clippings, Pat Connors, "Orphans From Hong Kong Look to U.S. for a Home," *New York World Telegram*, May 28, 1962; "Suk Wah Meets the Family – Wordless Charm Puts Chinese Girl in Clarendon Hills' Heart," *Chicago Daily News*, June 28, 1962; Howard James, "Adopted Chinese Child Is Really on the Ball," *Chicago Tribune*, July 5, 1962; Francis Sugrue, "She's Now Elaine Peterson: Wong Lan's 2 Worlds—Chinese & American," *New York Herald Tribune*, May 27, 1962. Box 16, International Social Service Archives.

were laid, in which adoptees are broadly understood to be the fortunate recipients of the gift of a fairytale American life.

It is, of course, impossible to know or predict with certainty what any of these adoptees' lives would have been like had they remained in their countries of origin; as we will see in Chapter 4, removal from their birth countries instills in many adoptees a lasting longing for a phantom life that they feel they could have had. It is undeniable that pressures of war, poverty, destabilization, migration, gender roles, and other matrices of power created very, very difficult living conditions for the children who found themselves displaced or in orphanages in these periods and places, and it is not my intention or desire to argue that these adoptions should or should not have taken place. Rather, I wish to draw attention to the construction of a genre of discourse around the practice of adoption from Asia that, layer by layer, has worked to constrain adoptee subjectivities. With the sedimentation of a popular discourse that universally maintains that such adoptees are lucky to have been saved from their origins by their adoptive parents, adoptees are figured as essentially indebted to their benefactors: their adoptive parents and the United States more broadly. This position is ultimately one of precarity, placing adoptees at the center of an unresolvable contradiction: their assimilation into U.S. life is celebrated, yet they remain perpetually singled out as the recipients of a gift, and therefore expected to express mainly gratitude and contentment about their adoptions and about life in the U.S. in general.²⁶ The dominant genre of adoptee story that frames them as having been rescued from terrible circumstances, therefore, regardless of the truth of those circumstances in the stories told in

²⁶ See Kimberly D. McKee, *Disrupting Kinship: Transnational Politics of Korean Adoption in the United States* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2019); Kim Park Nelson, *Invisible Asians: Korean American Adoptees, Asian American Experiences, and Racial Exceptionalism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016); and Susie Woo, *Framed by War: Korean Children and Women at the Crossroads of US Empire* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

media outlets, contributes to the circumscribing of Asian adoptee identity and expression, and to the ways that *all* Americans eventually came to view the practice of transnational adoption of nonwhite children.

These same narratives continued into the Vietnam War, a conflict in which American involvement had wrought massive amounts of destruction and ended in failure. In 1969 World Vision ran a headline on the front page of its *Scope* magazine that read “VIETNAM – the war against DESPAIR” against a photo background of a small Vietnamese child standing in torn clothes in front of what appears to be a jungle; inside, they told readers that they could “do something about Vietnam” by joining “‘FRIENDS OF VIETNAM’—a unique company of concerned Christians who are *doing* something about Vietnam”: pledging “for one year to pray for Vietnam and to send \$10 a month to help alleviate the suffering and bring Christian love and hope to the Vietnamese.”²⁷ In 1973 *Newsweek* ran a feature called “Vietnam’s War-Torn Children,” with several vivid photos of Vietnamese orphans, two of whom had lost limbs in the war, and others who clung to the mesh wire serving as windows in an orphanage, the latter captioned: “In a Vietnamese orphanage: Filth, rat bites, isolation and scant hope for the future.” This story, too, was appended by a tale of a happy ending through adoption: an orphan named Duong Muoi, who was discovered in an orphanage “covered with bedsores and rat bites” by her to-be adoptive parents. The story of Duong Muoi was followed by a section titled “How to adopt a Vietnamese,” which featured an AP photo of a small child begging on a street, captioned: “Saigon beggar: Youthful flotsam.”²⁸ Adoption as a form of altruism and a method of providing

²⁷ “VIETNAM – the war against DESPAIR,” World Vision *Scope* magazine, May 1969, Box 10, International Social Service Archives.

²⁸ Loren Jenkins, “Vietnam’s War-Torn Children”; Paul Brinkley-Rogers, “A New Family for Duong Muoi”; “How to Adopt a Vietnamese,” *Newsweek*, May 18, 1973, Box 12, William Pierce Files, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries.

foreign aid to countries in need, first solidified during the Korean War and the Korean orphan crisis, had already become common sense.

Narratives which focused heavily on the suffering of orphans in their home countries and then, post-adoption, almost exclusively on their happiness and adjustment to their privileged new lives in the U.S. with their adoptive families, had several significant consequences for their audience's understanding of transnational adoption: first, they obscured and obliterated adoptees' pasts, their optimistic stories passing over any mentions of adoptees' birth families, ties to their native countries, or potential trauma related to their experiences or their adoption; second, they contributed to a general understanding of the adoptees' Asian birth countries as inferior to the U.S., especially for raising children.

Eleana Kim has written that the legal and social severance of adoptees from their birth families (whether they are actually orphans or not, all adoptees are rendered legal orphans to the state in order to be adoptable) reduces the complex origins of the adoptee.²⁹ This deterritorialization happens not only legally, but rhetorically. Accounts of adoptees from Asia in the 1950s and 1960s repeatedly framed stories of adoptees from Asia in ways that cleanly separated the adoptees' unfortunate pasts with their promising American futures. The story of a Chinese child who was "abandoned in the streets of Hong Kong" after her family fled communist China and who was adopted by a white family in Westchester County, NY, was described in the newspaper as "the tale of a Chinese waif who made good in the United States. She is a waif no more." The girl *used* to be a "Chinese waif who can speak no English," but now, the writer says, she's "a little American girl with a loving father and mother."³⁰ Readers are

²⁹ Eleana Kim, *Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 11.

³⁰ Francis Sugrue, "She's Now Elaine Peterson: Wong Lan's 2 Worlds—Chinese & American, *New York Herald Tribune*, May 27, 1962, Box 16, International Social Service Archives.

instructed, therefore, that “waif” is a state of being incompatible with American life post-adoption; and wrapped up in “waif” are other facts about the child’s past, including “Chinese” (which becomes “American”), her barely-implied birth family (abandonment becomes acceptance into a nuclear American family), and ties to her past in the form of language (her native language is not acknowledged, except as not English). As the caption of a 1962 photo of a Chinese child sitting in the lap on a white woman announces, the girl is “An Orphan No Longer”³¹: the Hong Kong refugee child may have been an orphan *before* she arrived in the U.S., but now her past, including whatever may have happened to her parents (in the case of Chinese children adopted from Hong Kong, they were often surrendered by living parents), has been rhetorically erased, leaving only a shiny and optimistic new future.

The consequences for these erasures from the broader narrative of transnational adoptions was the perpetuation of the popular belief that transnational adoption was an unalloyed good that transformed Asian waifs into all-American children in a transition that had no downsides. The subjectivities of adopted children were prescribed well before they reached adulthood, the popular discourse that would surround their lives, families, and identities already firmly established and set, severely limiting their abilities to name and identify any more complex feelings about their adoptions, to validate their own histories, and to receive affirmation in those mixed feelings from those around them. (Chapter 4 describes the effects of these discourses on adoptees, as expressed by adoptees themselves, in greater detail.)

These stories functioned as a form of education in an era when there was little information about Asia available, due to strict legal exclusions that had barred Asian immigration

³¹ Photocopy of newspaper photo clipping, *Chicago's American*, June 28, 1962, Box 16, International Social Service Archives.

to the U.S. for decades.³² Americans instead were educated about Asia as a series of nations for which the U.S. had a parental responsibility, particularly in the context of the early Cold War.³³ Korea, divided at the 38th parallel between communist-controlled North and U.S.-aligned South at the end of World War II, became an important military and ideological battleground for the U.S. in its fight against communism. A 1953 *Life* editorial encouraged Americans to help “restore Korea to health and hope because of what Korea stands for in the history of Asia and of liberty”—the country, the editorial notes, has “the largest percentage of Christians of any Asian land”—by donating to the American-Korean Foundation to support U.S.-led efforts helping orphans in Korea.³⁴ What Korea needs, another article tells readers, more than even hospitals, doctors, and engineers, is “to belong” and to know that she “she has earned her place among the nations of the free world.”³⁵ An article on the relationships between the U.S. and the countries of east Asia, written by *Life*’s editor-in-chief Henry R. Luce, stresses that since the U.S. must be able to confront Soviet Russia from a position of great strength, “Communist Tyranny in China should be thoroughly shaken,” and Korea must be “made free,” for “all may be lost if she is not.” If Korea does become independent and “free,” Luce writes, “the United States will have played a great part in that re-birth of a nation.”³⁶

³² Park Nelson, *Invisible Asians*.

³³ See Jodi Kim, “An ‘Orphan’ with Two Mothers: Transnational and Transracial Adoption, the Cold War, and Contemporary Asian American Cultural Politics,” *American Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (2009): 855-880; Klein, “Family Ties and Political Obligation”; Pate, *From Orphan to Adoptee*; and Woo, *Framed by War*.

³⁴ “Helping Koreans Help Themselves,” *Life*, October 12, 1953, *Life Magazine Digital Archives*, https://books.google.com/books?id=pEYEAAAAMBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false.

³⁵ Dr. Howard A. Rusk, “Voice from Korea,” *Life*, June 7, 1954, *Life Magazine Digital Archives*, https://books.google.com/books?id=G1MEAAAAMBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false.

³⁶ Henry R. Luce, “America and Asia,” *Life*, February 23, 1953, *Life Magazine Digital Archives*, https://books.google.com/books?id=FEIEAAAAMBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false.

The U.S., therefore, had a crucial role to play in Korea, a nation, like the U.S., full of Christian people, and an openly acknowledged hinge in the fight against communism in east Asia. Relief efforts, Oh writes, “became a way for Americans to win ‘the allegiance of Asia.’”³⁷ U.S. Army General James A. Van Fleet argued that military victory in Korea was crucial, “for if Communism takes over all of Asia then the whole free world must eventually fall.”³⁸ If the U.S. effort in Korea ended without a decisive victory, and moreover, had contributed to a massive amount of devastation on the peninsula, the U.S. could still “salvage an ideological win by caring for Korea’s people and helping with reconstruction.”³⁹ Indeed, president of the Korean-American Fund Howard A. Rusk wrote in *Life* that in Korea, “U.S. soldiers who have had to devastate a country are voluntarily helping to reconstruct it” for the first time in history, a military use of humanitarianism that, as Pate points out, served as a canny public relations tool in softening the “image of the United States as colonizer and occupier, advancing the Cold War version of American exceptionalism.”⁴⁰ (The language of justification in Rusk’s statement—that U.S. soldiers *had* to devastate Korea—attempts to undercut the hypocrisy of military humanitarian efforts in the country.)

Klein writes that sentimentalized portrayals of adoption in this period figured a familial and parental relationship between the U.S. and Asia, instructing Americans on the primacy and importance of such family bonds as a way to sharply distinguish American-style democracy from communism.⁴¹ Even the earliest incorporation of Korean orphans into U.S. military camps was

³⁷ Oh, *To Save the Children of Korea*, 84.

³⁸ James G. Van Fleet, “The Truth About Korea: Part II: How We Can Win with What We Have,” *Life*, May 18, 1953, *Life Magazine Digital Archives*, https://books.google.com/books?id=l0YEAAAAMBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false.

³⁹ Oh, *To Save the Children of Korea*, 87.

⁴⁰ Pate, *From Orphan to Adoptee*, 35.

⁴¹ Klein, “Family Ties and Political Obligation,” 43-44.

depicted as quasi-familial, with orphaned children taken in as “mascots or houseboys” who were affectionately looked after by the GIs.⁴² These children quickly came to be referred to as “Amerasians,” signaling their mixed U.S. serviceman/Asian mother parentage. Doolan argues that the term “Amerasian” is a “Cold War construct” that served a political purpose: it called Americans to be invested in Asia and its wayward children, and by constructing Amerasians as children in need of rescue, the U.S. positioned itself as a pluralistic society safeguarding the world from communism.⁴³ Korea became an investment and a development project for the U.S., and children became the center of this effort to contain communism in Asia,⁴⁴ with organizations like the China Children’s Fund beginning to “advertise the idea of sponsoring a child as itself a way to defeat Communism.”⁴⁵ Author and adoption advocate Pearl S. Buck wrote that it was important both from a humanitarian and political perspective to adopt mixed-race GI babies, as those who remained could fall prey to “the worst Communist propaganda.”⁴⁶

The burden fell on Americans to do their part by sponsoring and adopting the at-risk Asian orphans left in the wake of conflict and war.⁴⁷ Adopting children from Asia was therefore not only the humanitarian and Christian thing to do: it was practically an issue of national security. Asian nations were a site of ideological tension, precarious places where the very real danger of a global collapse of democracy could be at any moment realized; over time, “Americans became ever more schooled in how to believe that only U.S. intervention could

⁴² Michael Rougier, “The Little Boy Who Wouldn’t Smile,” *Life*, July 23, 1951, *Life Magazine Digital Archives*, https://books.google.com/books?id=l04EAAAAMBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbg_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false.

⁴³ Yuri Doolan, *The First Amerasians: Mixed Race Koreans from Camptowns to America* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming), manuscript provided by the author.

⁴⁴ Woo, *Framed by War*.

⁴⁵ Briggs, *Somebody’s Children*, 143.

⁴⁶ Oh, *To Save the Children of Korea*, 88.

⁴⁷ See McKee, *Disrupting Kinship*.

solve the problem that U.S. intervention had wrought.”⁴⁸ That is, the sentimentalization of adoption of Asian children by U.S. families helped to assuage the contradictions of the U.S. attempting to woo a part of the world where the U.S. military seemed to routinely wreak devastation. The portrayals of such children unapologetically and effectively appealed to U.S. audiences’ pathos: DC-based aid organization Chinese Refugee Relief asked in a brochure featuring a large photo of a morose-looking Chinese child: “Communist Failed Her . . . Will We?”⁴⁹ Similarly, in 1954, Rusk wrote in *Life* of the “plight of children in a nation which needs

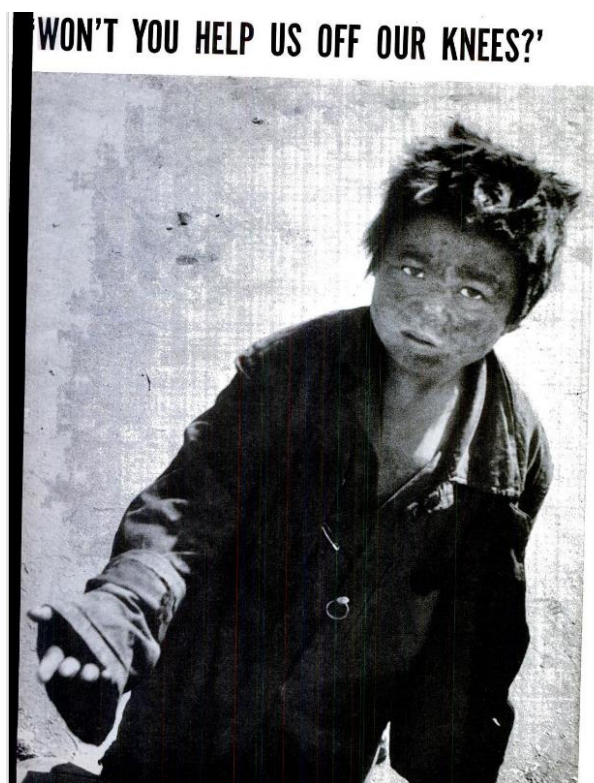


Figure 1.6. Photo and headline from *Life*, June 7, 1954, *Life* Digital Archive, published by Time Inc.

aid to rebuild itself.” The article included a large photo of a Korean “beggar child” with a dirty face, unkempt hair, and a too-large shirt, one hand outstretched toward the camera, below the words: “Won’t You Help Us Off Our Knees?”⁵⁰ As audiences were interpellated into the role of would-be rescuer of these individual children in need, these sentimentalized pleas focusing on the figures of individual needy children had the desired effect. After WAIF and the International Social Service were featured in a 1957 TV program depicting three stories of

international adoption, including a child from Korea, Americans were so moved that more than a

⁴⁸ Briggs, *Somebody’s Children*, 137.

⁴⁹ Pamphlet, “Communism Failed Her . . . Will We?”, Chinese Refugee Relief, n.d., Box 11, International Social Services Archives.

⁵⁰ Dr. Howard A. Rusk, “Voice from Korea,” *Life*, June 7, 1954, *Life Magazine Digital Archives*, https://books.google.com/books?id=G1MEAAAAMBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false.

thousand families wrote in; prospective parents wrote that their “hearts went out to these children, just waiting for some loving parents to want them and mother them,” and that they “would like to give some child with a dismal future a chance to grow up as a happy and loved individual.”⁵¹

Language that figured orphans and waifs as “waiting for loving parents to want them” implied that the children didn’t have parents who loved them and wanted them, when frequently the opposite was true—these children often had parents who loved them very much, but were unable to care for them; or, in exploitative scenarios that were nonetheless all too frequent, their parents had been coerced or lied to, told that the child would be temporarily housed in an orphanage, and then the child was given up for adoption without the parents’ knowledge or consent. Yet the depiction of such orphans as not just unfortunate but *unwanted* was a potent justification for adoption to the West. These Asian nations didn’t *want* these children, the discourse instructed Americans: they had been abandoned—not just by their parents, but by their countries of origin. The contrast between the prosperous U.S. and bleak conditions in Asia popularized the “idea that happiness begins in the United States.”⁵² Asian nations were “imagined as not only war-torn and impoverished, but also culturally backward,”⁵³ commonly depicted as overly focused on racial purity and therefore unaccepting of the many mixed race GIs left behind after the war. In addition to being dangerously adjacent to communist-controlled countries, Asian countries, cultures, and people, were pathologized in the media;⁵⁴ they were too homogenous, too entrenched in tradition, and unable to care for their abandoned children.⁵⁵

⁵¹ “ISS Featured on CBS Network Show,” ISS Public Relations Newsletter, February 1958, Box 5, Folder 26, “Public Relations ISS Newsletters, 1957-1971,” International Social Service Archives.

⁵² Choy, *Global Families*, 105.

⁵³ Choy, *Global Families*, 44.

⁵⁴ McKee, *Disrupting Kinship*.

⁵⁵ Choy, *Global Families*.

This was, in many cases, true—mixed-race children were “stigmatized as the children of prostitutes” in their home countries and seen as a threat to racial purity.⁵⁶ Yet as Choy has pointed out, these generalizations about Asian cultures “glossed over racism in the United States against Asian Americans, African Americans, and mixed race people.”⁵⁷ Furthermore, these depictions, serving as pervasive and justificatory calls to save children from their own people, further cemented popular U.S. notions of all Asian nations and cultures as equally and interchangeably inferior, contributing in a very lasting way to the common belief that “it would be far better for these children to be placed in the United States than to remain in Korea” or any other equally intolerant Asian country. In fact, Doolan argues that Americans’ emphasis on South Koreans as “racist and unwavering in their discrimination towards mixed race children” spurred welfare and adoption practices in Korea that actually ensured that Americans “retained control over mixed race children’s welfare” over Korean agencies and social workers.⁵⁸ Removing suffering children from Asia to the U.S., dominant discourse insisted, took them away from nations in which they surely could not thrive, away from poverty and homelessness, away from the clutches of communism, and away from their bigoted native cultures into the more tolerant and more progressive United States.

Directing the focus of conflict and anti-communist foreign policy onto repeated images and descriptions of Asian waifs and orphans flattened complex geopolitical relations into affective family bonds,⁵⁹ sentimentalizing foreign policy within the private realm of the family. Pate and others have described how the insistence on a paternal relationship between the U.S. and Korea, and between privileged white Americans and unfortunate Asian children, cemented

⁵⁶ Oh, *To Save the Children of Korea*, 7.

⁵⁷ Choy, *Global Families*, 22.

⁵⁸ Doolan, *The First Amerasians*, 136, 139.

⁵⁹ See Klein, “Family Ties and Political Obligation.”

and naturalized neocolonial relations between the U.S. and Korea, which developed a fully institutionalized child welfare system designed around sending children abroad.⁶⁰ And as transnational adoption discourse naturalized neocolonial relations between the U.S. and Asia for Americans, this imbalanced relationship was carried over into how Americans viewed, portrayed, talked about, and understood Asians and adoptees themselves.

Significant social and economic changes in Korea, in large part thanks to its close relationship with the U.S., had an important impact on the international adoption landscape. U.S. military occupation in Korea “threaded American militarism into the national fabric of South Korean politics, economics, and society,” and U.S. economic assistance programs that were implemented on the condition of adopting Western style capitalist policies to solve political and social problems in Korea secured “a relationship of dependency” between the two nations.⁶¹ Rapid industrialization of South Korea, the dissolution of traditional society and kinship networks, and the rapid rise of welfare systems predicated on the steady availability of Korean children for adoption to the West led to “tens of thousands of Korean children born by young factory workers and abandoned and declared foundlings.”⁶² By the 1980s, Korean adoption agencies had become highly profitable businesses with maternity shelters and homes for single, unwed mothers; international adoption from Korea peaked from 1984-1988 with 6,500-9,000 cases annually, “an amazing 1-1.4 percent of the country’s annual living births.”⁶³

South Korea cut back foreign adoptions after 1988. But by the late 1980s and early 1990s, a “market mentality” had begun to emerge around international adoption, when “demand in Western countries increased and outstripped the number of children available for developing

⁶⁰ Pate, *From Orphan to Adoptee*; Hübinette, *Comforting an Orphaned Nation*, 53-54.

⁶¹ Pate, *From Orphan to Adoptee*, 29.

⁶² Hübinette, *Comforting an Orphaned Nation*, 68.

⁶³ Hübinette, *Comforting an Orphaned Nation*, 72.

nations.”⁶⁴ Signs of a booming and fully institutionalized adoption industry were clear in the United States, and demand was high. Foreign adoption became even more popular, with a 1990 article reporting 2 million American couples seeking to adopt and only 25,000 children available domestically each year.⁶⁵ A woman told USA TODAY that she chose Korean adoption because “I wanted to adopt an infant” and the waiting list for an American baby was “horrendous,” but the list for a Korean baby was much shorter.⁶⁶ Adoption became a front-page story, with *Time* running a cover story called “Want a Baby?” in 1989 that warned, “No one ever said adoption was easy—but as the market tightens and competition soars, options for parents are more intricate than ever.” The article described parents, now unable to turn to South Korea for a ready supply of babies, turning to other countries like Thailand, India, and Peru as “possible sources.”⁶⁷ Interest in adoption from other countries soared, with *OURS/Adoptive Families* magazine, a popular and long-running magazine for prospective and current adoptive families, running articles and advice pieces on adoption from Haiti, India, Ecuador, Brazil, Vietnam, Mexico, the Philippines, Peru, Siberia, China, Guatemala, Russia, Belarus, Ethiopia, and more throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Ads for adoption agencies in *OURS/Adoptive Families* swelled, with 16 pages of ads in a 1997 issue for adoption services, lawyers, and agencies, often specializing in certain regions of the world.

Additionally, adoption as a form of foreign aid had become an important bedrock of individual U.S. responses to crises overseas. An interest arose in adopting Romanian children after the fall of Nicolae Ceaușescu in 1989; a woman from Virginia was described by the

⁶⁴ Alexandra Young, “Developments in Intercountry Adoption: From Humanitarian Aid to Market-Driven Policy and Beyond,” (*Adoption & Fostering* 36, no. 2, 2012), 73.

⁶⁵ Mary Jordan, “Fairfax Woman Rescues Orphan from Romania,” *Washington Post*, July 15, 1990, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1990/07/15/fairfax-woman-rescues-orphan-from-romania/869a2c86-f189-44da-af62-bc9aa152cacb/>.

⁶⁶ Barbara Bisantz Raymond, “Foreign-born, USA-bred,” *USA TODAY*, n.d., Box 16, William Pierce Files.

⁶⁷ Nancy Gibbs, “The Baby Chase,” *Time*, October 9, 1989, Box 18, William Pierce Files.

Washington Post as having “rescued an orphan from Romania,”⁶⁸ and actress Jessica Lange made a trip in 1993 and described on her “horror” at the “plight of the 80,000 abandoned youngsters living in institutions” on Capitol Hill.⁶⁹ *Adoptive Families* noted in a sidebar in 1994 that despite the collapse of the Rwandan government, Rwandan orphans were “not yet available for adoption.”⁷⁰ Demand for needy foreign babies from countries plagued with misfortune grew so high that *OURS* magazine, the precursor to *Adoptive Families*, first ran an article in 1989 lamenting that adoption from Japan was “rare and difficult,” then followed up with a reader’s



Figure 1.7. Advertisement, *OURS*, September/October 1979, Volume 12, Number 5, New Hope Media, New York, NY.

comment in the next issue reminding would-be parents that “no news is good news” in Japan, as having fewer available babies to adopt meant that the country had the stability and resources to care for its children.⁷¹ Calls both implicit and explicit to rescue children from desperate situations in impoverished regions of the world continued unabated, frequently couched in religious

justifications. A 1979 ad by the Bible and Literacy League asked readers to sponsor a “precious Indian child” who will be fed, housed, educated and “best of all shown and taught the saving

⁶⁸ Mary Jordan, “Fairfax Woman Rescues Orphan from Romania,” *Washington Post*, July 15, 1990, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1990/07/15/fairfax-woman-rescues-orphan-from-romania/869a2c86-f189-44da-af62-bc9aa152cacb/>.

⁶⁹ Lois Romano, “The Reliable Source,” *Washington Post*, May 6, 1993, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1993/05/06/the-reliable-source/9b7352f4-e6ec-4521-bb7f-cfa99f5a909f/>.

⁷⁰ “Rwandan Orphans Not Yet Eligible for Adoption,” *Adoptive Families*, November/December 1994, Volume 27, Number 6, New Hope Media (private archive), 108 W. 39th Street Suite 805, New York, NY 10018.

⁷¹ “Special Update on Japan,” *OURS*, July/August 1989; “Roundtable,” *OURS*, September/October 1989. New Hope Media.

love of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”⁷² A 1980 letter described the work that *OURS* partner, the International Mission of Hope, had undertaken in “bringing hope to abandoned children” in what was then Calcutta: “Indians do not abandon their children with the frequency that is found in Oriental countries. Therefore, if a child does come to us for adoption, we can assume that the most drastic circumstances caused the abandonment . . .”⁷³ One ad for an agency called Americans for African Adoptions depicted two side-by-side photos, one of a small Black girl named Kelem in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, shown unsmiling, wearing a smudged sweater and with what



Figure 1.8. Advertisement, *Adoptive Families*, September/October/November 1997, Volume 30, Number 5, New Hope Media, New York, NY.

appears to be dirt on her face, alongside a photo of a beaming Kelem with her white American mother, wearing a flouncy white dress and earrings: this is Kelem six years later, a “5th grade A/B student in America.” “So many ‘African Angels’ like Kelem need a Family,” the ad insists. “She found hers, will the others find you?”⁷⁴

One characteristic of this period in adoption discourse is the rapid diversification of sending countries and attendant extension of paternalist logic of rescue and charity to children

⁷² Advertisement, “Gift of Love,” Bible and Literacy League, *OURS*, September/October 1979, Volume 12, Number 5, New Hope Media.

⁷³ “IMH – Bringing Hope to Abandoned Children,” *OURS*, July/August 1980, Volume 13, Number 4, New Hope Media.

⁷⁴ Advertisement, Americans for African Adoptions, Inc., *Adoptive Families*, September/October/November 1997, Volume 30, Number 5, New Hope Media.

from all sending countries in the “third world.” Still, specific paternalistic attention to Korea and other Asian countries persisted, playing on the same themes of East vs. West that had emerged three decades prior. In 1980, *OURS* ran a spread on Korean orphanages helped by aid from the magazine and its contributors;⁷⁵ in 1979, the magazine ran an article on the need for the adoption of Amerasian children.⁷⁶ In 1998, *Adoptive Families* ran a feature on the “Miraculous Transition of Chinese Orphans” called “From Surviving to Thriving,” which detailed the story of an infant girl (re)named Ana, adopted by a white couple who, upon first picking her up in Hefei, noticed her bad cold, cough, “eczematous cheeks,” and “emaciated body.” Ana was also fixated on watching her own fingers. The article describes this as a “familiar story”: many Chinese girls who are adopted have upper respiratory infections, the author wrote, and her finger fixation can be explained by the fact that “the baby’s fingers are her only toys.” The author concludes:

Ana’s story is quite typical of children adopted from orphanages in China. Obviously some children are more delayed than others. . . . Chinese orphans are hardy little survivors. They seem to have inherent—almost magical—survival skills that allow them to overcome adverse conditions.⁷⁷

The conditions in China, in other words, are uniquely awful, forcing even the smallest of children to adapt in ways that will require patience from their adoptive parents. Once more we also see descriptors of physical ailment, shoring up the general impression of Chinese orphans as sickly and in desperate need of help and attention. This helps to individuate the children as “magical” survivors against the backdrop of a country that isn’t able to care for them, encouraging a focus on the eligibility of individual children for rescue.

⁷⁵ “OURS Aid in Korea,” *OURS*, July/August 1980, Volume 13, Number 4, New Hope Media.

⁷⁶ “Fathered by Americans: Plight of Amerasians,” *OURS*, November/December 1979, Volume 12, Number 6, New Hope Media.

⁷⁷ Dr. Jane Ellen Aronson, “From Surviving to Thriving,” *Adoptive Families*, November/December 1998, Volume 31, Number 6, New Hope Media.

China had overtaken Korea in foreign adoptions by the early 1990s. This was driven in part by the impact of China's one child policy, which led to a high number of girls available for adoption,⁷⁸ but it was also helped significantly by South Korea's decision to reduce overseas adoptions in 1989. In 1988, Seoul hosted the Summer Olympic Games, an opportunity showcase a proud, "democratised and industrialised Korea" to the world.⁷⁹ But Western media took an interest in Korea's adoption program, with NBC's Bryant Gumbel reporting that "children constituted Korea's 'largest export.'"⁸⁰ The *New York Times*, reporting that 6,000 Korean children are adopted by American families every year, questioned the fact that this "flow of children overseas," which began when South Korea was poor, still continues when the country "boasts skyscrapers."⁸¹ The *Los Angeles Times* called South Korea "one of the world's leading exporters of 'orphans.'"⁸² And the *Washington Post* placed the blame squarely on Korea: "Instead of halting the adoptions after the pool of war orphans dried up, South Korea continued the program on the assumption that the impoverished nation could not care for some of its children, especially those born to unwed mothers."⁸³ Writers pointed to the prevalence of Confucianism in Korea as an explanation, noting that "very few Korean families are willing to take in children who are not blood relations."⁸⁴ Korea, it seems, couldn't win in the eyes of the U.S.: first too poor and too ideologically precarious to raise its own children, it had become, after

⁷⁸ Young, "Developments in Intercountry Adoption."

⁷⁹ Hübinette, *Comforting an Orphaned Nation*, 73.

⁸⁰ Eleana Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 32.

⁸¹ Susan Chira, "SEOUL JOURNAL; Babies for Export: And Now the Painful Questions," *New York Times*, April 21, 1988, *The Times Digital Archive*, <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/04/21/world/seoul-journal-babies-for-export-and-now-the-painful-questions.html>.

⁸² Sam Jameson, "Keeping Them Home: Orphan—A Shame Fades in S. Korea," *Los Angeles Times*, September 1, 1989, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1989-09-01-mn-1466-story.html>.

⁸³ Peter Maass, "Adoptions: Korea's Disquieting Problem," *Washington Post*, December 14, 1988, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1988/12/14/adoptions-koreas-disquieting-problem/045b4a05-1f07-4189-9632-f161f8d79f24/>.

⁸⁴ Chira, "SEOUL JOURNAL; Babies for Export"; Jameson, "Keeping Them Home."

adopting Western-style industrialization, too greedy and too “Confucian” to stop exporting its children. Obscured in these criticisms was the fact that South Korea had implemented Western style capitalist policies to respond to domestic political and social problems because U.S. economic assistance (the U.S. spent nearly \$3 billion in economic and military aid to Korea between 1953-62) was conditional upon their doing so.⁸⁵ As Kimberly McKee writes, U.S. criticism of Korea’s adoption practices was “ironic . . . given the United States’ role in instituting adoption as a de facto social welfare policy in Korea nearly thirty years prior.”⁸⁶

The Olympics was a turning point for Korean adoption, with the Korean government significantly curtailing foreign adoptions starting almost immediately. Still, U.S. critiques of Korea’s “baby industry” did not change the fact that white Americans felt, and continued to feel, entitled to children from Asia and from “third world” countries around the globe. The pages of *OURS/Adoptive Families* was full stories of would-be adoptive parents, usually white women, who were frustrated with the various forces that often seemed to conspire to keep them apart from “their” children, whether infertility, lack of availability of children, the long and challenging foreign adoption process, or even God. A poem in *OURS* in 1983 described the writer’s suffering when she and her husband failed to conceive even when her best friend and sister easily got pregnant: “I would be a good Mom, / Why me, Lord, why me? / Is it possible you know something / That I cannot see?” Eventually, however, after applying for adoption, she receives good news:

The phone finally rang
 “We’ve a daughter for you.”
 I couldn’t believe it,
 My Kimberly Sue. . . .

⁸⁵ Pate, *From Orphan to Adoptee*.

⁸⁶ Kimberly McKee, *Disrupting Kinship: Transnational Politics of Korean Adoption in the United States* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 36.

Her eyes were like almonds
 Her face slightly tan
 I understand now, Lord,
 That this was your plan.⁸⁷

Another woman wrote that she and her husband “felt we had a special tie” to needy Korean children because they had visited orphanages in Korea. They expected a short wait for a baby but were dismayed and frustrated by delays, which caused “enough trouble with Berry Kim’s arrival to last a lifetime.” (Their son, Berry Kim, is described as “A Gift from Korea.”)⁸⁸ A Minnesota woman who had already adopted two children wrote of wanting to adopt another, seeing a child named Juan Diego’s photo, and being “overwhelmed with the knowledge that this was to be my son. I got excited!” She prayed to God to convince her husband to “let him know as You’ve let me know that this child is ours.”⁸⁹ There is a clear sense of possession in these narratives, as indicated through the repeated use of pronouns like *my* (“my Kimberly Sue,” “this was to be my son”) and *ours* (“this child is ours”). In their stories, couples and mothers regularly describe to-be-adopted children using language that clearly suggests that the child “belonged” to them even before the adoption took place. Through their own writings, adoptive parents depict a powerful sense of entitlement to the child that they have selected and chosen, with that sense of proprietary ownership over the child often beginning when the parent sees their first photo of the child. This intense and unreasonable “bond” with the child’s photo was even a source of trouble for one mother, who wrote that her daughter, upon arrival, “looked nothing like her photograph” and was “nothing like the young lady I had constructed in my brain” based on the photo that she had “bonded” with.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Susan Orban, “Tears,” *OURS*, January/February 1983, Volume 16, Number 1, New Hope Media.

⁸⁸ Jane S. Everhart, “Berry Kim: Our Gift from Korea,” *OURS*, July/August 1982, Volume 15, Number 4, New Hope Media.

⁸⁹ Anacleta Walters, “When God Takes Over,” *OURS*, May/June 1981, Volume 14, Number 3, New Hope Media.

⁹⁰ Leslie Alexander, “In My Mind’s Eye,” *OURS*, January/February 1989, Volume 22, Number 1, New Hope Media.

The entitlement many would-be adoptive mothers felt towards foreign children was especially clear in cases where the adoption was not able to ultimately take place. One woman, whose adoption of an Indian baby was halted because of the “strict, conservative Bombay courts,” wrote of her anguish: “It is clearly time . . . to accept the fact that my beautiful Indian son will never be with me physically; Anshul will always be with me *in my heart*” (emphasis original).⁹¹ Another couple wrote that “It Doesn’t Seem Fair” that their would-be adoption of a Native American girl whom they had previously cared for was on hold because “Indians are given priority”:

Where is this home? How long are children kept in suspended animation because of said factors? . . . What is to guarantee that an American Indian child placed in such a home will grow up and perform the way the tribe is expecting them to, simply on a racial basis? . . . They tell us nothing except not to get our hopes up. But how do you do that for a little child (and who cares what color) that you’ve rocked to sleep at night, watched eat (or gum) their first French fry at McDonalds . . . worried about [a] cold and had a doctor tell you “you worry too much?”⁹²

The language in the former case expresses a belief that the child, Anshul, is *already* the woman’s “beautiful Indian son,” even though the adoption never took place. She therefore describes herself as feeling the grief of someone who has lost a child, even though he “will never be with me physically.” In the second case, the couple suggest that they have a preexisting claim to the child that should trump the desires of the child’s kinship network, especially because it appears to them that, much like children from Korea, China, and Vietnam years earlier, these children have been abandoned and let down by their own people. Their language suggests that it is actually these would-be parents who are best situated to care for the girl because of what they feel is their unique love for her. These stories all share the same underlying belief: that these

⁹¹ Carolyn Shafer, “The Broken Threads of Hope,” *OURS* March/April 1983, Volume 16, Number 2, New Hope Media.

⁹² Dan & Linda McAllister, “It Doesn’t Seem Fair . . .,” *OURS*, July/August 1979, Volume 12, Number 4, New Hope Media.

white American would-be parents offer a special kind of love, and a kind of life, that makes them uniquely deserving to care for this child over any other parent figure, including the child's own kin; and that their having chosen this particular child for this life with them makes that child *theirs* through a kind of spiritual bond that still somehow excludes the experience and feelings of the child herself and often defies the material reality of the relationship or situation.

These narratives and expressed beliefs were possible because, as they had done decades prior, people still believed unquestioningly that adoptable children were suffering children, and that adoption to the U.S. was their best chance to survive and to thrive. Increasingly, people expressed a belief that the to-be-adopted children, often those waiting in orphanages, were eagerly waiting to be adopted by U.S. families. One Minnesota woman wrote a poem called "The Ballad of the Orphan Girl," about an imagined little girl named Mi Lee who was left to "face the world, the hard cruel world" in an orphanage:

The years have numbered five in all
 But many and many a time
 She longed to be the one to leave
 With parents, oh so kind! . . .

A tear drops down from eyes so red
 And hits the window sill.
 Mi Lee is left another day
 To wait—and wish—until . . .⁹³

It may have been written 25 years later, but the poem is in many ways a sentimentalized version of the 1954 *Life* article with the photo of a Korean beggar child, titled: "Won't You Help Us Off Our Knees?" The fixation with the orphan child as unfortunate waif and the fiction of the child asking Americans directly and plaintively for help has remained, as well as the fantasy of Western rescue solving their problems through altruistic intervention. These justifications for

⁹³ Nancy Johnson, "The Ballad of an Orphan Girl," *OURS*, March/April 1979, Volume 12, Number 2, New Hope Media.

white adoption of nonwhite foreign children were potent, and the compulsion to erase the to-be-adopted child's ties to their past very powerful. In 1987, John Rosemond, an influential family psychologist with a nationally syndicated parenting column and several popular books on parenting already under his belt, wrote in the *Des Moines Register* that "an adopted child has one set of parents," the couple who "accepted and carried out the daily responsibilities of raising him. Giving birth does not necessarily a parent make." He felt "an injustice had been done" in a case where a birth mother sought out the son she had given up for adoption decades earlier and initiated contact—an event he found "greatly disturbing."⁹⁴ Rosemond, who is conservative and whose work is strongly, if not overtly, influenced by his Christianity, offers here a more modern interpretation of the evangelical Christian justifications of the 1950s and '60s: the Asian waif, newly rescued, who must be absorbed into white American homes is a child with only "one set of parents," who should be thanked for their act of selflessness with exclusive loyalty. A few years later, an anonymous adoptive mother even wrote in *Adoptive Families* that contact between an adoptee and their birth mother isn't advisable because it might "increase an international birthmother's pain."⁹⁵ And while many articles throughout the 1980s and '90s in *Adoptive Families/OURS* discussed trips back to children's home countries, attempts to minimize or head off the surfacing of trauma recurred: one woman warned against "[traipsing] off with impressionable young children without knowledge about the information that may be found" in the child's birth country,⁹⁶ while another mother expressed concern over "the growing mood to

⁹⁴ Photocopy of clipping, John Rosemond, "Adopted child has one set of parents," *Des Moines Register*, September 20, 1987, Box 14, William Pierce Files.

⁹⁵ Anonymous author, "Oceans Apart," *Adoptive Families*, November/December 1994, Volume 27, Number 6, New Hope Media.

⁹⁶ Mary Ann Curran, "Returning Home—Without the Trauma," *OURS*, January/February 1988, Volume 21, Number 1, New Hope Media.

focus on adoption as a trauma to dwell upon, search out, dramatize, and point to as the cause or reason for all that our children feel or experience”:

[H]er adoption . . . is a fact of her, and our, lives, just like the fact that she’s a girl, has brown hair, is great at math, and tells great jokes. We celebrate how our family was formed. . . . But we don’t dwell on it.⁹⁷

The author describes essentially a fantasy in which family separation has no significant role to play in her child’s inner life. As a small child, of course, her daughter is subject to her own mother’s insistence that “we don’t dwell on” her own adoption, a statement that functions more as a performative speech act than a definite descriptor of reality. This author may have been surprised to read the account in the very next issue of *OURS*, in which a mother described her three-year-old adopted daughter’s disjointed recollections of her past in Korea and feeling “ashamed of how easily I had decided that her past wasn’t important. How could I have ever thought that her first three years didn’t count?”⁹⁸ Dominant narratives clearly insisted that adoption was not inherently or necessarily a trauma, instead providing a series of potent justifications for what one mother described as “adoption mania” and “obsession”⁹⁹ based on depictions of needy orphans and waifs, fantasies about foreign children’s desperation and desire to be adopted to the U.S., and the insistence that U.S. aid was not just welcome but necessary, all elements of a discursive formation that had been introduced into U.S. adoption discourse decades prior and had by now permeated the well-established networks and institutions servicing foreign adoptions.

⁹⁷ Judy L. Heitfield, “Roundtable: How Much is Too Much?”, *OURS*, May/June 1990, Volume 23, Number 3, New Hope Media Archives, 108 W. 39th Street Suite 805, New York, NY 10018.

⁹⁸ Judy Williams, “Amy Remembers,” *OURS*, July/August 1990, Volume 23, Number 4, New Hope Media.

⁹⁹ Linda Edwards Babb, “Adoption Mania,” *OURS*, November/December 1988, Volume 21, Number 6, New Hope Media.

These justifications combined with the intense marketization of adoption, increased visibility of adoption as a practice, the availability of children around the world, the ever-increasing use of adoption as a family-based solution to global inequity, and the dominance of adoptive parent voices in the media contributed to further objectification of foreign adopted children. Foreign adoption had developed into a fully realized market economy in the United States, with adoptive parents as target consumers. Advertisements abounded in the 1980s and 1990s in *OURS/Adoptive Families* for adoption agencies and services reassuring adoptive parents of short wait times (“We specialize in placing you with *a newborn infant* in an *average 12 month waiting period*,” boasts one 1990 ad.¹⁰⁰) Children are referred to as “gifts” and “prizes” (as in, “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize!”, a story of a happy adoption ending after a couple’s “son in India” was claimed by his biological parents)¹⁰¹. The emphasis remained primarily on children—newborns and babies, preferably—whose pasts and birth families could be more easily overlooked. Foreign children were still figured as unfortunate waifs in need of American assistance; indeed, the term “waif” was still in use in 1996 to refer to Chinese orphans, as indicated in an *Adoptive Families* article detailing a white family’s adoption of a child first described as an “unsmiling three and a half year old waif.”¹⁰²

Dong Soo Kim has noted that adoption of children from “third world countries and former Communist bloc countries” to the U.S. suggests a “deepening division between the ‘have and have-not countries’”: “International adoption practice is now a long-term, worldwide phenomenon of exploitation whereby nonwhite children from poor nations are transferred to

¹⁰⁰ Advertisement, *OURS*, May/June 1990, Volume 23, Number 3, New Hope Media.

¹⁰¹ Mr. & Mrs. Bob Feldten, “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize!”, *OURS*, July/August 1979, Volume 12, Number 4, New Hope Media.

¹⁰² Rebecca Helgesen, “From East to West: One Child’s Journey,” *Adoptive Families*, January/February 1996, Volume 21, Number 6, New Hope Media.

families in rich, white nations.”¹⁰³ Indeed, the word “transfer,” imbued with its sense of ready movement in a globalized world, suggests the ease of mobility with which dominant discourse has framed the movement of adopted foreign children, particularly from Asia and countries that are seen to be unfit for raising them. Characterized as objects, simple, uncomplicated, and perhaps most importantly, non-autonomous, these waifs are subject to involuntary movement by U.S. colonial impulse translated to the intimate domain of the family, with paternalistic justifications assuring the public and adoptive parents that this is the best and right thing to do. The paternalism of discourse then becomes embedded in the relationship between white America and the foreign adoptees themselves, especially Asian Americans.

Take, for instance, a 2016 interview conducted by the *Hollywood Reporter* with filmmaker Woody Allen, in which he was asked about his wife, Soon-Yi Previn. Previn, the daughter of Allen’s ex-partner, Mia Farrow, was adopted from Korea around the age of seven. (Allen adopted two of Farrow’s adopted children, Dylan and Moses, after they became a couple, though he did not adopt Previn.) In 1992 Farrow discovered that Allen and Previn, who was around 21 years old at the time (he was 56), were having an affair; the two married in 1997. When asked how Previn has changed him, Allen replied:

Oh, well, one of the great experiences of my life has been my wife. She had a very, very difficult upbringing in Korea: She was an orphan on the streets, living out of trash cans and starving . . . I’ve been able to really make her life better. I provided her with enormous opportunities, and she has sparked to them. She’s educated herself and has tons of friends and children and got a college degree and went to graduate school, and she has traveled all over with me now. She’s very sophisticated and has been to all the great capitals of Europe. She has just become a different person. So the contributions I’ve made to her life have given me more pleasure than all my films.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Dong Soo Kim, “A Country Divided: Contextualizing Adoption from a Korean Perspective,” in *International Korean Adoption: A Fifty-Year History of Policy and Practice*, edited by Kathleen Ja Sook Bergquist et al. (Binghamton, NY: The Haworth Press, 2007), 17.

¹⁰⁴ Stephen Galloway, “The Woody Allen Interview (Which He Won’t Read),” *Hollywood Reporter*, May 4, 2016, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/features/woody-allen-interview-he-wont-889678>.

Allen turns a question about how his wife has changed him into a response about he has “really made her life better”—how he has transformed her, by his hand, from an orphan “living out of trash cans” into a sophisticated person with all the hallmarks of Western success. In fact, *she* has “become a different person,” while he has remained the same. The paternalism evident in his claim that he has “provided her with enormous opportunities” that she has “sparked to” (as a child might do) and that the improvement he has wrought in her life has given *him* pleasure is clear, as is the objectification of Previn. Allen credits himself with having moved her, developed her, shaped her, from waif to sophisticated quasi-American woman. He elides her rescue from her impoverished life in Korea with the fact that he has “made her life better” (though it was Farrow, of course, who adopted Previn as a child, and not Allen). Allen frames Previn as a waif who was lucky to be saved by him, and she cannot escape this figuration: though she is the paragon of the assimilated upper class foreigner, having attended college and graduate school, traveled, and “been to all the great capitals of Europe,” she still retains a perpetual foreignness, bearing the mark of a former “orphan in the streets” in Korea.

One year after Allen’s *Hollywood Reporter* interview, commentator Arthur C. Brooks wrote an op-ed for the *New York Times* titled “Let’s Restart the Adoption Movement.” It was an attempt to encourage more people to adopt to meet the need created by the “more than 15 million children around the world who have lost both of their parents.” The piece’s opening line, “Giving to charity makes you happier, healthier and even richer,” summarizes recent research Brooks had conducted that prompted his wife, who had “just read that there are millions of abandoned little girls in China,” to suggest that they adopt.¹⁰⁵ The relationship for Brooks and his wife between charity and adoption of “abandoned little girls” from China is direct and unabashed. The theme

¹⁰⁵ Arthur C. Brooks, “Let’s Restart the Adoption Movement,” *New York Times*, November 17, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/17/opinion/restart-the-adoption-movement.html>.

of foreign adoption as a form of aid in which Americans rescue Asian children is evidently alive and well.

The cultural context has changed, however. Brooks cites dramatically declining numbers of foreign adoptions by U.S. families between the mid-2000s and 2016, which had come as a surprise to Brooks and his wife, who had imagined themselves to be “part of a foreign adoption movement”:

We were sure that enlightened public policy would continue to loosen regulations, which would make for more and more miracles like ours. Blended international families of choice were the wave of the future, we thought, and a reflection of an increasingly shared belief in a radical solidarity that transcended borders and biology.¹⁰⁶

Brooks unintentionally paints himself into an ideological corner: adoption in his characterization is both an act of condescension and one of radical acceptance. He and his wife have built a family the progressive way, thinking outside the limitations of borders and biology; yet their stated motivation is charity, in which the adoptive parent bestows the gift of a future in the U.S. as an escape from dire circumstances of origin. Like Allen, who has derived pleasure from “bettering” his wife’s life, Brooks also posits that charitable acts like foreign adoption of waifs from unpleasant countries can bring happiness, health, and wealth to the adopter.

The doubled and contradictory nature of adoption is most clearly illustrated by Brooks’ penultimate paragraph, in which Brooks both makes the case for his daughter’s well-adjusted place in their “blended international family” and simultaneously marks her as object:

Today, my daughter is a freshman in high school. She spends too much time on Instagram but is killing it in her classes. . . . I don’t know or care what my daughter has done for my income or health. But my happiness? It spikes every time she looks at me and I remember the magic day we met.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Brooks, “Let’s Restart the Adoption Movement.”

¹⁰⁷ Brooks, “Let’s Restart the Adoption Movement.”

Like the adopted Asian orphans and waifs decades earlier, Brooks' daughter happily bears the hallmarks of having been fully Americanized, growing beyond the stagnant roots of her birth country: Instagram and academic performance have replaced blue jeans and a taste for meat and potatoes, but the theme is the same, as are the rhetorical moves that mark the child—here, something that “spikes” Brooks' happiness—as object, despite claims to equal incorporation into American whiteness. It would be unacceptable today to write that a child is “as American as any [child]” “except for the Oriental slant to his eyes,” but modern public discourse on adoption has found ways to express the same sentiment.

Another modern and apparently progressive approach to transnational adoption discourse comes from NPR host Scott Simon, who, in 2010, published a book called *Baby, We Were Meant for Each Other: In Praise of Adoption*, which details his and his wife's journey to adopting two little girls from China. In an interview, Simon expressed that adoption was “not a trauma,” because human beings are “wired to take care of children who have been abandoned, who need families and need to love, and to reach our arms down and out and to bring them into our lives.”¹⁰⁸ Simon mentions war and battlefield victors over the course of history who have picked up children from the “embers” of a territory they'd just defeated and raising them, suggesting that adoption has an ancient and global history; if it's nothing new, he implies, it shouldn't be considered a trauma (although it is hard to imagine a more traumatic history than the wartime fantasy he describes). He, too, figures adoptees as “abandoned” children waiting to be picked up from whatever barren foreign ground on which they find themselves, lifted up and saved by white American love. In so doing, he is consistent with decades of discourse that has predominantly figured would-be adoptees as not just in need of care but unloved—when, of

¹⁰⁸ Enrique Cerna, “Scott Simon,” *Conversations at KCTS 9*, aired November 21, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DO51xQNjOIk>.

course, children who have been given up for adoption are often very loved, by their birth parents and foster parents. The figuration of adoptable children as lying on the barren and empty ground waiting only for a white U.S. parent to rescue them conveniently rhetorically erases the child's history and past, rendering them readily available for literal and figural movement by their U.S. rescuer parent. Simon deemphasizes the significance of mobility by rooting a case for its painlessness and frictionlessness in a global prehistory, and like Brooks, he gestures at the border- and biology-transcending promises of such universal forms of love. Yet also like Brooks, he contradictorily stresses the importance of white U.S. paternalistic control of mobility by stressing the benefits of such movement: "Our little girls from China are actually I think going to stand a substantially better chance of getting to know the majesty and the grandeur of Chinese civilization and Chinese culture by growing up here, with us."¹⁰⁹ It's a reach to say so, but Simon couches this assertion, as we will see, in critiques of modern day China that follow the rhetorical pattern of East vs. West that has characterized adoption discourse for 70 years.

In keeping with past decades of discourse around adoption from Asia, Simon views foreign adoption as a form of rescue of children who can't be expected to flourish in their native countries otherwise. The repeated reference, for Simon, for Brooks, and all those who came before them, to adoptable Asian children as "abandoned" justifies their removal to the U.S. by figuring their birth parent(s) and countries as callous or careless, and therefore imagining the children as no longer having lasting or important ties to their birth countries. Simon solidifies the theme of birth country-as-harmful by claiming that his children would have likely "spent their lives in an orphanage and were slotted into factory or farm work by the age of twelve" had he and his wife not adopted them. He ventures further to add that for "hundreds of millions of

¹⁰⁹ Cerna, "Scott Simon."

Chinese people and young Chinese women in particular,” it’s even worse: “That would have been if they were lucky. There are also millions of young Chinese women that, well . . . it’s too terrible to contemplate.”¹¹⁰

Simon’s protracted rumination on this purely hypothetical fantasy of his daughters’ ill fate had they not been saved from it through adoption is revealing: in its unapologetic excess, it voices an unquestioned belief in the universal perniciousness of Chinese culture toward women, and a not-insignificant sense of affective pleasure in having facilitated this rescue of these would-be Chinese prostitutes. Simon’s previously stated belief that his girls would better learn the “majesty and grandeur of Chinese civilization” by “growing up here, with us” is a clear enough indicator that he knows little about China; here, he fills in the gaps with his own imagination, supplemented and supported by an already firmly established discursive formation that makes imagining Asian orphans as dangerously vulnerable to terrible lives in their home countries uncontroversial—a given, in fact, so well baked into white liberal understandings of Asian transnational adoptees that Simon both sees, and feels comfortable voicing, the inevitability of his daughters become child laborers or prostitutes had he not altruistically rescued them from this fate. The same paternalism that drove Americans to “help [Koreans] off their knees” in the 1950s and to save Chinese and Vietnamese orphans from overcrowded orphanages or lives on the street—with the accompanying certainty that they will die without this intervention by U.S. families—is at work in Simon’s words six decades later. Though disguised in language of modern-day globalization, including Simon’s insistence that he “doesn’t want our little girls to grow up with any feeling of gratitude or obligation”¹¹¹ and references to the universalizing power of kinship and familial love across borders, his justifications reveal an

¹¹⁰ Cerna, “Scott Simon.”

¹¹¹ Cerna, “Scott Simon.”

objectifying impulse, an obliteration of the past, and a belief that Chinese orphans are in need of saving because their native country is unfit, discursive themes that did not originate with him, nor are they limited to him. Even the rumination on what his daughters' fate might have been aligns with earlier preoccupations with the dire conditions in which orphans and waifs lived, like Allen describing Previn's early life in Korea "eating out of trash cans."

Decades of globalization and increasingly progressive attitudes toward "blended families" has not, it seems, changed the tendency toward rhetorical framings of Asian adoptable children as orphaned waifs, and Asia itself as backwards, dirty, unable to care for its children, and regressive. Simon's children, like Brooks' and like Previn, are lucky, it is strongly implied, to have been saved from these places. And even as these adoptive parents' children (or, in Allen's case, wife) grow into Asian American adults, the ways they are talked about and treated in discourse still echo these same paternalist and objectifying sentiments, rooted in six decades of paternalist discourse toward Asia revolving around the figure of the waif, freezing the adoptee as a perpetual child, without proper autonomy of their own.

Asian American adoptees are the ones who bear the consequences of these discursive formations. If the figure of the suffering Asian waif has not changed for six decades, then Asian American adoptees themselves have also found themselves frozen as perpetual child figures in dominant public discourse, largely unable to speak or convey the complexities of their experience. The paternalist relationship cemented over six decades of discourse between white and Asian adoptee America have resulted in a single, narrowly defined space for adoptees to inhabit: that of the "good, happy subject,"¹¹² frozen in time like the photo of Kang Koo Ri, wearing American clothes and a smile as he rides an American carousel. And as we will see in

¹¹² McKee, *Disrupting Kinship*, 11.

the next chapter, the racial dimensions of this relationship between white America and Asian American adoptees have a profound impact on the ways both groups imagine belonging and kinship in the United States.

CHAPTER THREE

“Korean-born, Not Korean Anymore”: Transnational, Transracial Adoptees and the Myths of Postracialism

In the June 29, 1962 edition of the Painesville, OH newspaper *The Telegraph*, an article appeared, titled, “Chinese tot finds love in Mentor Village home.” It describes a child named Sue Lei, a 20-month-old orphan from Hong Kong. Sue Lei’s adoptive parents, the article says, had to weigh the decision to adopt her into their family, which already included a little girl and “three of the most active, all-American boys imaginable.” In the end, she was a welcome addition. “We like her because she’s oriental and not just like any other girl,” Sue Lei’s new brother, David, says. The article tells us that the family “agreed ‘there may be some prejudice’ when Sue Lei is a little older and starts school, ‘but it shouldn’t bother her too much if she gets enough love at home.’ And there’s no question about that.”¹

A similar happy tale about an adopted orphan from Hong Kong appeared in the *New York World Telegram* on May 28 of the same year, in an article describing the dire conditions of Chinese orphans in Hong Kong and the International Social Service’s work finding homes for them. ISS Director Susan T. Pettis tells of a “tiny, Chinese boy” who arrived in the U.S. two years prior “dressed in a quilted satin coat and cap”: “‘Recently I received a picture of this same little boy from his parents. He was dressed in blue jeans and cowboy regalia with a holster hanging on his four-year-old hips. Except for the Oriental slant to his eyes, he was as American as any little boy in any American backyard.’”²

¹ Clipping, “Chinese tot finds love in Mentor Village home,” *Telegraph*, June 29, 1962, Box 16, International Social Service Archives, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries.

² Clipping, Pat Connors, “Orphans From Hong Kong Look to U.S. for a Home,” *New York World Telegram*, May 28, 1962, Box 16, International Social Service Archives.

For decades, Asian American adoptees have been rhetorically framed as celebrated members of “blended international families,”³ the highly visible elements of difference that give such families the privilege of being “blended” in the first place. They are figures around which the ideals of postracial progressivism have coalesced, or, as Eleana Kim has written, figures representing “postnational cosmopolitanism” *par excellence*.⁴ Yet celebrations of their difference have always been inextricably linked with celebrations of their successful assimilation, a process often involving descriptions of the adopted child’s fascination with American television and voracious appetite for American food—and, of course, a change in name, from original Korean or Chinese names to American ones. The postracial ideology governing attitudes toward Asian American adoptees is not one of minimizing racial difference, but minimizing the *meaning* of racial difference. As such, this chapter argues, it obscures the objectification, othering, and paradoxically, the racialization of Asian American adoptees, even as it seeks to move beyond the limits of race. Through the simultaneous fixation on and dismissal of physical difference, celebratory descriptions of assimilation and the changing of original names, emphasis on cultural education, and, finally, the idea that love can overcome racial prejudice, postracial attitudes around Asian American adoption enact an intimization of power that ultimately works not to obliterate boundaries to kinship, but to further entrench them, marginalizing adoptees in US life.

Postracialism, Catherine Squires observes, emerged as a commonly named attitude in the 2000s, though it appeared in the 1990s in the media as writers wondered whether demographic changes would yield a “post-race” society, and whether post-racial politics might “displace race-

³ Arthur C. Brooks, “Let’s Restart the Adoption Movement,” *New York Times*, November 17, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/17/opinion/restart-the-adoption-movement.html>.

⁴ Eleana Kim, *Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 267.

based alliances.”⁵ The rise of a new class of Black politicians whose politics de-emphasized racial justice found its apex in President Barack Obama, who was elected in 2008 to celebratory coverage that hailed the arrival of a “post-race” era. The media coverage of Obama’s win, Squires writes, solidified earlier themes on postracialism: first, that “multiracial people and families continued to be cited as ‘proof’ of an emerging post-race society,” and second, that a Black man’s presidential victory would “signal the beginning of a post-racial era for the nation,” without addressing how that might actually come about.⁶ Watts has characterized the postracial rhetoric at the time of Obama’s election as “an announcement of sorts that color-blindness is no longer a necessary fiction we should tell ourselves because racialism can serve progressive purposes The significance of race is actually intensified and revised rather than dispensed with.”⁷ Watts makes an important distinction between postracial rhetoric and rhetorics of racial colorblindness, where the latter represents an attempt to “nullify the pernicious effects of racial thinking and judging,” effectively arguing that racial difference has *no* significance. Writers on race and colorblindness have observed the phenomenon that Bonilla-Silva calls “color-blind racism,” an attitude in which racial difference is seen as no longer relevant, in which race is understood to no longer be a foundational element of U.S. society because of both the lack of “*de jure* segregation” and the rise of minority figures like Obama,⁸ and in which race has therefore been so depoliticized as to make any discussion of race at all seem potentially racist itself.⁹

⁵ Catherine R. Squires, *The Post-Racial Mystique: Media and Race in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 20.

⁶ Squires, *The Post-Racial Mystique*, 40.

⁷ Eric King Watts, “A Monstrous Genre--Violent ‘Man,’” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 107, no. 2 (2021): 236.

⁸ Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*, 5th ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

⁹ Michael G. Lacy and Kent A. Ono, eds., *Critical Rhetorics of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2015); Darrel Wanzer-Serrano, *The New York Young Lords and the Struggle for Liberation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015).

Following Watts, I understand postracial discourse as differing from colorblind discourse in a significant way: postracialism, I suggest, involves an acknowledgement of racial difference, but one accompanied by the belief that U.S. society and politics has moved beyond the “old” racial hierarchies, entering instead “into new relations of power.”¹⁰ In other words, postracialism signifies the operationalizing of race for new ends—not the end of old racial hierarchies, but an attempt to discursively reframe them. This has entailed framing Asian Americans as “model minorities,” a status meant to contrast with Black Americans, curtailing Asian American subjectivities and perpetuating anti-Blackness at the same time—a dual process that has occurred in the U.S. since the mid-20th century.¹¹ Celebrations of Asian American adoptee inclusion into white American families as a sign of multicultural progressivism represent an attempt to both depoliticize Asian American identity and to further entrench anti-Blackness as the always-unassimilable state against which Asianness is upheld.

The “postracial” therefore has the potential to creatively deploy race in ways that marginalize minorities in novel ways. Watts notes the “undead character of the postracial,”¹² its capacity to resuscitate and revive old racial injuries. Scholars have noted that the depoliticization of race has driven white supremacy “underground” in what has yielded a “disaster for democracy,”¹³ and that colorblind racism has simply shifted racist assumptions into other dynamics, including cultural factors and individual responsibility.¹⁴ Indeed, liberalism is frequently tied to colorblindness and postracial attitudes: Eng is critical of the liberal compulsion

¹⁰ Watts, “A Monstrous Genre,” 236.

¹¹ Glenn Omatsu, “The ‘Four Prisons’ and the Movements of Liberation: Asian American Activism from the 1960s to the 1990s,” in *Asian American Studies Now: A Critical Reader*, edited by Jean Yu-wen Shen Wu and Thomas C. Chen (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 298-330.

¹² Eric King Watts, “Postracial Fantasies, Blackness, and Zombies,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 14, no. 4 (2017), 318.

¹³ Wanzer-Serrano, *The New York Young Lords*, 174.

¹⁴ Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists*.

for legal recognition that can deny the role race plays in structuring both public and private relations.¹⁵ Perhaps even more often observed is the relationship between racial colorblindness or postracialism and neoliberalism. Wanzer-Serrano has described the current moment in race relations in the U.S. as characterized by a “neoliberal articulation of race,” or a “neoliberal racelessness,” in which race and racism have been depoliticized through the “gutting of collective memory, driving race underground, and denying racist inequity,” normalizing whiteness and embodying a drive toward “universalizing homogeneity.”¹⁶ Squires links postracial visions of “an already-achieved multicultural nation” with “neoliberal ideologies of market individualism,” which emphasize individual freedoms, “obfuscate institutional racism and blame continuing racial inequalities on individuals who make poor choices.”¹⁷

Transnational adoption, Eng points out, shores up attitudes of “abstract individualism” that support “neoliberal claims to colorblindness in our multicultural and post-identity age.”¹⁸ Eleana Kim has also noted the connection often made between transnational adoptees and progressive multiculturalism, with adoptees “invoked as the actualization of ideals of humanitarianism and the promises of multiculturalism.”¹⁹ For Kim, these discourses are inextricably tied to liberal ideals of globalization, of the dissolution of the significance of borders and categories in a neoliberal age. If what Thomas Friedman, hailing the flattening of the world in the mid-2000s, termed “Globalization 3.0” is characterized by “the newfound power for *individuals* to collaborate and compete globally,” with “every color of the human rainbow

¹⁵ David L. Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

¹⁶ Wanzer-Serrano, *The New York Young Lords*, 175.

¹⁷ Squires, *The Post-Racial Mystique*, 6.

¹⁸ Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship*, 95.

¹⁹ Eleana Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 8.

[taking] part,”²⁰ then the neoliberal age can be understood as a time of hyperfocus on the role of the individual, not the power of structures: the old barriers and hierarchies of race, ethnicity, nation, and class no longer hold people back, but rather individuals who are responsible for their participation in this new globalized world.

Transnational adoption, therefore, is an ideal neoliberal practice: framed as transcending the borders and boundaries of race and nation, characterized by individuals making the individual choice to bring a child into their home, often to help solve a larger perceived problem, such as crisis or natural disaster in the child’s home country. But what about the earliest stages of the practice, in an era where neoliberalism was still a fringe economic theory espoused by a handful of radical academics in Chicago? Postracialism in the context of transnational adoption, as we will see, is not merely a neoliberal phenomenon, but it is a liberal one, one that has a long history and one that, I argue, signifies a more specific attitude than simply no longer “seeing color.” Following Watts, I argue that postracial discourse, when it appears, signifies not (just) a minimization of racial difference, but an attempt to retell the story of what those racial differences *mean*: not merely the depoliticization of race, but the re-politicization of race for new ends. It is an argument that the old racial hierarchies no longer hold, and in their place, new racial meanings have emerged. It marks an attempt to reframe existing racial meanings in a new way, and an attempt that covers over the violence and harm perpetuated by very much still-existing racial hierarchies, and one that, in the case of transnational adoption from Asia, ultimately obscures the objectification and othering of Asian adoptees. In adoption discourse, this takes place through the simultaneous fixation on and dismissal of physical difference, including references to “rainbow children” or the creation of “rainbow families”; the changing of adoptees’

²⁰ Thomas L. Friedman, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Globalized World in the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Allen Lane, 2005), 10-11.

original names, which is rhetorically associated with Americanization of the child; an emphasis on cultural education; and the idea that love can overcome prejudice.

In 1958, Congress lifted a quota on refugees entering the U.S. in cases where the refugee is a child, allowing for thousands more Americans to adopt from foreign countries. A *Parade* insert in the *Sacramento Bee* on April 26 of that year heralded the arrival of a child who, the author wrote, was the “first Asiatic to reach the U.S. for adoption under new legislation.”²¹ Kwang Jin Chun, a “war orphan from Seoul, Korea, became Timothy David Daines, of Highland Park, U.S.A.” The child was described as “black-haired, black-eyed Timmy,” who was excited at the prospect of going “to America where the Hellos [GI’s] are. I get plenty chocolate, plenty bubble gum.” His parents “knew he was the boy they wanted” when they “received a snapshot of him with two six-shooters in holsters slung about his waist.” They decided on his name, Timothy David, because both are “good Biblical names,” fitting for a child who, they said, “was really a child sent to us from God”; besides, they added, “‘Timmy’ seemed like a good American nickname.”

The case of Kwang Jin Chun is demonstrative. He is described as physically unique from his American family—“black-haired, black-eyed”—while at the same time is noted for his proximity to Americanness, even before his immigration to the U.S. Indeed, he was chosen by his parents specifically *because* of that proximity: a Korean orphan pictured with “two six-shooters and holsters slung about his waist,” Kwang Jin Chun was both foreign and a ready subject. He is different, but not so different as to be unassimilable. The change of his name from his original name to Timothy David, or Timmy, which is cited as a “good American nickname,”

²¹ Karl Kohrs, “An orphan boy comes ‘home’ to America,” *Parade* in *The Sacramento Bee*, April 26, 1958, Box 11, International Social Service Archives.

carries symbolic weight: as the article's author writes, Kwang Jin Chun "*became* Timothy David Daines" (emphasis added), a transformation in which his foreignness, his Koreanness, was altered into something safer and more intelligible—something undeniably American.

The juxtaposition of Kwan Jin Chun's foreign identity, which is marked by his physical difference, with his assimilable and assimilated American identity, a transformation signaled by his change in name from his original name to a "good American nickname," forms an important foundation of the postracial discourse in general around Asian adoptees that developed at this time. For Kim Park Nelson, the infantilizing parental relationship framed in dominant media narratives between the United States and Korea were a foundation for a type of rhetorical erasure of race that took place when Asian adoptees' "Americanization" was described: adoptees' Asianness only matters when reminding the public that adoptees were "rescued from a bad (Asian) place."²² In order to present adoption as a categorical win-win situation, with adoptive parents obtaining "much-wanted children" while also providing homes for children saved from "backward and faraway places," the disruptive act of adoption itself had to be elided:

Forgetting the reality of adoption was a key part of normalizing adoptive families, and, to forget adoption, the most visible sign of difference between parents and children, race, had to be overlooked. The forgetting also rendered the stories of adoptees themselves less visible when compared to stories of adoptive parents. In this way, adoptee Asianness is elided, except to remind readers that adoptees were rescued from a bad (Asian) place.²³

The child's Asianness, therefore, is only allowed to matter to the adoptee's parents, not to the adoptee themselves. Adoptees were depicted as "lucky, and also as normal, largely unracialized in their White families, living just as White children would." It is implied that these

²² Kim Park Nelson, *Invisible Asians: Korean American Adoptees, Asian American Experiences, and Racial Exceptionalism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 4.

²³ Park Nelson, *Invisible Asians*, 4-5.

children are both lucky to have been adopted, and “lucky to have escaped race, which doesn’t exist in their adoptive homes.”²⁴

In Kwan Jin Chun’s case, we see this playing out clearly in the obliteration of his Koreanness through assimilation and Americanization, which includes his name change, as well as his interest, even on his first day in the United States, in a toy tow truck and toy cowboy guns, which stopped his initial fits of crying. He “pushed away a bowl of rice” in favor of the toys, but when offered a “slice of layer cake, baked by Mrs. Daines that morning,” Kwang Jin Chun picked up his fork and “devour[ed] it to the last crumb.” We see him already, on his first day, gravitating towards American pursuits, like home-baked cake and toy cowboy guns.

That Kwang Jin Chun is described having an appetite for American food is not isolated in adoptee narratives of this period. Food, perhaps the most basic and obvious marker of culture for ordinary people, becomes a stand-in for adoptees’ almost voracious acceptance of their adoptive cultures, and the hearty appetites of new adoptees for American food is a curiosity that is repeatedly touched upon. Kwang Jin Chun rejected rice—an essential food of his birth culture—in favor of Mrs. Daines’ home-baked layer cake, a symbolic rejection of his old life and embracing of his new one. A child named Wong Lan, a “Chinese waif” and orphan who was “abandoned in the streets of Hong Kong,” was quoted by a *New York Herald Tribune* reporter in 1962 as saying, “I love reading in school . . . and I love spaghetti and meat balls.”²⁵ Another adoptee from China was described by her mother to the *Chicago Tribune* as having a hearty appetite: “She eats everything—meat, potatoes, and salad. She’s just like any other American

²⁴ Park Nelson, *Invisible Asians*, 6.

²⁵ Clipping, Francis Sugrue, “She’s Now Elaine Peterson: Wong Lan’s 2 Worlds—Chinese & American,” *New York Herald Tribune*, May 27, 1962, Box 16, International Social Service Archives.

youngster.”²⁶ This appetite for American food functions as an important sign of the child’s assimilation into American life, accompanying their name change and descriptions of their fascination with all things American—television, toys, technology—in narratives about the adopted child’s transformation from foreign Asian to recognizable American. Kwang Jin Chun has his toy truck and cowboy guns; the girl who loves meat and potatoes, Suk Wah, renamed Susan Elizabeth Dean, became “fascinated with television, the first time she had apparently seen it,”²⁷ and is later described as “learning about the intricacies of softball and another game called ‘mowing the lawn,’ which puzzled her.”²⁸ Kang Koo Ri, the “famous” Korean orphan featured in *Life* magazine in 1951 as “The Little Boy Who Wouldn’t Smile,”²⁹ was the subject of a follow-up article five years later, where he is identified as Ri Kang Yong; in it, he is shown talking on a telephone, “mystified and delighted by voice from other end,” and watching television, which is “a fascinating new experience for Kang,” who “prefers cowboy shows.” Operating the television, the caption explains, “thrills him almost as much as programs.”³⁰

These descriptive hallmarks of assimilation into American life substantiate the claims that the child has now *become* someone else: Kwang Jin Chun “*became* Timothy Daines,” just as the girl who loved spaghetti and meatballs, Wong Lan, “*is now* Ruth Elaine Petersen . . . she is a waif no more” (emphasis added). Living “just as White children would,” these adoptees had their

²⁶ Clipping, Howard James, “Adopted Chinese Child Is Really on the Ball,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 5, 1962, Box 16, International Social Service Archives.

²⁷ Clipping, “Suk Wah Meets the Family,” *Chicago Daily News*, June 28, 1962, Box 16, International Social Service Archives.

²⁸ Clipping, Howard James, “Adopted Chinese Child Is Really on the Ball,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 5, 1962, Box 16, International Social Service Archives.

²⁹ Michael Rougier, “The Little Boy Who Wouldn’t Smile,” *Life*, July 23, 1951, *Life Magazine Digital Archive*, https://books.google.com/books?id=l04EAAAAMBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false.

³⁰ “A Famous Orphan Finds a Happy Home,” *Life*, May 14, 1956, *Life Magazine Digital Archive*, https://books.google.com/books?id=p0wEAAAAMBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false.

Asianness flattened, enough to stamp out discomfort, leaving just enough to remind audiences that these children came from a worse-off place from which their connections are now, thankfully, sundered. Susie Woo has written about Korean War immigrants' forced need to assimilate through their isolated absorption into white communities, granting them what she calls "honorary whiteness."³¹ Narratives about Korean adoptees "collapsed" their identities and "subsumed their Koreanness," leaving only enough "Koreanness" visible to attest to progressive "US racial democracy" in the early days of the Cold War. Korean adoptees, as children, were "clean slates onto which American ideals, values, and behaviors could be readily imprinted." This process of assimilation, in which "national inclusion was predicated upon an erasure of ties to South Korea," was evidenced in media coverage that depicted adoptees as leaving their Asian selves behind, and becoming, fully embodying, American children, white in all but appearance.³² Pate calls this *yellow desire*, a "combination of traditional Orientalist stereotypes and Cold War politics of integration,"³³ an attitude under which "the bodies of Korean children become desirable because of their potential to integrate successfully in American society and in their new American family."³⁴ Yellow desire, for Pate, tames difference. That suppression of difference, and the integration of Asian children into white American life, treated with an indulgent and condescending eye toward the child's encounter with American food and television, is clearly seen in media narratives.

And yet, as Woo suggests, some lingering Asianness remains, just enough to attest to the U.S.' liberal attitude toward nonwhite children who are perceived to be in need of rescue from

³¹ Susie Woo, *Framed by War: Korean Children and Women at the Crossroads of US Empire* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 18.

³² Woo, *Framed by War*, 124, 134, 138.

³³ SooJin Pate, *From Orphan to Adoptee: U.S. Empire and Genealogies of Korean Adoption* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 87.

³⁴ Pate, *From Orphan to Adoptee*, 88.

foreign (Asian) countries. The child's difference is an inseparable element of the desire to adopt them: languishing in a "third world" country, they are objects in need of rescue, yet once they arrive and undergo the Americanization process of renaming, learning English, acquiring American tastes, and learning to love American toys and television, it is the novelty of their assimilation that sets them apart. Adoptees from Korea and China could not escape their physical difference; their "black hair" and "black eyes" persist as a remarked-upon reminder of their status, not as fully (white) American, but as *assimilated* American, an identity that always implies difference. In remarking affectionately on these adopted children's fascination with American mainstays like cowboy shows and spaghetti and meatballs, media coverage ensured that audiences did not forget the children's origins, even as they sought to show that they were "just like any other American youngster." We can therefore see that, just as Park Nelson has noted that adoptee Asianness only remains to remind audiences that "adoptees were rescued from a bad (Asian) place,"³⁵ physical difference, when noted in media coverage, functions to interpellate audiences repeatedly into the dynamic of rescuer of the rescued. Race of the adoptees doesn't matter, the articles assert—which is to say, it should not, is not allowed to, matter for the adoptees themselves; but the repeated insistence on portraying these Asian children *as* Americanized constantly refers back to the act that brought them here, and to the paternalistic relationship that has characterized American adoption of Asian children from the beginning.

Postracial discourse served a specific political purpose in this period. Pate, Oh, and Woo have noted the relationship between the popularization of Korean adoption and U.S. military objectives.³⁶ With global anticolonial pressures mounting, particularly in the aftermath of the

³⁵ Park Nelson, *Invisible Asians*, 5.

³⁶ Arissa H. Oh, *To Save the Children of Korea: The Cold War Origins of International Adoption* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015); Pate, *From Orphan to Adoptee*; Woo, *Framed by War*.

Korean War, the U.S. was in need of a shift in optics, and placing Korean children in American families “produced the right kind of Cold War script, one that configured US-South Korean relations in the framework of care and kin, not violence and force.”³⁷ Saving children from the “clutches of communism” through the creation of “international and interracial families” meant that Americans could participate in securing democracy domestically and globally.³⁸ Cultural products like the film *South Pacific* (1958) figured “parental love as a way to assert cross-racial alliance,” though ultimately, Klein argues, the metaphor of parenthood merely re-mapped racial hierarchy onto the hierarchy of age.³⁹

Additionally, domestic racism in the 1950s and 1960s was a major public relations problem for the United States on the global stage, and a material hindrance in the U.S.’ fight against the spread of communism, threatening to delegitimize the U.S.—and its case for the appeal of democracy—in the eyes of the world.⁴⁰ According to Dudziak, discrimination in the U.S. against both nonwhite foreign dignitaries visiting the country and against its own black populations was covered in newspapers throughout the world, leading to “foreign relations problems with countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America” and providing the Soviet Union with a clear weakness on which to capitalize in its anti-American propaganda.⁴¹ And while permitting *too* much self-criticism about the prevalence of domestic racism would have been problematic for the U.S.’ strict pro-American status quo Cold War culture, “civil rights reforms that made the nation look good might be sufficient.” “Making the nation look good” meant, in this case,

³⁷ Woo, *Framed by War*, 12.

³⁸ Woo, *Framed by War*, 14-16.

³⁹ Christina Klein, “Family Ties and Political Obligation: The Discourse of Adoption and the Cold War Commitment to Asia,” in *Cold War Constructions: The Political Culture of United States Imperialism, 1945-1966*, edited by Christian G. Appy (Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 55.

⁴⁰ Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*, 2nd ed (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); Klein, “Family Ties and Political Obligation.”

⁴¹ Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 30-31.

engaging in a “sustained effort to tell a particular story about race and American democracy: a story of progress, a story of the triumph of good over evil, a story of U.S. moral superiority.”⁴²

Assimilation and absorption of Korean children into white American families in this period, therefore, can be understood to have served an important (geo)political purpose: this proto-postracial attitude was an important point of ideological juxtaposition against the communist East, helping to rehabilitate the U.S.’ image as a postracial democracy at a time when that image being under siege internationally was a foreign relations problem. Adoption discourse sat at the nexus of a profound contradiction between the U.S.’ self-image as a racially accepting nation and the U.S.’ history—and material reality—as a racially unjust and violent nation. Because the U.S.’ domestic racism problem was almost exclusively what was at the time referred to as the “Negro problem,”⁴³ this contradiction meant the celebration of incorporation of Asians into U.S. life while apparently canceling out the political, legal, economic, and social rejection and exclusion of black Americans from the same—one salient piece of a long history of the weaponization of Asians and Asian Americans to discredit blacks in U.S. political life. That this was accomplished through neatly individualized and intimated relations between the U.S. and Asia, reducing those relations to the sphere of the family, made this process all the more insidious and effective. Through the creation of what Woo calls “family frames,” or idealized family-based representations that instructed Americans how they should behave and see their relation to the world,⁴⁴ the U.S. transformed transnational adoption into a soft solution for its hard problem of domestic racism, while also facilitating a legible (to Americans) relationship with Asia, one of familial and parental care.

⁴² Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 31.

⁴³ Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 26.

⁴⁴ Woo, *Framed by War*, 14.

In addition to its foreign relations context, framings of Asian American adoptees' absorption into white American life in this period reveal much about the complex confluences of domestic racial politics, occurring against the backdrop of significant social transformations. The presence in media stories about Asian adoptees of activities, objects, and patterns of consumption that we now can recognize as quintessentially "American"—television, phones, food, even lawn mowing—demonstrated a willingness to include Asian adoptees in what was fast becoming a prevalent and uniquely American way of life: that of the normative, consumption-driven white middle class suburb. Spurred by federal programs that guaranteed loans for single-family homes and mortgages for war veterans, the decades following World War II marked a period of rapid, intense, and widespread suburbanization, accompanied by the rise of the American middle class and a way of life marked both by affluence and by its rigid boundaries, both geographical and racial.⁴⁵ Suddenly, white Americans were moving in droves out of city centers and into the peripheries, where construction of new single-family homes boomed (over 26 million homes were constructed between the end of WWII and 1965, most of them in the rapidly developing suburbs).⁴⁶ Families who were now enjoying higher wages were eager to take advantage of the "style of living heretofore unimagined"⁴⁷ that the suburbs offered: home ownership, access to a wide range of consumer goods intended for use in the home, large lots with lawns, and automobiles, which were now used for commuting to work and for household errands. Developers and builders began mass producing homes, which allowed them to build quickly to meet demand, resulting in the familiar cookie-cutter character of lookalike suburban

⁴⁵ Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Becky M. Nicolaides and Andrew Wiese, eds., *The Suburb Reader*, 2nd ed (New York: Routledge, 2016).

⁴⁶ Nicolaides and Wiese, *The Suburb Reader*, 257.

⁴⁷ Robert A. Beauregard, *When America Became Suburban* (St. Paul, MN: The University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 14.

subdivisions;⁴⁸ and the Federal Housing Administration, or FHA, enforced minimum requirements for things like “lot size, setback from the street, separation from adjacent structures, and even for the width of house itself,”⁴⁹ contributing to the suburbs’ uniform, standardized character.

This enforcement of uniformity took place at levels both formal and informal. The suburban lifestyle, in which home ownership was an important status and class marker, was as desirable as it was homogeneous. As “the province of young, white, educated, married couples with children,”⁵⁰ suburban life, though pervasive, was not inclusive. This was in part by definition: the zoning laws that enforced subdivision boundaries and character kept unwanted people and housing types out, including “[a]partments, factories, and ‘blight,’ euphemisms for blacks and people of limited means, were rigidly excluded.”⁵¹ Housing prices also served as a barrier to working class, disadvantaged, and minority would-be homeowners.⁵² And although the emptying of urban ethnic communities into suburbs resulted in a melding of European American ethnic identities into modern American “whiteness,” segregation along racial lines was still strictly observed.⁵³ Black families and other minorities “faced hostility at every level of the suburban housing market,”⁵⁴ including from the influential FHA, which was “extraordinarily concerned with ‘inharmonious racial or nationality groups’” and “feared that an entire area could

⁴⁸ Nicolaides and Wiese, *The Suburb Reader*, 257.

⁴⁹ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 208.

⁵⁰ Beauregard, *When America Became Suburban*, 131.

⁵¹ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 242.

⁵² Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf, 2003), excerpted in *The Suburb Reader*, edited by Becky M. Nicolaides and Andrew Wiese (New York: Routledge, 2016), 282-286.

⁵³ George Lipsitz, “The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: Racialized Social Democracy and the ‘White’ Problem in American Studies,” *American Quarterly* 4, no. 3 (1995): 369-87, excerpted in *The Suburb Reader*, edited by Becky M. Nicolaides and Andrew Wiese (New York: Routledge, 2016), 358-361.

⁵⁴ Nicolaides and Wiese, *The Suburb Reader*, 337.

lose its investment value if rigid white-black separation was not maintained.”⁵⁵ This fear bled into the white families whose middle-class identity was tied to their status as suburban homeowners: “if integration occurred, property values would drop, and a family’s status and very identity as part of the middle class . . . would be destroyed.”⁵⁶ White suburban residents were most vociferously opposed to Black families buying homes in their neighborhoods, and engaged in “intensive, high-stakes, and sometimes violent conflict”⁵⁷ to retain white control over suburban space, including firebombing the houses of Black families.⁵⁸

While anti-Blackness in white suburban life was unequivocal, attitudes towards Asians were more uneven. In 1952, residents of Southwood, an all-white San Francisco suburban area, voted to reject a Chinese American family, the Shengs, who wanted to move to the neighborhood. Sing Sheng told residents, who voted against him out of fear that a Chinese American family moving to the neighborhood would lower property values, that they should “find out a little of what we’re fighting for in Korea.”⁵⁹ Much of the rest of the country, as it turned out, agreed with him—nationwide media attention to the case resulted in outrage and condemnation of the Southwood residents’ decision, largely a consequence, Charlotte Brooks argues, of the U.S. government’s Cold War campaign to win over Asia, which resulted in increased public interest in Asian and more favorable perceptions of Asians and Asian Americans.⁶⁰ The investment in Asia among the public that was required to sustain not just policy commitments but military commitments in the region manifested in support for the Shengs—and increased support for Asian integration—against the continued threat of Black

⁵⁵ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 208.

⁵⁶ Nicolaides and Wiese, *The Suburb Reader*, 337.

⁵⁷ Nicolaides and Wiese, *The Suburb Reader*, 337.

⁵⁸ Charlotte Brooks, “Sing Sheng vs. Southwood,” *Pacific Historical Review* 73, no. 3 (2004): 463-94, excerpted in *The Suburb Reader*, edited by Becky M. Nicolaides and Andrew Wiese (New York: Routledge, 2016), 365.

⁵⁹ Brooks, “Sing Sheng vs. Southwood,” 365.

⁶⁰ Brooks, “Sing Sheng vs. Southwood,” 365.

incursion, and the ongoing rejection of potential African American integration in the suburbs. In other words, thanks to U.S. geopolitical commitments to Asia, Asian Americans became more palatable as minorities who could be integrated into otherwise all-white suburban lifestyles, thereby aligning *both* groups on the side of the exclusive suburb and against undesirable minorities—namely, Black and Latino families and individuals.

This racial alignment in the suburbs took place against the broader backdrop of racial politics during the Cold War, which saw a heightened privileging of Asian Americans, who more successfully assimilated into modern U.S. social life, and a concurrent frustration with Black Americans, who more often resisted this process.⁶¹ The result was the development of the “model minority” figure: Asian Americans as the elevated, “successful” minority who had achieved assimilation as “a result of stoic patience, political obedience, and self-improvement.”⁶² Scholars have long identified the model minority construction as a tool of anti-Blackness, where the “construction of black difference as less assimilable difference” is a crucial element of maintaining the Asian American model minority myth itself.⁶³ The acceptance of Asian Americans—indeed, the celebratory welcome of Asian Americans into the arms of dominant whiteness as honorary “model minorities”—rested on “the more weighty abjection of blackness.”⁶⁴ This dynamic, in which Asian Americans are used as a foil to Black Americans, and indeed, frequently pitched against Blacks and other minorities, can be seen clearly in present-day debates about affirmative action, in which conservative white and Asian American

⁶¹ Robert G. Lee, “The Cold War Origins of the Model Minority Myth,” in *Asian American Studies Now: A Critical Reader*, edited by Jean Yu-wen Shen Wu and Thomas C. Chen (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 256-271; Oh, *To Save the Children of Korea*.

⁶² Lee, “The Cold War Origins,” 256.

⁶³ Sara Dorow, “Why China? Identifying Histories of Transnational Adoption,” in Wu and Chen, *Asian American Studies Now: A Critical Reader*, 277; see also Daryl J. Maeda, *Chains of Babylon: The Rise of Asian America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); and Omatsu, “The ‘Four Prisons.’”

⁶⁴ Dorow, “Why China?”, 280.

groups argue that affirmative action policies give undue benefit to Black students at the expense of Asian students.⁶⁵

Asian American adoptees, welcomed into the fold of white America, were important figures in this racial landscape: unthreatening and assimilable children, their Asianness whitewashed, portrayed as quickly adapting to the dominant and most desirable way of life at the time—affluent, normative suburban life—adoptees became the ideal form of the model minority, depicted as integrating successfully into the template of the white suburban American family.⁶⁶ Adoptees’ Asianness mattered, but only insofar as it both signaled a politically desirable level of social tolerance of racial minorities, and justified a renewed line of attack against Black Americans, whose unequal status could now be attributed to cultural factors that signal their own unwillingness and inability to assimilate. In other words, Asian American adoptees did not represent a wholehearted step forward in racial progress in the United States; rather, the popular emphasis on Asian adoptees’ assimilation and model minority status furthered the deeply entrenched cause of anti-Blackness, helping to perpetuate the idea that “unlike Asians, these groups supposedly come from cultures that do not sufficiently emphasize education, family cohesion, and traditional values.”⁶⁷ Black Americans were too unassimilable into whiteness to be withstood, tolerated, or integrated. Asian Americans, in the form of malleable children, who *looked* Asian but could be raised white, were “digestible diversity.”⁶⁸

⁶⁵ See Michael Omi and Dana Takagi, “Situating Asian Americans in the Political Discourse on Affirmative Action,” in Wu and Chen, *Asian American Studies Now: A Critical Reader*, 118-125.

⁶⁶ See Oh, *To Save the Children of Korea*; Omatsu, “The ‘Four Prisons’”; Woo, *Framed by War*.

⁶⁷ Omatsu, “The ‘Four Prisons,’” 314.

⁶⁸ Oh, *To Save the Children of Korea*, 12.

Depictions of Asian nations as racially intolerant provided an additional contrast between the tolerant racial democracy of the United States and the backwards nations of east and southeast Asia. A 1979 feature in the *Chicago Tribune* that addressed American GIs' "legacy of tears in Asia" explained that in Thailand, mixed-race children of Thai women and American soldiers weren't accepted by Thai people. A Thai sociologist named Yuphin Songvicha explained:

They are considered 'tainted' or 'dirty' because they have foreign fathers. But actually much of the discrimination is motivated by jealousy. So many of the mixed race children are more beautiful and taller than Thai people." . . . In a society motivated by a thousand years of racial xenophobia, where 'farangs' [outsiders] were looked upon as barbarians and where Thai culture is elevated to narcissistic heights, Amerasian children are little more than vermin.⁶⁹

That same year, an article in the *Bucks County Courier Times* noted that Amerasian children—the half-American, half-Asian children borne of relations between American GIs and local Asian women—are “labeled as equivalent of half-breed, bastard and mixed race who are treated as impure and defiled” in their native countries.⁷⁰ The belief that mixed race Amerasian children suffered a unique “plight” (a term commonly used for both Amerasian children and Asian orphans in general) and the desire to help them was an important impetus for adoption as early as the Korean War, with the Holt Adoption Program noting that Harry and Bertha Holt were motivated by the “extreme prejudice faced by Korean-American children in Korea, and the desperate plight of orphaned and abandoned Korean children.”⁷¹ Bertha Holt told a newspaper that “[b]ecause of their mixed color, these babies are not wanted by their mothers and are

⁶⁹ Photocopy of clipping, Ronald Yates, “GIs left legacy of tears in Asia,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 6, 1979, Box 20, International Social Service Archives.

⁷⁰ Photocopy of clipping, Bruce Olds, “A day for remembering forgotten children,” *Bucks County Courier Times*, April 23, 1979, Box 20, International Social Service Archives.

⁷¹ Pamphlet, Holt Adoption Program Inc., n.d., Box 22, Pamphlet Collection - Pamphlets from Miscellaneous Publishers, 1844-2010, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries.

discriminated against by other Koreans. . . . Some of them are beautiful babies and would be quickly adopted if people here knew about them.”⁷² The point was, therefore, often made that the

Out of the throes of the Korean War, the extreme prejudice faced by Korean-American children in Korea, and the desperate plight of orphaned and abandoned Korean children, Harry Holt and his wife Bertha organized an action-oriented “Baby-lift” which placed over 3,000 desolate children in American homes in a few short years.

From this has come the Holt Adoption Program, a fully licensed adoption agency under the laws of the State of Oregon, still placing children in both American and Korean homes as long as the need continues (3-5 babies a day are abandoned in Seoul alone, many to die even after being found and sheltered).



Figure 2.1. Excerpt from pamphlet, Holt Adoption Program, Inc., n.d., Box 22, Pamphlet Collection - Pamphlets from Miscellaneous Publishers, 1844-2010, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries.

United States was more racially tolerant than the children’s home countries: not hamstrung by Confucian patrilineal beliefs, nor hung up on “pure” blood, and more than willing to take in mixed-race children, as the countries of their birth were not. It was often true that mixed race children and their birth mothers faced discrimination in their home countries, and to its credit, U.S. media did, on occasion, reckon with the history of GI abandonment of partners or even wives in Asia and the children they had fathered.

Yet the depictions of Asian nations as racially intolerant, in contrast with the

United States, where magnanimous families unconcerned with racial difference were more than willing to take in those nations’ children, served a purpose. As former Commander-in-Chief of U.N. and U.S. Far East forces in Korea, General Lyman L. Lemnitzer, said in an ISS newsletter, leaving the problem of “mixed-blood orphans” fathered by American GIs unresolved “would

⁷² Clipping, “Creswell Man-Father of Six-To Adopt Korean War Orphans,” unknown publication, n.d., Box 10, International Social Service Archives.

leave a lasting scar on our relations with other nations.”⁷³ In promoting transnational, transracial adoptions, as ISS and other organizations did, the U.S. wasn’t a country whose defining experience with race was virulent domestic racism: it was the forward-thinking, progressive nation who was happily building families that crossed racial lines through foreign adoptions of unwanted children. In the global struggle of the 1950s and ‘60s to gain the upper hand in the eyes of the rest of the world, U.S. postracialism was an important weight on the U.S.’ scale.

As transnational adoption continued and grew ever more popular into the 1970s and ‘80s, discourse that expressed both simultaneous fixation on, and dismissal of, physical difference of nonwhite adoptees increased. In 1977, a mother named Barbara Mosman wrote in a poem for *OURS* magazine:

I did not create your hair so black and fine
 Those lovely dark eyes surely aren’t mine
 You didn’t inherit your dimple from someone I know
 I have no way of knowing how tall you will grow
 I did not conceive you . . .
 I had nothing to do with your outward beauty
 But I pray to God I can fulfill my duty
 That when others look into your sweet brown eyes
 They know that more beauty within them lies
 I am your Mother . . .⁷⁴

Certainly, it is not unusual for parents to admire and comment on the physical attributes of their children. But Mosman’s poem is indicative of a trend in the way Asian adoptees are spoken about during this period by their white adoptive parents: physical difference (black hair, dark eyes) is noted, even admired, but ultimately subsumed to the assertion that family bonds transcend these differences. Another poem in a 1979 issue of *OURS* remarks on a child’s

⁷³ ISS World News Newsletter, published by the American Branch of International Social Service, New York, NY, February 1958, Box 5, Folder 26, International Social Services Archives.

⁷⁴ Barbara Mosman, “For My Adopted Korean Son Darrin Richard Ryan,” *OURS*, 1977. New Hope Media.

“Almond eyes / Precious smile / Hair straight as a pin,” but these differences again are resolved by love: “Open up your hearts to love / And let this child come in.”⁷⁵ In that same issue, a poem called “Dark Hair, Dark Eyes, and Fair Complexion” almost seems to elide the child’s physical attributes with her name or identity:

Dark Hair, Dark Eyes, and Fair Complexion
 Is what they say of you,
 But are you happy, healthy, smiling?
 Are there arms
 To hold you tight? . . .
 But Dear, Sweet Child,
 they don’t know
 You’re not just a picture and a page.
 You’re a part of life we want to share
 . . . it is **you** that fill
 that need within us to care.
 . . . Please Hurry Home.
 We are waiting
 For you –
 Dark Hair, Dark Eyes, & Fair Complexion.⁷⁶

The term *multiculturalism*, Park Nelson notes, began to appear in the 1970s, rising to increased prominence in the 1980s as a “popular ideal among socially liberal and progressive elements of American society.”⁷⁷ As expressed through the realm of the family, assimilationist ideals of multiculturalism were evidenced in the “celebration of the ‘rainbow family’ that includes one or more transracially and/or transnationally adopted children,” such families acting as proof that the family “could bridge race and class barriers.”⁷⁸ Such diversity within American families was celebrated, with children often positioned as the extra “color” in an otherwise all-American family: one birth mother called her daughter Cinnamon, who was adopted from India,

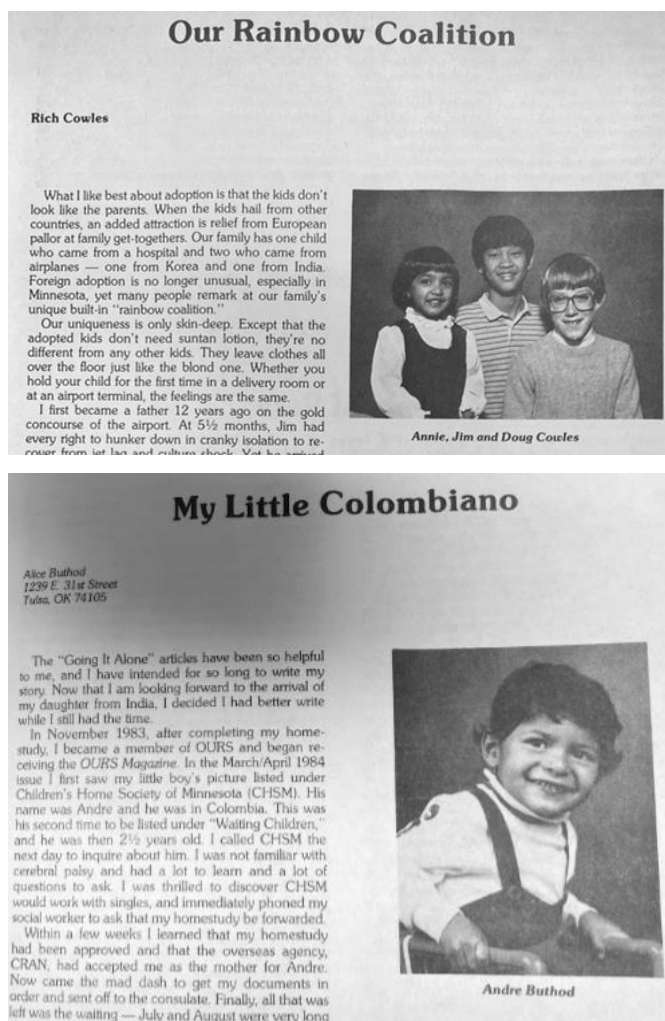
⁷⁵ Mrs. Diane Montondo, “You’re In Our Life to Keep,” *OURS*, March-April 1979, Volume 12, Number 2, New Hope Media.

⁷⁶ Judy Kamerud, “Dark Hair, Dark Eyes, Fair Complexion,” *OURS*, March-April 1979, Volume 12, Number 2, New Hope Media.

⁷⁷ Park Nelson, *Invisible Asians*, 98.

⁷⁸ Park Nelson, *Invisible Asians*, 99.

the “spice of our lives,”⁷⁹ while another mother’s child is “My Little Colombiano.”⁸⁰ A mother wrote to *OURS*, celebrating her “Japanese-Filipino-Scottish-American” family (“Some folks can’t stop at one ... or two ... or even five”).⁸¹ One father wrote of his and his wife’s “Rainbow Coalition,” noting proudly that his children add “relief from European pallor at family get-togethers.” “Except that the adopted kids don’t need suntan lotion, they’re no different from any other kids,” he adds; although, in all of these cases, the children, whom their parents insist are “no different” from (white) American kids, are still racially marked—but affectionately, as tokens, with parents singling out characteristics like their “trademark . . . thick, shiny black



Figures 2.2, 2.3. Articles, *OURS*, March-April 1986, Volume 19, Number 2, New Hope Media, New York, NY.

⁷⁹ Ginger Fisher, “Cinnamon – The Spice of Our Lives,” *OURS*, September-October 1983, Volume 16, Number 5, New Hope Media.

⁸⁰ Alice Buthod, “My Little Colombiano,” *OURS*, March-April 1986, Volume 19, Number 2, New Hope Media.

⁸¹ Candy Murdock, “My Family: Japanese-Filipino-Scottish-American,” *OURS*, March-April 1989, Volume 22, Number 2, New Hope Media.



Figure 2.4. Advertisement, *OURS*, May-June 1988, Volume 21, Number 3, New Hope Media, New York, NY.

hair” and comparing a growing Korean child to a “bamboo shoot.”⁸² As Park Nelson has noted, “adoption inserted children of color into strongly assimilative situations, where their birth culture could only be dimly imagined

by White family members on the basis of flawed cues from American popular culture.”⁸³ Racial difference, these multicultural adoption discourses insisted, was not a profound difference, but rather an interesting quirk, one that is assumed to have no relevance to the child’s life, relevant to their parents and family only as an added “spice”—a nonwhite child’s race was to be recognized and celebrated only as one more “color” to a family’s “rainbow.” “Adoption is a rainbow of love,” announced one advertisement for posters and bumper stickers in a 1988 issue of *OURS*,⁸⁴ perfectly encapsulating the governing racial ideology in adoption discourse of the period: race is just one colorful element of a family, and family love overcomes all racial difference.

For adoptees, there was an attendant expressed belief and expectation that racial difference didn’t, and shouldn’t, matter to them, either. One adopted girl from Korea, “Amy Joy – American,” was described, in an article about her naturalization ceremony, as a “regulation

⁸² Rich Cowles, “Our Rainbow Coalition,” *OURS*, March-April 1986, Volume 19, Number 2, New Hope Media.

⁸³ Park Nelson, *Invisible Asians*, 100.

⁸⁴ Advertisement, “Adoption is a rainbow of love,” *OURS*, May-June 1988, Volume 21, Number 3, New Hope Media.

American child” with her interest in rock songs, playing with her friends, and *Star Wars*. But what happens, the article asks, when others “make fun of her slanted eyes and dark skin, and how does she take it?”

The answer is, this hasn’t happened often and when it does Amy handles the situation in much the same way as a kid with glasses would when called ‘Four Eyes.’ She sometimes doesn’t deign to reply. She sometimes is too busy having fun to notice the remark. And she sometimes responds with a well-placed kick.⁸⁵

Being recognizably nonwhite, the parent-written article suggests, is no more significant an experience for the child than needing glasses to see: it is an equal physical difference to any other, and does not carry with it any sort of additional emotional or social weight. Nonwhite adopted children can deal with it easily and without any lasting angst or effect. Moreover, much as the parents of Sue Lei, the girl whose story opened this chapter, insisted that any racial prejudice she experiences “shouldn’t bother her too much as long as she gets enough love at home,” the idea of the all-encompassing power of love figured into the extent to which race was depicted as mattering for adoptees: the assumption wasn’t that others wouldn’t notice adoptees’ Asianness, but rather that it was a small physical difference whose social effects could be countered by the equal or more powerful weight of love in the context of the family.

In the 1980s, a domestic debate raged in adoption circles around whether Black children should be raised in white families, and if so, whether they should be raised with strong Black identities. An article in *OURS* in 1981, written by a self-identified “Swedish-Norwegian and Belgian” mother and president of a regional Illinois chapter of *OURS*, opined that “constant stress on Black Identity would tend to promote a false and unnatural way of life for white parents.” For the author, parents of transracially and transnationally adopted children “love their

⁸⁵ Richard P. Carpenter, “Amy Joy – American,” *OURS*, January-February 1979, Volume 12, Number 1, reprinted from *Salem (Mass.) Evening News*, New Hope Media.

children, regardless of their color or country of origin,” and should not be expected to take on the burden of “[changing] our lifestyle to one paralleling any ONE” of the nationalities of their children: “We will not move to Chinatown for our Oriental daughters to become aware of their identity, just as we will not go to Brussels or Stockholm for any length of time.” Instead, the author implicitly proposes a swap: love instead of cultural pride or education.

More important than teaching our children to be Black, Vietnamese, or Colombian, is to teach them about life and the love of their fellow man. . . . We are proud that our daughters are Asian-Americans. All of us are equally different and equally loved. **It is not the color of skin or country or origin that makes us somebody – it is belonging to someone, being part of a whole, that gives us identity and purpose.** . . . Love is the KEY to cross-cultural/transracial adoptions.⁸⁶

Rona Tamiko Halualani has articulated a representation of diversity in the “post-race era,” which she defines as the period from the 1990s-present in which “U.S. society invoked a neoliberal stance through which race in all social and political matters was to be avoided.”⁸⁷ In this ideological representation, diversity signifies an abstract and “raceless” reality in which racial groups are depicted as “present” and therefore “equal”; all groups are “the *same and equal* precisely because they are all equally *different*.”⁸⁸ The discourses around transnational, transracial adoption during this period perform a similar type of substitution: all races, they insist, are equal; being an Asian adoptee in the United States is no different, experientially, from being a white person whose family’s ancestry is from northern Europe. There is even, as we see in the above example, at times an insinuation that to cater to every culture from which one’s adopted children have come from would be an unreasonable burden. In these examples, it is

⁸⁶ Ann Vermeire, “Attitudes on Transracial Adoption,” *OURS*, January-February 1983, Volume 14, Number 6, New Hope Media. Emphasis original.

⁸⁷ Rona Tamiko Halualani, “Abstracting and De-Racializing Diversity: The Articulation of Diversity in the Post-Race Era,” in *Critical Rhetorics of Race*, edited by Michael G. Lacy and Kent A. Ono (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 248.

⁸⁸ Halualani, “Abstracting and De-Racializing Diversity,” 248.

notably not addressed that transnational adoption of a nonwhite child might be expected to carry those responsibilities. Instead, an easier substitution is made: love will unite all of the “colors” in a family, will smooth the edges of any racial prejudice, will compensate for any need the child may have to connect with their birth culture or community. The individual family and the love within it are meant to make up for that: you don’t need to know or live your birth culture, this discourse says; you have our love instead.

This ultimately comprises a type of repression for adoptees in the ways that they are allowed to imagine their identities and feelings of belonging. Much like their counterparts three decades earlier, the Korean War orphans adopted to the U.S. for whom “national inclusion was predicated upon an erasure of ties to South Korea, past and present”⁸⁹ and for whom assimilation into “honorary whiteness” was the only option, nonwhite transnational adoptees continued to have the expectations placed upon them that their racial difference didn’t, and couldn’t, matter—at least, not to them. It could matter insofar as their nonwhite skin could be celebrated as one of many colors of a family’s “rainbow.” But beyond this, progressive attitudes suggested that any deeper fixation on the color of one’s skin—and what that may represent—was a type of ideological retrenchment. The U.S. society, with progressive adoptive families leading the way, had moved on from such preoccupations, and adoptees, constructed as the objects around which these postracial hopes coalesced, were swept up in these currents, forced to do the same.

The ramifications of these attitudes on adoptees were, and are, significant. In her ethnography of Korean adoptees in the U.S., Eleana Kim has noted that the legal and symbolic “orphaning” that adoptees experience and the resulting “mis-fit with dominant national, ethnic, and cultural models” leads adoptees to share “common experiences of disconnection,

⁸⁹ Woo, *Framed by War*, 138.

disidentification, and displacement.”⁹⁰ Woo adds that Korean adoptees were forced to undergo physical, emotional, and even physical transformations to “align” with the U.S. and become ideal subjects and “model minorities,”⁹¹ as they were expected to become Christian, use English, and adapt to U.S. culture. Adoptees “symbolized a silent path to inclusion,” expected to adhere in obedience to white U.S. norms and disavowal any trauma of separation that they’d experienced. “In order for narratives of rescue and benevolence to hold, everything had to be spun into a positive,” Woo writes,⁹² and McKee affirms this with her description of the “*adoptee killjoy*,” building on Ahmed’s “feminist killjoy”: an adoptee who counters the dominant expectation of the “good, happy subject, or in this case, the happy, grateful adoptee,” who must “employ a particular affect conveying their joy” around their adoption.⁹³ That failing to “adhere to the adoption fantasy” of rescue constitutes a “politics of refusal” that denies white demand for gratitude and therefore incites reprimands for being “ungrateful, angry, and maladjusted”⁹⁴ is a powerful indicator of the social pressures exerted on adoptees to perform uncomplicated positivity and gratitude despite the feelings of loss, displacement, or trauma they may also experience.

With the rise of liberal multiculturalism in the 1980s, a new interest in cultural education arose, with adoptive parents signing their children up for youth classes and culture camps, travel operators offering “heritage” tours to Korea and other sending nations, and vendors advertising in the pages of *OURS* magazine for “ethnic” arrival announcements, cards, ornaments, t-shirts,

⁹⁰ Eleana Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 98.

⁹¹ Woo, *Framed by War*, 131, 133.

⁹² Woo, *Framed by War*, 141.

⁹³ McKee, *Disrupting Kinship*, 11.

⁹⁴ McKee, *Disrupting Kinship*, 11, 9.

and more. In 1983, *OURS* advertised for a Korean culture camp held by the Central Minnesota Korean-American Cultural Society called “Kamp Kimchee,” which gave families the chance to “learn Korean customs, history, geography, music, dances and oral and written language” while also enjoying a “relaxing family vacation week” in the resort town of Brainerd.⁹⁵ The Korean Institute of Minnesota instituted youth classes for Korean adoptees that included “Korean language, culture, history, cooking, dancing, Tae Kwon Do and Oriental painting” to “help the youth develop understanding of Korea through education and friendship.”⁹⁶ *OURS* even published a guide to “Throw[ing] a Korean Culture Day On a Shoe-String Budget,” which included displaying issues of *OURS* alongside a Korean cookbook, “Asian dolls, Korean coins and books,” and “beautifully crafted Asian dolls” made by an adoptive grandmother; a free taekwondo demonstration; and Korean food catered by a local Korean family.⁹⁷

This same issue, published in the spring of 1990, emphasized cultural education around internationally adopted children, with a spotlight on Haiti (“a tiny Caribbean country of disease, poverty, and oppression-but also of pride and world leadership in the arts and literature”),⁹⁸ and an article on “Cultural Parenting Styles” that encouraged adoptive parents to learn about the family customs of their children’s birth countries. An American whose time volunteering in the Peace Corps in Thailand undergirded his authority to speak on the country described Thai people as “[focused] on the group, based on Buddhist philosophy,” as exerting “intense pressure to get along and not make waves,” as subjugating women “in every way,” and as “very clean people.” A section on Korea by an adoptive parent of a Korean child attributed the lack of in-country

⁹⁵ Mary C. Steffenson, “Kamp Kimchee: Korean Culture Camp for 1983,” *OURS*, March/April 1983, Volume 16, Number 2, New Hope Media.

⁹⁶ “Korean Institute of Minnesota Announces Youth Classes,” *OURS*, March/April 1983, Volume 16, Number 2, New Hope Media.

⁹⁷ Joanne Green, “How to Throw a Korean Culture Day On a Shoe-String Budget,” *OURS*, March/April 1990, Volume 23, Number 2, New Hope Media.

⁹⁸ Anne Welsbacher, “Pride and Devastation,” *OURS*, March/April 1990, Volume 23, Number 2, New Hope Media.

adoptions of Korea's orphaned children to "Korea's Confucian view on the meaning of life": unlike US "individual-based" culture, Korean culture is "group-based," and therefore more hostile to the needs of the individual. Dr. Lucien W. Pye, a Professor of Political Science at MIT and an "authority on Chinese culture" (Pye was, indeed, known as an expert in comparative politics and focused on the development of impoverished countries in Asia, though his *New York Times* obituary noted his peers sometimes critiqued his use of generalizations and stereotypes⁹⁹), noted that in the U.S., "we stress the need for individuals to find fulfillment," whereas in Confucianism, "the individual or self is always defined in terms of something else – the individual's place within the family, the clan, the group, the society." The author, though refraining from directly criticizing Korean culture, depicted the contrast in cultural norms as favoring the US:

In the United States, family planning is a smorgasboard. Abortions are legal and safe. A woman wanting to be a mother but having difficulty conceiving has options . . . And it is socially acceptable for an unmarried mother to raise a child herself. Individual rights, as long as they don't infringe legally on another's rights, are paramount in the U.S.

"Yi Dynasty females," the author wrote, referring to the Chosun (Yi) dynasty under which Confucianism developed, "lived the Confucian concept of filial piety." Yet since the end of that dynasty, "[m]ajor political and economic changes have occurred, and the 1990s promise great cultural change," namely the "westernization" and, hopefully, "more individual freedom for members of South Korean society."¹⁰⁰ Interestingly, one of the more important elements of this education about Korean culture seems to be the superiority of U.S. societal norms around family planning, and the repressiveness and, indeed, illiberalness of a Korean culture that inadequately

⁹⁹ Douglas Martin, "Lucian W. Pye, Bold Thinker on Asia, Is Dead at 86," *New York Times*, September 11, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/12/us/12pye.html>.

¹⁰⁰ Kathleen Cassen, "Cultural Parenting Styles"; Holly Meisner, "The Distance Between Two Mothers," *OURS*, March/April 1990, Volume 23, Number 2, New Hope Media.

values the rights of the individual. Though the article on cultural parenting styles featured some sections with information on popular birth countries provided by people from those countries, the sections on Korea, Thailand, and Colombia used white Americans, often adoptive parents, as their authorities. In the case of Thailand, the rhetor's interactions with the country were mediated through the Peace Corps and assumptions about power, poverty, and charity; in the case of Korea and Colombia, white adoptive parents engaged with their children's birth countries through lenses of a "sending/receiving country" power dynamic that considered a sending country to be generally inadequate or unable to care for the children it sent overseas for adoption. The at times helpful yet often misguided nature of these forms of cultural education for adoptive parents characterized the unresolved tensions in prevailing attitudes around transracial international adoption, in which openness, racial acceptance, and progressivism were often layered with lingering attitudes of condescension and pity, and a compulsion to other.

Narratives of adoptive families' trips to their children's birth countries also exemplified this duality. The pages of *OURS* were filled with first-hand accounts of adoptive parents and families traveling to other countries to bring home their child, or to pay a visit to their child's birth country many years later. One mother wrote of a visit she took with her son and several other families to Vietnam, from which he'd been removed as part of the infamous "Operation Babylift." The visitors saw the sites of Hanoi, with its "crumbling and moldy" French Colonial architecture, visited several orphanages, and met welcoming crowds in the "old American stronghold" of Da Nang, who were "very proud" to see the children "so healthy and handsome." Pedicab drivers in Ho Chi Minh City were eager, for a few US dollars or cigarettes, "would drive us on their old, broken-down bikes anywhere we wanted to go." They were "shocked at the poverty and filth of a home for street children in Ho Chi Minh, and prayed that conditions would

improve there soon.” And the children, she wrote, were “sad and wistful” to see their former orphanages, but “happy at the same time.” Her son, who had for a long time “denied his roots” because he felt “diminished” by “attitudes about Vietnam,” became “overcome with pride in what he saw” on the trip.¹⁰¹ Told by a white adoptive parent, this travelogue of a trip to Vietnam depicts the country as impoverished and crumbling, yet imbued with a noble history; most importantly, perhaps, it speaks *for* the adopted children around whom the trip centered. It characterizes a well-meaning desire to, as another mother wrote, learn as much about the child’s birth country as possible “so that our daughter would have her heritage”¹⁰²: an admirable goal in an era of increasing multicultural acceptance. Yet these stories about foreign countries who send their children overseas for adoption remained overwhelmingly in the hands of white adoptive parents, framed as form of additive cultural knowledge without deeper grappling with the geopolitical forces and profound inequalities that had shaped the conditions of poverty and postwar collapse and recovery that they witnessed. It is not questioned that bringing adopted Vietnamese children to various orphanages and a “filthy” home for street children is helpful and beneficial to them; it is assumed that, in addition to visits to historical tourist sites, these stops are all part of helping a child learn their “roots.” The children, upon seeing the orphanages, are presumed to display full emotional transparency to their white adoptive parents, and whose inner lives around returning to their origins—“sad and wistful, but happy at the same time,” having now come “full circle,” implying the end of an emotional journey—are easily readable and processed.

Discourse in this period of proliferating multiculturalism, indeed, favored framings of such cultural explorations in self-contained and tidy narratives. In one article, an adopted mother

¹⁰¹ Jeanne Lang, “A Journey Back in Time,” *OURS*, May/June 1990, Volume 23, Number 3, New Hope Media.

¹⁰² Chris Winston, “Our Trip to Korea,” *OURS*, May/June 1990, Volume 23, Number 3, New Hope Media.

wrote of changing the names of her three children, all adopted from India, from their original names to American names: “Our gift to these children was not only new life in a family of love but an identity that reflected *our* investment in them.”¹⁰³ Another article explained that one adoptive mother planned to acquaint her daughter with “her Korean background, perhaps through a Korean cultural camp that offers ethnic food and teaches Korean dancing,” noted that the mother “doesn’t want Katharine to forget her heritage; at the same time she said the little girl is ‘Korean-born, she’s not Korean anymore.’”¹⁰⁴ Cultural education, in other words, had its limits. It was acceptable and encouraged, but only up to the point at which one—or even the child—might forget that they are, indeed, American now, and members of white American families, or to the point at which the adoptive parents’ role in their children’s lives might be threatened or questioned. It was perhaps for this reason that education about racial and ethnic heritage was largely limited to additive cultural elements, focusing on things like “ethnically appropriate dolls” and toys.¹⁰⁵ Parents often approached raising transracially adopted children with optimism; one mother wrote that she never took offense when strangers asked questions like “Are they both your children?” about her biological and adopted sons, choosing to see it only as “friendly interest,” like someone asking, “How old are you?”¹⁰⁶

The dominant trend of multicultural education through articles that delved into the history and cultural practices of adopted children’s birth countries, as well as firsthand accounts of initial or return trips, also contribute to what Halualani called “abstract or raceless diversity,” a

¹⁰³ Robyne L. Bryant, “More Desirable Than Riches,” *OURS*, May/June 1991, Volume 24, Number 3, New Hope Media.

¹⁰⁴ Kay Urtz, “All Her Children Are Real,” *OURS*, September/October 1985, Volume 18, Number 5, New Hope Media.

¹⁰⁵ Darlene Powell-Hopson, Ph.D., “Ethnically Appropriate Dolls: Tolls for Racial Pride,” *OURS*, November/December 1991, Volume 24, Number 6; Judy Thorp, “Searching For Cultural Roots,” *OURS*, September/October 1990, Volume 23, Number 5, New Hope Media.

¹⁰⁶ Melissa Abramovitz, “Living in a Racially-Mixed Family: A Question of Attitude,” *OURS*, July/August 1991, Volume 24, Number 4, New Hope Media.

representation of diversity in media discourses that presents varied racial and ethnic groups as (increasingly) “*present and thus equal*”—and equally, universally different from one another.¹⁰⁷ This results, Halualani writes, in a contradictory formation in which demographic diversity is acknowledged but at the same time rendered *raceless* and lacking any differentiation between groups; diversity, therefore, is “highlighted at the very same moment as it is abstracted away from race or difference. This specific articulation of diversity is used to eradicate race.”¹⁰⁸ Trends in the 1980s and ‘90s of recognizing, even lauding, diversity in adopted children’s races and sending countries through cultural education and features on various countries—especially those features that, told through the perspective of white adoptive parents, failed to grapple with complex geopolitical and social conditions and spoke for the kinds of “closure” such trips afforded adopted children—constituted, I argue, another form of representation-based diversity. If, in a regime of “raceless diversity,” diversity is “abstracted as a general set of social relations between groups that are ‘present’ and ‘different,’” obfuscating or disregarding “specific inequalities and power differentials” and “historical and structural positionings,”¹⁰⁹ adoption discourse in this period that fed into celebratory presentations of multicultural diversity in American families without acknowledging the imbalances in power that made such “rainbow families” possible can also be understood as a representation of “raceless diversity”—which, according to Halualani, serves the interests of the hegemonic White-centered status quo. In this sense, it was important, even crucial, to represent the *raced* nature of multiracial families; “raceless diversity” signified not a lack of race but a very real and laudable presence of it. But as evidenced by the statement that one mother’s child, who was adopted from Korea, is “Korean-

¹⁰⁷ Halualani, “Abstracting and De-Racializing Diversity,” 248.

¹⁰⁸ Halualani, “Abstracting and De-Racializing Diversity,” 258.

¹⁰⁹ Halualani, “Abstracting and De-Racializing Diversity,” 258.

born, she's not Korean anymore," it was equally important to represent race—even inclusive of cultural signifiers like food or traditional dance—shorn of history, power imbalances, and politics. There are, undeniably, many benefits to educating a child in their birth country's culture, and racial and ethnic representation can play a significant role in a child's self-image and confidence. But in the case of the discourse around raising a transnationally and transracially adopted child, "cultural education" meant just that: additive elements of a child's birth country's culture, deployed in a way that both represented and erased the significance of racial difference in the same moment. As one mother wrote, her husband, "in marrying me, had acquired Dutch and Lithuanian traditions, just as my family had acquired Polish ones. With Sharon [the child they adopted], we just added Korean to the list."¹¹⁰

This is not to say, of course, that all coverage of the period espoused this perspective. A small number of articles and accounts embraced and encouraged approaches for adoptive parents and families that would mean grappling with discomfort around race. A clinical psychologist writing on genetics and adoption in 1988 noted that the answer to how parents can best show their love to their adopted children "does not lie in pretending that there are no differences between adoptive and biological relationships."¹¹¹ One mother wrote in *OURS* of her family's increasing participation in Korean culture, institutions, and traditions to make her children who were adopted from Korea feel more comfortable, despite—and even because of—the level of discomfort it brought to her family and, in particular, to her biological child.¹¹² And *USA Today* ran a story on the importance of entering the raising of a transracially adopted child "with their

¹¹⁰ Lisa Jackson, "Threads of Many Colors: Adopting From Different Countries," *OURS*, September/October 1992, Volume 25, Number 5, New Hope Media.

¹¹¹ Patricia Baasel, "Genetics and Your Child," *OURS*, July/August 1988, Volume 21, Number 4, New Hope Media.

¹¹² Terra Trevor, "Embracing Ethnic Heritage," *OURS*, November/December 1991, Volume 24, Number 6, New Hope Media.

eyes open” to the challenges, including one’s own biases and prejudices. Suggestions around confronting transracial adoption in ways that openly embrace discomfort on the part of the adoptive family—which, as the mother of the *OURS* article pointed out, is “exactly what we ask our kids to do” as they join their new families—spoke against the maintenance of white comfort, white privilege, and the white-dominated status quo in adoption that insisted only on diversity as a type of aesthetic. Still, even the *USA Today* article mainly limited its advice to introducing one’s children to their birth culture and encouraging children who face prejudice to recognize that “unkind remarks say nothing about them, but volumes about the people who make them.”¹¹³ The latter is as good as any advice that one could give to a child facing racism and discrimination; but in its attempt to redirect an issue about race into an issue of personal responsibility, it also comes dangerously close to supporting narratives of raceless diversity. The article also mentioned that one mother learned from the way that her 8-year-old son, who was adopted from Guatemala, responded to negative comments: “he was so dignified and understanding that I learned to control my temper.” In this case, the child shouldered the burden of modeling to the parent how to respond to racism and discrimination, and was praised for doing so with “dignity,” an indirect but clear statement of support for adopting a politics of civility as a means to manage racism.

In fall 2020, the U.S. Senate was about to hold confirmation hearings for Amy Coney Barrett’s nomination to the Supreme Court. Coney Barrett and her husband, Jesse, had adopted two Black children from Haiti, one after the 2010 earthquake there devastated an orphanage. Conservatives were optimistic about Coney Barrett; Candace Owens, conservative author and

¹¹³ Barbara Bisantz Raymond, “Foreign-born, USA-bred,” *USA Today*, n.d.. Box 16, William Pierce Files, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries.

speaker, tweeted: “She’s a woman, so they can’t hire their usual fake sexual assault victims. She has two black children, so they can’t smear her as a racist.”¹¹⁴ Another conservative commentator, Jenny Beth Martin, who co-founded the Tea Party Patriots, expressed a similar sentiment in a now-deleted Tweet: “With 2 adopted children from Haiti, it is going to be interesting to watch the Democrats try to smear Amy Coney Barrett as racist.”¹¹⁵ In reply to the latter, Ibram X. Kendi, Andrew W. Mellon Professor in the Humanities at Boston University and Founding Director of the Boston University Center for Antiracist Research, noted in a series of tweets:

Some White colonizers “adopted” Black children. They “civilized” these “savage” children in the “superior” ways of White people, while using them as props in their lifelong pictures of denial, while cutting the biological parents of these children out of the picture of humanity. And whether this is Barrett or not is not the point. It is a belief too many White people have: if they have or adopt a child of color, then they can’t be racist.¹¹⁶

Kendi’s tweets inspired fierce backlash and calls for his resignation from his position at BU. On Twitter, many accused Kendi of racism, generalization, and unfairness; journalist Glenn Greenwald called Kendi’s words “despicable.”¹¹⁷ The *Wall Street Journal* published a series of letters to the editor under the headline: “Why don’t the critics of interracial adoption ask Vivian and John Peter [Coney Barrett’s adopted children] if they would prefer being malnourished in Haiti to being members of the Barrett family?” Critics of Coney Barrett and her husband’s

¹¹⁴ Candace Owens (@RealCandaceO), “Amy Coney Barrett: -She’s a woman, so they can’t hire their usual fake sexual assault victims. -She has two black children, so they can’t smear her as a racist...,” Twitter, September 26, 2020, <https://twitter.com/RealCandaceO/status/1309967793102749701>.

¹¹⁵ Ariel Zilber and Geoff Earle, “Boston University Professor is Urged to Resign for Calling Amy Coney Barrett a ‘White Colonizer’ Who is Using Her Two Adopted Haitian Children as ‘Props,’” *Daily Mail*, October 12, 2020, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8779469/Amy-Coney-Barrett-white-colonizer-adopting-two-black-children-Haiti-professor-says.html>.

¹¹⁶ Ibram X Kendi, (@DrIbram), “Some White colonizers ‘adopted’ Black children. They ‘civilized’ these ‘savage’ children in the ‘superior’ ways of White people, while using them as props in their lifelong pictures of denial. . . ,” Twitter, September 26, 2020, <https://twitter.com/dribram/status/1309916696296198146>.

¹¹⁷ Zilber and Earle, “Boston University Professor is Urged to Resign.”

adoptions “aren’t thinking clearly,” letter writers wrote. “So I assume these disparaging accusations apply to the Hollywood likes of Sandra Bullock, Madonna, Charlize Theron, Tom Cruise and Angelina Jolie?” Another reader said that their family adopted “an African baby girl” while their family lived in Africa: “What we did through adoption was to put flesh on our faith that compels us to love sacrificially. . . . Denigrating people who have chosen to adopt transracially certainly cannot be part of the solution.”¹¹⁸ A separate *Wall Street Journal* article pointed out that economists Mark Montgomery and Irene Powell assured in their 2018 book, *Saving International Adoption*, that transracial adoption does no harm to black children, and that there is “no statistical difference between the groups in terms of self-esteem, self-concept and family integration.” The author referred to the criticisms as characteristic of “the Left’s unhealthy interest in Amy Coney Barrett’s adopted kids.”¹¹⁹

The assumption that children are better off taken in by white U.S. families than “being malnourished in Haiti” aptly demonstrates the overriding belief in white U.S. adoption as an unquestioned good and a form of rescue, as elaborated in the previous chapter. But this discourse also has significant implications for racialization. There is a more politically charged insistence than in the discourse of the 1980s and 1990s on transnational, transracial adoption as an unalloyed good, and with it a matching insistence that such adoptions, *because* they are motivated by good intentions, cannot be compatible with racism. Though Kendi clearly notes that he makes no accusations about Coney Barrett specifically, and instead intends to challenge the notion that white parents of nonwhite children cannot be racist, the vitriol and defensiveness

¹¹⁸ “Amy Coney Barrett and Her Adopted Black Children,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 5, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/amy-coney-barrett-and-her-adopted-black-children-11601935392>.

¹¹⁹ Jason L. Riley, “Upward Mobility: The Left’s Unhealthy Interest in Amy Coney Barrett’s Adopted Kids,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 30, 2020, Eastern edition, <http://turing.library.northwestern.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/upward-mobility-lefts-unhealthy-interest-amy/docview/2447188646/se-2>.

of the criticisms aimed at Kendi demonstrate a profound anxiety about white adoptive parenting of nonwhite adopted children, and an intense desire to have such adoptions depicted uncritically. In a deeply divided political atmosphere, Kendi's comments are taken to be symptomatic of a leftist compulsion to attack conservatives for nonsensical or hypocritical reasons; his caution that white parents should not be universally celebrated as having overcome racism when they have adopted nonwhite children was, alarmingly, disregarded in favor of the implicit accusation that to express doubts, concerns, or criticism about white families who have adopted transracially is to denigrate the practice in its entirety.

In her opening statement on the first day of the Senate confirmation hearings, Coney Barrett shared details about each of her seven children. Her biological children were described in terms of what they did or aspired to be—eldest daughter Emma was a sophomore in college and wanted to go into law; 16-year-old Tess loves the liberal arts and math; Liam is “smart, strong, and kind”; 10-year-old Juliet wants to become an author; youngest son, Benjamin, has Down syndrome and is the family favorite. But Vivian and John Peter, the children they adopted from Haiti, are described in terms of their overcoming situational misfortune:

Next is Vivian, who came to us from Haiti. When Vivian arrived, she was so weak that we were told she might never talk or walk normally. But now she deadlifts as much as the male athletes at our gym, and I assure you that she has no trouble talking. . . . John Peter joined us shortly after the devastating earthquake in Haiti, and Jesse, who brought him home, still describes the shock on JP's face when he got off the plane in wintertime Chicago. Once that shock wore off, JP assumed the happy-go-lucky attitude that is still his signature trait.¹²⁰

As Régine Jean-Charles noted in *Ms*, “these Black Haitian children were merely the sum of their trauma.” Jean-Charles noted that while the other siblings were described according to

¹²⁰ Scott Stump, “Amy Coney Barrett Opens Up about Her 7 Children at Supreme Court Confirmation Hearing.” *TODAY*, October 12, 2020. <https://www.today.com/parents/amy-coney-barrett-talks-about-her-kids-confirmation-hearing-t194002>.

their intellectual attributes and accomplishments, Vivienne, John Peter, and Benjamin were “identified for their strength and resilience”; further, eschewing similar references to intellectual ability and instead using expressions like “happy-go-lucky” “plays into more nefarious myths about Blackness.”¹²¹ These insidious differences, in which children of color are framed as being equal members of a multiracial family, and yet are described in unequal ways that make clear the lingering significance their rescue from dire circumstances (Coney Barrett has said she and her husband chose Haiti “because of its overwhelming poverty” as well as its proximity to the U.S.¹²²) carries for the adoptive parents, are symptomatic of the compulsions that Kendi warned against. Their status as adoptees who are welcomed as ostensibly equal members of their family does not prevent Vivienne and John Peter from being subtly racialized to the public, incorporated and included and yet, as Shimakawa has written in her study of Asian American performance, made abject—a state that signals both radical foreignness and “the abhorrent as already internalized.”¹²³ Though Shimakawa writes of the specific and contradictory nature of Asian American in/exclusion, I argue that for all transnational, transracial adoptees who are wielded as figures of diversity while simultaneously presented as ostensibly raceless in their family contexts, the effect is remarkably similar.

These discourses also facilitate the deployment of racially diverse children who joined white families through adoption as a political tool. The *New York Times* ran a story in October 2020 detailing Coney Barrett’s adoptions from Haiti with a heavy emphasis on the children’s

¹²¹ Régine Jean-Charles, “Amy Coney Barrett’s ‘Happy Go Lucky’ Haitian Children and the White Savior Narrative,” *Ms. Magazine*, October 21, 2020, <https://msmagazine.com/2020/10/21/amy-coney-barrett-haiti-black-children-white-savior/>.

¹²² Catherine Porter and Serge F. Kovalski, “An Earthquake, an Orphanage, and New Beginnings for Haitian Children in America,” *New York Times*, October 19, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/19/world/haiti-adoptions.html>.

¹²³ Karen Shimakawa, *National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 8.

escape from devastation (“I got out of there, but all those people were left. They didn’t get the chance I got,” Coney Barrett’s son, John Peter, was quoted as saying); accompanying the piece was a large full-color photo of Coney Barrett at the White House with her husband and their seven children, including Vivian and JP, standing between President Trump and First Lady Melania Trump. Everyone in the photo was dressed smartly and wearing a big smile. The subheading read: “After the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, 19 children from one orphanage were flown to the U.S. to be adopted by American families. One would later meet President Trump.”¹²⁴ That one, of course, was John Peter, Coney Barrett’s son. That the family was pictured alongside President Trump, who had some three years previous referred to Haiti as one among a collection of “shithole countries” from which people sought to immigrate to the U.S., and who reportedly said that Haitians “all have AIDS,”¹²⁵ alongside an article framing John Peter’s meeting President Trump as the pinnacle of a young life characterized primarily by his rescue from a country in ruins, represents a form of cynicism at best and violence at worst. It speaks clearly to the expectations placed upon transracially, transnationally adopted children to perform gratitude and to represent racial diversity and acceptance that the photo and article came to be. The article mentioned the irony of President Trump lauding the Barretts’ adoptions when he had “referred to Haiti with an expletive,” and mentions that critics have identified an element of “white saviorism” in Coney Barrett’s “public accounts of her children’s dire situations before they left Haiti,” but devoted the vast majority of its word count to the story of the Barretts’ trials in their adoption of John Peter, ending with the image of JP’s shock when he got off the plane in Chicago, and his transition to a “happy-go-lucky” young man.¹²⁶ John Peter’s racialization, and

¹²⁴ Porter and Kovalski, “An Earthquake, an Orphanage, and New Beginnings.”

¹²⁵ Ibram X. Kendi, “The Day *Shithole* Entered the Presidential Lexicon,” *Atlantic*, January 13, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/01/shithole-countries/580054/>.

¹²⁶ Porter and Kovalski, “An Earthquake, an Orphanage, and New Beginnings.”



Figure 2.5. Photo of Judge Amy Coney Barrett and her children with President Trump and first lady Melania Trump, *New York Times*, October 19, 2020. Photo by Doug Mills for *New York Times*.

his status as a disadvantaged black child from an impoverished country, is used as a tool to add human interest to the figures of both Coney Barrett and Trump; yet that it might also be a source of discomfort or difficulty for John Peter is never mentioned. He is expected to represent diversity—to be, in fact, the shield that protects his mother from any and all leftist criticism of racism—but in all of the conversations and debate around his adoption, and around Coney Barrett, no serious conversation was raised around the realities of living as a nonwhite adoptee in a white family, especially where your story is publicly narrativized as one of overcoming your traumatic roots. Vivienne and John Peter are figures of “raceless diversity”—diversity without a past, without friction, without politics.

Postracial discourse around adoption has not *only* entailed a minimization of racial difference. As we have seen, lingering vestiges or mentions of race are still and always present.

Postracial discourse marks an attempt to recast the meaning of racial difference for new ends, an argument that new racial meanings have replaced old ones. From depicting the U.S. as more racially democratic in the eyes of the world to gain the upper hand during the Cold War, to portrayals of “model minority” adoptees that insidiously perpetuate anti-Blackness, to celebrations of “rainbow families” that downplayed the emotional and psychological effects of transnational, transracial adoption on adoptees in an era of increased marketization and commodification of adoption, to the use of nonwhite adopted children to signal racial tolerance to political allies and foes, postracial attitudes around adoption have sought to retell the meanings of race. The problem, of course, is that the old meanings have never left us. Postracial discourse as it has been deployed around adoption since the 1950s is not, as this chapter has demonstrated, a reliable means to achieve racial justice or restitution. Instead, it further entrenches white privilege by obliterating adoptees’ ability to claim the significance of their racial ties, their birth countries, and their birth families, which they are rendered unable to do without disrupting the precarity of white comfort. Those adoptees who do risk such disruption, who fail to perform gratitude for their rescue, who seek to publicly grapple with the harms and challenges of being raised in a family ill-equipped to deal with racial difference, are at risk of being labeled what McKee calls the *adoptee killjoy*, after Ahmed’s feminist killjoy: an adoptee who refuses to “adhere to the adoption fantasy.”¹²⁷ In the next chapter, we begin to see the contours of discourse by adoptees who, consciously or unconsciously, embrace their role as adoptee killjoy, firmly casting themselves as autonomous rhetors against the image of the perpetual child who is spoken for, and whose racial difference has been minimized and used but

¹²⁷ McKee, *Disrupting Kinship*, 11.

not seriously engaged. We will see what it looks like as, in fits and starts, adult adoptees start to speak against the fantasy.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Commonography of Souls: An Overview of Asian Adoptee Rhetoric

The walls of an orphanage
 my mother's womb.
Concrete slabs quiver and quake
 spit me into the world.
Legal papers and airplane tickets
 preparation for my birth.
Two white people decide to adopt
 that's where life began.¹

In 1997, Tonya Bishoff and Jo Rankin published an edited volume of writings by Korean adoptees titled *Seeds from a Silent Tree: An Anthology of Korean Adoptees*. The first publication about adoption edited by adult adoptees (McKee 2019), it marked an important moment in transnational adoptee cultural history: it was the first book in which Korean adoptees spoke entirely for themselves. In forty-five essays and poems, adoptees wrote of loss, alienation, racism, reunions, and suicide. The above excerpt, from a poem titled “Behind My Eyes” by Melissa Lin Hanson, expressed a theme that is repeated in adoptee literature: the recognition that, in the eyes of one’s adoptive parents, of one’s adoptive country, of the West, an adoptee’s life “begins” when, as Bishoff writes, one is “squeezed through the opening / of a powerful steel bird.”²

This image of perverse birth, in which the adoptee is born not of a person, not in a geographically or culturally specific place, but from an airplane, emphasizes the layers of an adoptee’s reckoning with the concept of origins—an acknowledgment both of their lack of knowledge about their (biological) births and of their adoptive families’ and cultures’ disinterest in the same. The irony undercutting these “birth” images demonstrates that there’s something

¹ Melissa Lin Hanson, “Behind My Eyes,” in *Seeds from a Silent Tree*, edited by Tonya Bishoff and Jo Rankin (San Diego, CA: Pandal Press, 1997), 60.

² Tonya Bishoff, “Unnamed Blood,” in Bishoff and Rankin, *Seeds from a Silent Tree*, 37.

dissonant and unnatural—and harmful—about Western adoptive families’ assumptions that their adopted child’s life up to the point of disembarking from the airplane in the arms of a foreign caregiver is both unimportant and inconsequential. This imagery, recurring in Asian adoptee rhetoric, is a potent example of what bell hooks called “talking back”: defiant speech, speech that dares to disagree, that dares to speak as “an equal to an authority figure.”³

Critical adoption scholars have noted that adoptees are burdened with expectations of gratitude and indebtedness for having been “rescued” by their adoptive parents and given better opportunities in the United States.⁴ This is especially true for Asian adoptees, who, as previous chapters have shown, are framed as having been rescued from dire futures in developing countries. Kimberly McKee has explained that the social pressure to present an affect of gratitude and joy maintains an adoptee’s status as “the happy, grateful adoptee,” whereas failure to affectively perform this gratitude results in being characterized as an ungrateful adoptee, angry, and embittered. McKee coins the term “adoptee killjoy,” adapted from Sara Ahmed’s concept of the feminist killjoy, to describe an adoptee who “disrupts adoption narratives of child rescue through political activism.”⁵ The adoptee killjoy’s refusal to perform gratitude and their inclination instead to critique adoption narratives and the process that involuntarily brought them to the West invites accusations of ingratitude and betrayal—yet increasingly, adult adoptees have done just that.

³ bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2015), 5.

⁴ Eleana Kim, *Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Daniel Y. Kim, *The Intimacies of Conflict: Cultural Memory and the Korean War* (New York: New York University Press, 2020); Kimberly D. McKee, *Disrupting Kinship: Transnational Politics of Korean Adoption in the United States* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2019); Susie Woo, *Framed by War: Korean Children and Women at the Crossroads of US Empire* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

⁵ McKee, *Disrupting Kinship*, 11.

This chapter examines Asian adoptee rhetoric, looking at cultural production by adult Asian American adoptees who, since the 1990s, have engaged in this refusal, not only declining to perform gratitude but actively choosing to talk back to dominant discourse in very public ways. As a rhetorical phenomenon, adoptee discourse functions as a critique of domination, an important counterpoint to mainstream discourse around transnational adoption: the many layers of identity, kinship, and alienation expressed in adoptee writings inject complexity and ambivalence missing from paternalist narratives of adoption, complicating what is otherwise a simplistic picture of adoption and, moreover, affirming the production of group and community solidarity. Adoptee rhetorics also represent an important critique of the process of stranger adoption itself, exposing the abuses, manipulations, deceptions, and harms that have so often been perpetrated and permitted by adoption facilitators. What, I ask, do public examples of the “adoptee killjoy”—transnational Asian adoptees who have written and published their stories and experiences in narratives that run counter to mainstream narratives of orphan rescue or racial optimism and colorblindness—have in common? What do they unearth about the unique and incommensurable experience of being the object of foreign stranger adoption from Asia to North America? And how do they function as a way not just of rewriting an Asian American diasporic experience, but of creating a unique Asian American diasporic identity?

Since Kent A. Ono and John M. Sloop brought attention to the study of vernacular discourse,⁶ rhetorical scholars have been attentive to rhetorics of oppressed communities, examining how such discourses “make visible power relations among subjects.”⁷ Ono and Sloop point out that critiques of vernacular discourse should recognize that marginal communities are

⁶ Kent A. Ono and John M. Sloop, “The Critique of Vernacular Discourse,” *Communication Monographs* 62, no. 1 (1995): 19–46.

⁷ Bernadette Marie Calafell and Fernando P. Delgado, “Reading Latina/o Images: Interrogating Americanos,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 21, no. 1 (2004): 6.

“affirmative” and always in transition, “constructing identities that function within vernacular communities.”⁸ Similarly, Eric King Watts has theorized “voice” not simply as an expression of a subject’s speaking agency but “a relational phenomenon occurring in discourse,” “constitutive of *ethical and emotional dimensions that make it an answerable phenomenon*.”⁹ It is therefore crucial to consider adoptee discourse as both in an ongoing relationship to the figuration of the adoptee as structured through discourse, and as a crucial means of constructing identity and community for transnational adoptees for whom traditional forms of community membership or kinship are inaccessible. While this chapter does not focus on vernacular discourse per se, its centering of adoptee-generated rhetoric gives us a crucial insight into alternate constructions of adoptee identity against dominant and mainstream portrayals. Through adoptee discourse, we see that the discursive phenomena described in the two previous chapters—Christian paternalist discourses of rescue and charity, and postracial discourses that deploy nonwhite adoptees’ racial difference as a sign of racial progressivism without engaging material issues of racial discrimination and inequality, often within their own families—have had significant and material consequences for the lived experiences of adoptees, who write in response to—or talk back to—those very same structuring discourses. Equally important, we see that adoptees’ acts of naming the challenges they face—in describing their experiences, in finding a vocabulary, individually and in common, to begin to express feelings that quite literally have no place in the social world—is just as much a political act as countering named narratives. These acts directly confront the fact that in U.S. public life, adoptee feelings and experiences that do not align with dominant discourses are insensible: there is no established place for adoptee counter discourses,

⁸ Ono and Sloop, “The Critique of Vernacular Discourse,” 27.

⁹ Eric King Watts, “‘Voice’ and ‘Voicelessness’ in Rhetorical Studies,” *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 87, no. 2 (2001): 180.

no genre, and no space in social life for such expressions to inhabit, be accepted, and even be understood.¹⁰

We also see what Lisa A. Flores has called “a rhetoric of difference,” or a rhetoric that both repudiates mainstream discourse and, crucially, works to define group identity, allowing marginalized groups, through reflection on “the uniqueness of their identity,” to “find security and a sense of home within.”¹¹ In Flores’ study, Chicana feminists are described as inhabiting a “border experience of living in two worlds,” unable to find complete acceptance as either feminists or as Chicanas; their rhetorical production therefore helps to produce the separate and unique identity of “Chicana feminist.”¹² Transnational adoptees similarly and repeatedly express what Eleana Kim has called “misfit identification”—neither fully American, nor fully Korean, and not legibly Korean American by the standard identifiers—marking them as perpetually alienated and foreign in both their adoptive and birth countries.¹³ I therefore approach adoptee discourse as a rhetoric of difference, one that faces both inward toward fellow adoptees and outward toward the society and culture that has marginalized them, critiquing the forces that have shaped them against their will and simultaneously building a common language, vocabulary, and commonality of experience that slowly begins a process, as Ono and Sloop put it, of *affirmation*: the intentional and deliberate creation of a community identity, and the painstaking binding together of a diasporic people into a community that is neither fully Asian,

¹⁰ The obscuring of collective understanding of an individual’s or group’s social experience is named by Miranda Fricker as an act of *hermeneutical injustice*, stemming from *hermeneutical marginalization* (158). Related literature on epistemic injustice provides a philosophical perspective on the mechanisms that cause marginalized groups’ speech to be silenced, misunderstood, marginalized, or misinterpreted. See Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); and Ian James Kidd, José Medina, and Gaile Pohlhaus, Jr., eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

¹¹ Lisa A. Flores, “Creating Discursive Space through a Rhetoric of Difference: Chicana Feminists Craft a Homeland,” *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 82, no. 2 (1996): 146.

¹² Flores, “Creating Discursive Space,” 145.

¹³ Eleana Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 93.

nor fully American, nor fully Asian American in its shared experience. It is instead, as adoptee Jane Jeong Trenka writes in her memoir, *Fugitive Visions: An Adoptee's Return to Korea*, a “commonography of souls.”¹⁴ This community identity is, as we will see, characterized and defined by loss, incommensurability, and nonbelonging; it is also, crucially, one whose membership grapples with the importance of biology, essentialism, and origins.¹⁵ For Asian adoptees, especially those who engage in a “return” journey, biology and origins remain crucially important, even as they fail to provide the sense of full belonging that adoptees hope for.

In this undertaking, I join critical adoption scholars like Kimberly McKee, Eleana Kim, Kim Park Nelson, and Jodi Kim in the project of accounting for adoptee storytelling and cultural production as an assertion of adoptees’ validity as knowledge producers and experts of their own experience.¹⁶ As McKee summarizes, adoptees have historically been “illegible in conversations about adoption and were often spoken for by adoption practitioners and adoptive parents.”¹⁷ This is a separate and additional layer of silencing on top of the difficulty transnational, transracial adoptees experience in, as Park Nelson writes, “configuring an identity that takes into account their experiences as Asians in families and communities that are overwhelmingly White . . . considering the culturally limited set of identity choices available to them.”¹⁸ Asian adoptees are, in other words, “minorities in our own families,”¹⁹ making it difficult to find the words and

¹⁴ Jane Jeong Trenka, *Fugitive Visions: An Adoptee's Return to Korea* (St. Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2009), 166.

¹⁵ Jenny Heijun Wills, “Paradoxical Essentialism: Reading Race and Origins in Jane Jeong Trenka’s *Asian Adoption Memoirs*,” *Canadian Review of American Studies* 46, no. 2 (2016).

¹⁶ Eleana Kim, *Adopted Territory*; Jodi Kim, “An ‘Orphan’ with Two Mothers: Transnational and Transracial Adoption, the Cold War, and Contemporary Asian American Cultural Politics,” *American Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (2009): 855-880; Jodi Kim, “‘The Ending Is Not an Ending At All’: On the Militarized and Gendered Diasporas of Korean Transnational Adoption and the Korean War,” *positions* 23, no. 4 (2015): 807-835; McKee, *Disrupting Kinship*; Kim Park Nelson, *Invisible Asians: Korean American Adoptees, Asian American Experiences, and Racial Exceptionalism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016).

¹⁷ McKee, *Disrupting Kinship*, 78.

¹⁸ Park Nelson, *Invisible Asians*, 103.

¹⁹ Sunny Jo, “The Making of KAD Nation,” in *Outsiders Within: Writing on Transracial Adoption*, edited by Jane Jeong Trenka, Julia Chinyere Oparah, and Sun Yung Shin (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2006), 289.

vocabulary to express one's feelings of nonbelonging, let alone the difficulty of finding a compassionate community. Adoption scholars who highlight the words and works of adoptees therefore recognize the silencing effects of assimilation and isolation on adoptees, and the challenges they experience in being taken seriously rather than pathologized and dismissed as disgruntled, angry, or having suffered a uniquely bad experience in an otherwise uncomplicatedly positive landscape of overall experience. Many critical adoption scholars are, crucially, Asian adoptees themselves, and their work routinely acts as a type of political activism, a defamiliarization of dominant adoptee discourse that has attempted to define them; their research exposing the Cold War geopolitics, racial ideologies, and heteronormative social pressures at work in the popularization of Asian adoption in the U.S. works to legitimize critical perspectives on adoption, and their highlighting of adoptee counterstories is a political act, deliberately bringing to the fore the voices that have, in their personal and academic experience, been neglected.

Scholars have generally approached the study of adoptees' stories through two avenues: ethnography through adoptee interviews, and analysis of published works like writings and films. The former, as in the case of Eleana Kim's *Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging* (2010), and Kim Park Nelson's *Invisible Asians: Korean American Adoptees, Asian American Experiences, and Racial Exceptionalism* (2016), draw on interviews with Asian American adoptees, developing theories of community building and kinship formation from themes that interviewees express. For example, Kim develops a concept of "adoptee kinship" to describe the unique form of "public intimacy" that develops between adoptees as they attempt to reflect on and mobilize new social and political identities in light of

their “shared histories of displacement.”²⁰ Scholars who engage in analysis of adoptee cultural production generally focus on one or two salient examples, and analyze how these media talk back to dominant perceptions and framings of adoption. Jodi Kim reads the documentary film *First Person Plural* (2000), directed by adoptee Deann Borshay Liem, for example, as making visible “one of the most troubling ‘costs’ of transracial adoption: its literal saturation with the logic of consumption and the marketplace,”²¹ while McKee emphasizes the narrative repair work done by adoptee counterstories, “shifting an understanding of adoptees in the eyes of the public imaginary.”²²

This chapter, like the chapters before it, engages with publicly oriented works, focusing on writings that attempt to in some way re-orient public opinion about adoption. Although private and vernacular rhetorics are undoubtedly a significant part of adoptee community building and identity formation, my interest is in what public adoptee rhetoric can show us about how adoptees respond to structuring discourses and contest them in the same public venues where their own subjectivities have been shaped. Whereas previous studies of public adoptee discourse have focused on one or two examples, I widen the scope of study, examining a wide range of artifacts that allow me to identify recurring themes in adoptee discourse. I focus on written memoirs and anthologies, centering some of the most well-known and referenced works of adoptee-produced writing and literature, including the seminal memoirs *The Language of Blood* (2003) and *Fugitive Visions* (2009) by Jane Jeong Trenka, as well as several more recent published memoirs, and several articles written by adoptees and published in well-read online media outlets. The scope and breadth of this analysis, which captures a wider range of adoptee

²⁰ Eleana Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 87, 86.

²¹ Jodi Kim, “An ‘Orphan’ with Two Mothers,” 682.

²² McKee, *Disrupting Kinship*, 82.

writings from a more varied set of authors than previous studies, allows me to generate a more fully developed model of the adoptee experience, as articulated by transnational adoptees themselves. Commonalities and themes emerge across multiple authors and examples; things adoptees wish us to know recur with surprising regularity and force.

The stories analyzed herein serve two purposes: to counter durable and dominant narratives about adoption, and to define and develop a fledgling Asian adoptee community identity—the latter a difficult task for a group of people who, as we will see, are unable to identify wholly with any one group, culture, nation, society, or kinship network, and whose experiences are largely insensible to the public. I contend that the common themes that emerge through adoptee narratives—including acknowledgment of erased histories and attempts to validate and reclaim them; feelings of deformity, monstrosity, and alienness; the role adoptive family and loved ones play in perpetuating harms through racist stereotypes or disregard for the importance of racial difference; the “coming out of the fog” journey; returns to Korea and to birth families; and the subsequent realizations that one has to forge one’s own sense of belonging—work as foundational themes for establishing a shared history on which to build a common identity. These themes begin to develop a “commonography of souls.”

My name is Jeong Kyong-Ah. My family register states the date of my birth, the lunar date January 24, 1972. I am the fifth daughter of Jeong Ho-Joon and the third daughter and fourth child of his second wife, Kang Ahn-Sun. . . . I am a citizen of the Republic of Korea. I come from a land of pear fields and streams, where Buddhist temples are hidden in the mountains, where people laugh loudly and honor their dead.

Halfway around the world, I am someone else.

I am Jane Marie Brauer, created September 26, 1972, when I was carried off an airplane onto American soil.²³

²³ Jane Jeong Trenka, *The Language of Blood* (St. Paul, MN: Borealis Books, 2003).

Jane Jeong Trenka's first memoir, *The Language of Blood*, was published in 2003. Trenka is a Korean adoptee who was adopted with her younger biological sister, Carol, to white parents in Minnesota in 1972. She has written two memoirs and co-edited an anthology of transracial adoptee writing titled *Outsiders Within*. In this excerpt from *The Language of Blood*, Trenka juxtaposes her Korean existence with her American one, positing not only that she contains two distinct identities, but that her American one was artificially made: she was "created," not born, on September 26, 1972—the day she arrived in the United States and was given to her adoptive family. Like the words of Melissa Lin Hanson and Tonya Bishoff that opened this chapter, who also claim an unnatural and artificial beginning to their American lives, Trenka treats her American identity with irony, an imposition by her new family and new country that obliterated the identity, the namesake, the family, the history into which she was originally born. It is not so much that adoptees describe these beginnings, where they are "created," not born, because they believe this to be the truth, but these descriptions also represent what is, for all intents and purposes, the reality for them, because it is the hard and fast reality to their families and to all those in their lives.

Crucially, because of the total sundering of their past histories upon adoption and arrival in their adoptive countries, adoptees feel that whoever they may have been before their adoptions and who they became upon arrival in the U.S. are mutually exclusive identities. For example, in a recreation of a childhood family scene, Trenka imagines her sister, Carol, as willing herself to "become a girl with no history [who] is now ready to start her new life."²⁴ In her second memoir, *Fugitive Visions: An Adoptee's Return to Korea*, Trenka says that her identity was "stripped and family removed" in a process that was meant to give her a "clean break."²⁵ This "clean break"

²⁴ Trenka, *The Language of Blood*, 17.

²⁵ Trenka, *Fugitive Visions*, 15.

was as clean as it was final; after all, as Eleana Kim has noted, Korean adoptees must be legally orphaned to be rendered eligible for adoption, in a legal and symbolic act that obliterates the possibilities of inclusion in any former families or communities;²⁶ and the practice of stranger adoption that developed in transnational adoption practice beginning with Korean War orphans is to intentionally sunder all ties and contact from the adoptee's birth family with the act of their adoption. Trenka describes her and her sister's Korean selves as "ghosts of our own dead twins, whom we had simply replaced one day by changing clothes: Kyong-Ah, who lived to the age of six months, and Mi-Ja, who died at four years of age when she became Carol."²⁷ To Trenka and other adoptees, the separation that is exacted between their "first" lives as infants or children and their American lives is final enough to be akin to a death of the first as a sacrifice to the latter.

Yet the effects of this "death" are not complete for adoptees who write of their experiences. Perhaps as a function of their being artificial creations, forcibly made through a kind of unnatural process, adoptees understand their American identities as in some way false or inauthentic: "When did I stop being Soo Na?" writes adoptee Soo Na in the anthology *Outsiders Within*. "I was created, molded, into Sonia."²⁸ (It is significant that Soo Na, who was given the name Sonia by her adoptive family, has, by the time she is writing for *Outsiders Within*, reclaimed her given Korean name.) Later, she writes that her name, like her language and food, were taken away, and that her parents "want to believe that my life 'began,' that I was 'born,' in North America from a plane's exit door, a painful admission of their unwillingness to see me whole."²⁹ Her false birth has led to her being forced to take on a false identity, one that requires suppression of her memories of Korea and any recognition of her past for the sake of her

²⁶ Eleana Kim, *Adopted Territory*.

²⁷ Trenka, *The Language of Blood*, 27.

²⁸ Soo Na, "Garlic and Salt," in Trenka et al., *Outsiders Within*, 22.

²⁹ Soo Na, "Garlic and Salt," in Trenka et al., *Outsiders Within*, 23.

adoptive parents' acceptance. Soo Na also has memories of Korea from her early childhood before her adoption; her adoptive parents, however, "refused to listen to me, denied parts of my memory," leading her to question the veracity of her memory and her own past.³⁰

Similarly, in the 1997 anthology *Seeds from a Silent Tree*, Mi Ok Song Bruining writes that she was "taught to forget my memories of Korea" in the United States.³¹ Yet adoptees express an inability to fully suppress or "forget" their pasts, regardless of pressures to do so: "I'm not crazy; my life in Coreia is not in my head," Soo Na asserts, in a powerful reclamation of her wholeness.³² For Soo Na and other adoptees, to be denied not just the significance but the *reality* of their lives pre-adoption is a rejection of an essential part of their existence, such that they do not feel seen in their "wholeness" or entirety without this recognition. Beth Kyong Lo, also in *Outsiders Within*, expresses this feeling of not-quite-existing: "I have worn so many masks over the years that my skin feels gray and my features have faded. Like a ghost, I feel doomed to wander the earth forever, invisible and disconnected from the world of the living."³³ As we will soon see, the pressures of feeling that one contains two identities but is unable to unite them, manage them, or explain them has a significant impact on Asian adoptees' images of themselves and on their mental health.

The complicity of adoptive family members in this erasure of history is well documented in adoptee writings. Jenny Heijun Wills, a Korean adoptee adopted to a family in Canada, writes in her memoir, *Older Sister: Not Necessarily Related.*, of attempting to teach her mother to pronounce her Korean name once she herself has learned it:

³⁰ Soo Na, "Garlic and Salt," in Trenka et al., *Outsiders Within*, 20.

³¹ Mi Ok Song Bruining, "A Few Words from Another Left-Handed Adopted Korean Lesbian," in Bishoff and Rankin, *Seeds from a Silent Tree*, 65.

³² Soo Na, "Garlic and Salt," in Trenka et al., *Outsiders Within*, 19.

³³ Beth Kyong Lo, "Explosions (Seoul 1975)," in Bishoff and Rankin, *Seeds from a Silent Tree*, 169.

Years later, we practised saying it together. The rising first syllable, the dreamy second, blurred together like a sigh. . . . Her voice became more frustrated each time. Me, then her. Me, then her. *We were told your name was pronounced differently from what you're saying.* She's consistent with that memory that dismisses my knowledge of my own name, my Korean family members' voices as they say it. . . . I don't remember who was first to give up trying, my Canadian mother or me.³⁴

In adoptee discourse, original birth names hold an important place: they are a hallmark of adoptees' histories, things that tie them to the pasts that they are now attempting to reclaim. (Many adoptees know very little about their pasts beyond their birth names, which may not even be the names they were given by their birth parents, but rather names bestowed on them by other caregivers or the adoption agency—or, as we will see, names they were made to assume in surreptitious swaps of adoptable babies.) Wills writes that her North American name is one that she uses “only because I'm accustomed to it. . . . Not because it suits me,” and that when, in 2009, she finally revisited Korea and found her Korean family, she was “reborn somewhere in the dusky November mountains of Seoul” when “my youngest sister called me unni, older sister, and I understood what that meant.”³⁵ Names, therefore, are crucial signifiers of what has been taken from adoptees: “loss of origin / loss of mother tongue / loss of being,” as Leah Sieck writes in her contribution to *Seeds from a Silent Tree*,³⁶ leaving them “a motherless, fatherless, / peopleless dust.” So for Wills' adoptive mother to first insist on her own knowledge of her daughter's (incorrect) Korean name over Wills' own knowledge, and then to give up learning this small, yet essential, piece of Wills' identity entirely, is an indictment of her family's investment in denying and disavowing her past.

³⁴ Jenny Heijun Wills, *Older Sister: Not Necessarily Related*. (Toronto, ON: Penguin Random House Canada, 2019), 127.

³⁵ Wills, *Older Sister*, 4.

³⁶ Leah Sieck, “Homeless,” in Bishoff and Rankin, *Seeds from a Silent Tree*, 95-96.

Trenka describes an incident in her childhood when she asks her adoptive mother, “Why did she give us away?”—“she,” in this instance, being her birth mother. Her mother, who had been rocking her, abruptly stops, and “stands up swiftly, like a reflex, shedding me from her lap. . . She does not return.”³⁷ Through her stories, Trenka depicts a household in which her and her sister’s pasts are so buried and denied as to be forgotten, even by themselves: “The a-word, adoption, was not mentioned in our house. Neither was the K-word, Korea. . . . They raised us the way they were supposed to—like we were their own.”³⁸ As a result, Trenka and her sister Carol grew up never speaking about Korea to each other, though they were biological sisters who had been adopted together: “We wove a gag over our mouths as thick and impenetrable as love.”³⁹

The knowledge that their adoptive parents, families, and cultures see their lives as only authentically “beginning” with their adoption structures adoptees’ relationships to, and interactions with, their families: many adoptees explain how they care for and safeguard their adoptive parents’ feelings around their own pasts or birth family searches, in some cases allowing their parents to continue to deny their children’s pasts. When Mei-Ling Hopgood, an adoptee from China, told her adoptive mother about her birth mother, whom Mei-Ling was planning to visit for the first time, her mother told her she was excited for her:

“But when you get back you have to make sure to tell me how much younger I look and how much prettier I am than your mother.” . . . I was careful not to say anything I thought might hurt my parents. For a long time, I tried to avoid calling my Chinese parents’ my’ parents. I referred to them as ‘the’ parents, ‘the’ father, and ‘the’ mother.”⁴⁰

³⁷ Trenka, *The Language of Blood*, 22-23.

³⁸ Trenka, *The Language of Blood*, 35.

³⁹ Trenka, *The Language of Blood*, 28.

⁴⁰ Mei-Ling Hopgood, *Lucky Girl* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 2009), 87.

Mei-Ling's careful coddling of her parents' feelings, her working to ensure that they know that they come first in her eyes through her denying the possessive "my" with reference to her birth family, is proven in this passage to be in some ways a necessary measure: her mother, though supportive and happy for her, still jokes that she wants to be assured that she's younger and prettier than Mei-Ling's birth mother. This jostling for primacy and expressions of jealousy from adoptive parents are recurring in adoptee narratives: when Trenka's Korean mother passes away, and Trenka chooses to organize a memorial in her hometown of Minneapolis for her Umma because she is unable to travel to Korea, she invites her adoptive mother, but her mother says she's "*not interested*": "She is unaffected by my mother's death; it didn't happen, *she* didn't happen. In my mom's mind, I don't come from somewhere else, I don't have a birth mother, I don't, I don't."⁴¹ Despite the fact that by this time, Trenka has visited Korea many times and has developed relationships with her birth mother and siblings, her adoptive mother remains recalcitrant and avoidant when it comes to acknowledging her daughter's first family, to the point of refusing to acknowledge Trenka's birth mother's passing, and prioritizing her own feelings over Trenka's. For Trenka, this is an indication of her mother's deep and insistent desire that her daughter remain her own, rather than having "come from somewhere else"; in *Fugitive Visions*, Trenka describes attempting to tell her mother about both the "pleasant things and the unpleasant things . . . the vast gray area of my adoption" and about her Korean family, and her mother cuts her off: "I guess I'm just a bad person," she says. My mother feels that she has to choose between two things: her own goodness or the truth of my experience. In the end, she chooses her own goodness."⁴² Adoptee writings suggest that a deeply rooted selfishness drives the jealousies and refusals by adoptive parents to accept or even acknowledge the proof of their children's first

⁴¹ Trenka, *The Language of Blood*, 167.

⁴² Trenka, *Fugitive Visions*, 47.

lives abroad. It is easy, reflecting on the discourse around adoption from the previous two chapters, to understand why: the single dominant narrative available to adoptive parents has always been one of altruism, shaping the story adoptive parents tell themselves into one of adoption as a charitable, selfless act. In adoptee writings, their parents, who have done the work of adopting and raising their children, react badly when confronted with alternate interpretations that bring closer to the light their participation in a potentially coercive system. An adoptee's interest in their birth family, particularly in birth mothers, is a statement that, to many adoptive parents, seems to counter the narratives they've been told, and have told themselves. If they did a good deed, and rescued a parentless child, why would that child betray them by turning back to the parents who didn't want them? Adoptive parents, adoptee stories show, harbor fear of being supplanted by their original counterparts. And adoptee discourse shows that adoptees recognize this clearly: presenting a hypothetical questionnaire for prospective adoptive parents in *Fugitive Visions*, Trenka asks her audience, "If you knew that your adopted daughter would eventually leave you and go back to where she came from, would you adopt her anyway? YES/NO."⁴³ Trenka isn't sure her own adoptive mother would answer yes to this question; and for us, the readers, this calls into question the responses of any adoptive parent, whose motives and understanding of adoption have been shaped by a discourse that frames them uncomplicatedly as a person who has done a good deed by adopting. They are poorly equipped, we understand, to reckon otherwise.

This intentional "forgetting," in which adoptees are completely cut off from their pasts at the moment of adoption and subsequently denied the validity of any memory or mention of that past or family by their adoptive parents, is a key feature of adoptees' assimilation and

⁴³ Trenka, *Fugitive Visions*, 80.

“Americanization,” which privileges integration into the white nuclear Western family and fails wholly to address the needs or desire of the adopted child. This “forgetting” is, for adoption scholars, a “key part in normalizing adoptive families, and, to forget adoption, the most visible sign of difference between parents and children, race, had to be overlooked.”⁴⁴ Children were simply “subsumed into the private space of the American home under the tutelage of white parents,” having been left “few options outside of assimilation.”⁴⁵ In other words, adoptive families’ denials of the past do not only occur around adoptees’ birth families and interest in their birth countries and cultures; they also encompass recognition of adoptees’ racial differences and the impact this has on their experiences living in majority white communities.

And the racism Asian adoptees experience is pervasive, rampant, and extremely well-documented. Almost every adoptee writes of having been called a “chink.” Multiple adoptees write of having to explain or defend the allegedly Korean practice of eating dogs. In 1988, Wills says, she first “became a Korean girl in the eyes of those around me” thanks to the Seoul Olympics, the target of teasing and jeers, children pulling back their eyes and saying “chop suey” and “chicken chow mein” in fake accents, and boys doing “fake-out martial-art chops.”⁴⁶ Many adoptees describe their mortification and horror at being mocked by other children pulling the corners of their eyes to give their eyes the slanted, narrower appearance of Asian eyes; Melissa Lin Hanson describes the feeling of being targeted with this gesture on the playground: “Panic electrifies my veins. / Paralyzed by shame / my face flames / scarlet / with heat.”⁴⁷ Mi Ok Song Bruining describes being “harassed, bullied, called names, insulted, threatened, and verbally abused

⁴⁴ Park Nelson, *Invisible Asians*, 4.

⁴⁵ Woo, *Framed by War*, 17-18.

⁴⁶ Wills, *Older Sister*, 135.

⁴⁷ Hanson, “Behind My Eyes,” 61-62.

by other kids” daily.⁴⁸ Hopgood and her brothers, both adopted from Korea, experienced what she calls the “silly, ignorant stuff of kids: the hiss of ‘ching-chang-chung,’ the kids who pulled back the ends of their eyelids, the chanting of ‘Chinese, Japanese, dirty knees, look at these!’”⁴⁹ (the latter being, incidentally, a favorite from my own childhood). Trenka recounts that her best friend when she was young called her “[f]rog-eyed nigger-lipped Dumbo-eared chink,” and Trenka “laughed like I thought it was as funny as she thought it was . . . You are supposed to laugh at your best friend’s jokes, right?”⁵⁰ In college, Trenka is stalked by a fellow student, who tells her, “You’re nothing but a Korean in a white man’s society. You’re no good, you’re a chink.”⁵¹ The stalker eventually follows her to her parents’ home in a different state and attempts on multiple occasions to break into their house, leading to his arrest. The experience results in Trenka being hospitalized the following year and being eventually diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

There is, of course, a highly gendered element to the racism adoptees experience, with Trenka’s being one example. (The police in her hometown initially brushed off her stalker’s attempts to break in to their home: “Sounds like it’s her boyfriend.”⁵²) Wills describes being “launched into Asian womanhood” in middle school with “no one to explain how grown men would look at me. Touch me. The ways they saw me that were different from the other girls in my class. The storylines they loved. The pornography they watched.”⁵³ And when she became a teenager, she stopped going out in public alone with her father, because she started to notice that strangers reacted with the clear assumption that she was his girlfriend or child bride.

⁴⁸ Bruining, “A Few Words,” 66.

⁴⁹ Hopgood, *Lucky Girl*, 78.

⁵⁰ Trenka, *Fugitive Visions*, 29.

⁵¹ Trenka, *The Language of Blood*, 73.

⁵² Trenka, *The Language of Blood*, 75.

⁵³ Wills, *Older Sister*, 144.

All racial minorities experience racism and discrimination in North America, of course. But for Asian adoptees, in addition to facing prejudice directly as a result of being a different race from their parents, the experience is unique in several respects: first, because they are so frequently racially isolated, having been adopted one by one to small towns across the U.S., they are often one of the only people of color, or the only Asian person, in their school or town, and therefore the sole object of fascination and racist attitudes; and second, because they are usually the only people of color *within their own families*, making their experience an especially isolated one—they are unable to share the experience with any member of their family.

Adoptees routinely express that their adoptive families were ill-equipped to manage racial difference and unhelpful when racism became a problem for their nonwhite child. Soo Na writes in *Outsiders Within* that she struggles having grown up “in a white family whose members deny their white privilege by denying the existence of white supremacy and instead tell me that racist people are ‘ignorant,’ and I should ignore them, superior in my silence.”⁵⁴ Mei-Ling Hopgood’s parents similarly “did their best to explain ignorance and hate, dismissing the offenders as idiots.”⁵⁵ This echoes adoptive parent discourse that has long relied on colorblind ideologies of “raceless diversity”⁵⁶ to address race, and has diminished racial difference as any more significant a difference from other people as having bad eyesight (if we recall the example of “Amy Joy – American” from the previous chapter). In adoptee writings, adoptive parents are shown to have inadequate and shallow responses to racism that fail to consider the consequences for their child of growing up visibly nonwhite in a white family and community. This failure is

⁵⁴ Soo Na, “Garlic and Salt,” 22.

⁵⁵ Hopgood, *Lucky Girl*, 78.

⁵⁶ Rona Tamiko Halualani, “Abstracting and De-Racializing Diversity: The Articulation of Diversity in the Post-Race Era,” in *Critical Rhetorics of Race*, edited by Michael G. Lacy and Kent A. Ono (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 247-264.

well-illustrated in another (re)imagined family scene in Trenka's *The Language of Blood*, in which she and her sister are gawked at when the family goes out to eat, then approached, touched, and shouted at ("Rice-picker! . . . Go back to where you came from. Can they speak English? . . . How much did they cost? Where did you get them? Chinese, Japanese, dirty knees, look at these!") while her parents ignore them.⁵⁷ These are all, the reader understands, comments, questions, and accusations that Trenka and her sister have heard leveled at them, yet their parents did little or nothing to help, protect, or defend them. In *Fugitive Visions*, when Trenka describes finally telling her mother "how profoundly painful and lonely it was in all that whiteness" while she was growing up, then asks why her mother didn't stand up for her, her mother replies:

*So what, all kids are mean, everyone gets teased, if they didn't tease you for being Korean they would have teased you for something else, like being fat, so why do you expect special treatment? At that moment I knew that my white mother doesn't see me . . . doesn't see how other people see me . . . chooses to see me without my body . . . because she can make that choice . . . she can choose to live in her imagination where I am white too . . . because I am her daughter.*⁵⁸

Trenka identifies that her mother is unwilling to recognize her corporeal reality, going so far as to characterize any preoccupation with racial difference and racism as wanting "special treatment." The consequence of this lack of recognition is not only that her mother fails to see the sting of racist comments and insults, but also fails to acknowledge and support the increasingly significant role that Trenka's Koreanness, her Asianness, plays in her life as she grows into adulthood.

The deprivation of history that these transnational adoptees experience is, therefore, a deprivation not only of birth family, but of adoptees' Asianness itself, their physical difference

⁵⁷ Trenka, *The Language of Blood*, 31.

⁵⁸ Trenka, *Fugitive Visions*, 29, ellipses original.

and all the consequences that entails when living among predominantly white North Americans. Beth Kyong Lo, in her essay “Korean Psych 101: Concepts of Hwa-Bung in Relation to Korean Adoption” in *Outsiders Within*, notes that, per a 2003 study, “white adoptive parents continue to downplay their Korean children’s heritage and consider their family to be ‘Caucasian with Korean children rather than a multiracial or multicultural family unit.’”⁵⁹ Adoptees talk about the role of multiculturalism in their families as primarily limited to “white parents’ desire to enrich their lives by parenting a child from a foreign culture.”⁶⁰ Soo Na, for example, points out that her birth language and food were “slowly taken away, and meted out to me in palatable ‘culture bites’ . . . And of course the palatability was defined by my parents, since I was the difference and I lived it.”⁶¹ The commodification of adoptees for their Asianness is also seen in how adoptees understand their interchangeability with other Asian children: Wills knows it was “common knowledge that my new parents had considered Vietnam first, but it was closed to Canadians. They didn’t care. They just wanted to help” (2019, 7). She acknowledges that she could have been anyone; the important thing to her adoptive parents was that their child be from an Asian country in need. And “colorblind” commodification is not limited to attitudes from adoptive parents, as we see in adoptee memoirs; it also extends to romantic partners. Trenka’s ex-husband, to whom she was married for five years, goes on to date a Chinese American woman after their separation:

He said it didn’t matter whether his new girlfriend was Korean or Chinese. It didn’t matter that I’m Korean, it didn’t matter to his girlfriend, it didn’t matter to him, it never mattered to anyone, only to me. We are just people, he said, we are just people . . . I wonder if he chose me, specifically, or if I was merely interchangeable with any other

⁵⁹ Beth Kyong Lo, “Korean Psych 101: Concepts of Hwa-Byung in Relation to Korean Adoption,” in Trenka et al., *Outsiders Within*, 171.

⁶⁰ Park Nelson, *Invisible Asians*, 89.

⁶¹ Soo Na, “Garlic and Salt,” 23.

Asian bride, as I had been interchangeable with any other Asian child available for adoption.⁶²

Adoptees express a recurring recognition of the conflict between the significant role of race in their daily life experiences and the purported importance of race to their friends and loved ones. Adoptee JS Lee recalls in *Yes!* magazine that she was often told race “didn’t matter,” even though her regular experience of racist jokes and slurs told her otherwise: “Some swore they forgot I was Asian and considered me to be White. The gaslighting and denial had me blaming myself for my own suffering.”⁶³ One adoptee told *Buzzfeed News*’ Tanya Chen that she struggles with white parents who don’t “get it”: “My mom was like, ‘You’re American; you’re just like us.’ . . . She didn’t know how to talk about race, because she didn’t have to.” After the Black Lives Matter protests of summer 2020, her mother became more receptive, but now “it’s all this white guilt,” and when her daughter expressed fear of leaving the house due to rising anti-Asian hate crimes, her mother suggested “saying a prayer.”⁶⁴ The utter insufficiency of this response, its total lack of engagement with the material realities that her daughter faces, are a clear indicator that the mother is ill-equipped to deal with those racial realities, and therefore unable to address them in a meaningful way to her own child.

The denial of racial difference in adoptive families and relationships occurs in conjunction with outright racial prejudice and expression of racial stereotypes that occur in those same relationships, as described in adoptee memoirs. Wills describes a scene at the dinner table in which her family members “sing-songed” a mispronounced version of her Korean name—

⁶² Trenka, *Fugitive Visions*, 75.

⁶³ JS Lee, “The Trauma of Transracial Adoption,” *Yes! Magazine*, November 13, 2019, <https://www.yesmagazine.org/opinion/2019/11/13/adoption-trauma-transracial>.

⁶⁴ Tanya Chen, “Asian American Adoptees Are Grappling With Incomplete Histories And Cultural Gatekeepers,” *BuzzFeed News*, May 13, 2021, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/amphml/tanyachen/asian-american-adoptees-connect-identity>.

“*hey yun, hi yun, ho yun*”—sounding like “my schoolmates when they mocked *Ching Chong Chang*, and I knew that I was a joke and my name was a joke too.”⁶⁵ Trenka dated two Asian men in high school and then never again because of the humiliations she suffered from her father, who “mocked their faces, as if they were not human, but dark, stupid monkeys.” These experiences caused Trenka to develop feelings of self-loathing, “the kind you get when you discover that you must be one of two things to your dad, either invisible or ridiculous; the kind you get when you hate your own face, so much like your boyfriend’s and so easily mocked.”⁶⁶

The feeling of self-loathing that Trenka describes in this passage is echoed in other adoptee writings, in which adoptees express long years of self-hatred centered around their racial difference as they grew up, as a result of the messages they received from society and culture around them, and from their own families. Here it is important to remember the role of Harry Holt, whose adoption agency, founded in 1953, became the driver of international adoption in its earliest stages: thanks to his development of charter flights and proxy adoptions, which significantly expedited the process of Korean adoption, Holt placed 1,822 Korean children between 1955 and 1960, 53% of all adoptions during this period (the International Social Service, a more regulated and well-established social service agency, placed only 5%),⁶⁷ quickly rising to dominate Korean adoption. And unlike existing processes of international adoption, in which social service workers took time to investigate potential adoptive parents to ensure a safe match for the child, Holt’s primary criteria for selecting adoptive parents, as demonstrated in Chapter 2, was that those parents be evangelical Christians, going so far as to eventually refuse placement of children through his agency in homes where the adoptive parents were not

⁶⁵ Wills, *Older Sister*, 126.

⁶⁶ Trenka, *The Language of Blood*, 59.

⁶⁷ Woo, *Framed by War*, 121.

members of fundamentalist Christian religious denominations.⁶⁸ Independent adoption programs like Holt's continued to form in the 1960s, frequently founded by fellow evangelicals, using Holt's program as a model, and setting themselves in opposition to social service workers, who favored a more measured process that insisted on standards of background investigation, placement, and supervision.⁶⁹

Huge numbers of Korean and other Asian adoptees, therefore, were placed by Holt's agency and similar agencies into white evangelical Christian homes, isolated from other nonwhite people or communities and other ways of life. Living in entirely or predominantly white areas with white families, adoptees express that they commonly saw themselves as white, at least "culturally," and just as often, that they *wanted* to be white. Yet the recurring reminders that they were racial minorities led to repeated distress, confusion, and self-loathing around their racial identities growing up. In Melissa Lin Hanson's poem in *Seeds from a Silent Tree*, she writes of being mocked by a white boy on the playground: "my eyes. My eyes. / Monster Mongoloid eyes. / They betray me." Later, in her teenage years, she experiences "a stenchy brew / pity, anger, hatred / tears of self-contempt. / I know I am not pretty" compared to the white, blonde, all-American girls and women shown to her every day on TV, in movies, and in commercials.⁷⁰ Adoptees routinely describe effectively forgetting their own racial difference, much as their families have conditioned them to do, and are therefore shocked with a sense of betrayal by their own bodies when confronted with racial prejudice. Adoptees also write of experiencing a type of dissociation around their race, and even racial bias. JS Lee writes that

⁶⁸ Newsletter, Harry Holt, "Dear Friends . . .," Creswell, Oregon, n.d., Box 10, International Social Service Archives, Social Welfare History Archive, University of Minnesota Libraries.

⁶⁹ Catherine Ceniza Choy, *Global Families: A History of Asian International Adoption in America* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2013).

⁷⁰ Hanson, "Behind My Eyes," 62.

being raised in racial isolation caused her to develop “racial confusion and internal bias”: “When I looked in the mirror, the face I saw was not what I expected or wanted to see. I didn’t look like my parents and siblings, or my friends.”⁷¹ An adoptee named YoungHee writes in the essay “Laurel” in *Seeds from a Silent Tree* that she “used to believe I was white”:

At least I was completely emotionally invested in this belief. Theoretically I was white, my family is white, the community I grew up in was white, and I could not point out Korea on a map, nor did I care about such a place. The only thing I heard about Korea was that they ate dogs. I denied that I was Korean to everyone, most painfully, I denied it to myself.

However, my image staring back at me in the mirror betrayed such a belief. There I saw it, the rude and awful truth... slanted-hooded eyes, non-existent eyelashes, ‘yellow’ skin, short legs, and long torso. I hated myself, this betrayal, being given such a look without any knowledge of where it came from.⁷²

Trenka grew up in Minnesota, and though her family was white, her surroundings were not entirely: there were varied Asian populations that she observed with friends as foreign creatures: “Asians were scary. Other. Something to be examined.” She didn’t want to associate with other Asian students in college, and declined attending a Lunar New Year party because “[w]hen the hell is Lunar New Year, anyway[?] . . . The place was filled with Asians. Asian Asians. Ugh.”⁷³ She writes that she even checked the box for “white” when racially identifying herself on her college forms:

Real reason: I didn’t want to be Korean. . . . Korea was the reason my face was mutated, why my glasses wouldn’t quite stay on my nose, why it was hard to find clothes that fit. It was the reason some children weren’t allowed to play with me, some felt justified in calling me a chink or a rice-picker, and adults didn’t feel compelled to defend me.

Self-deluding reason: what is on the inside is what matters. I checked ‘white’ because I was *culturally* white.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Lee, “The Trauma of Transracial Adoption.”

⁷² YoungHee, “Laurel,” in Bishoff and Rankin, *Seeds from a Silent Tree*, 86.

⁷³ Trenka, *The Language of Blood*, 66.

⁷⁴ Trenka, *The Language of Blood*, 113.

In other words, adoptees acknowledge feeling, throughout large portions of their lives, that their “inner” whiteness is betrayed by their undesirable Asian features, which draw negative and unwanted attention in the form of racist comments and stereotypes, to the point that very frequently, adoptees did not *want* to associate themselves with Asianness. Hopgood, for example, describes wanting “more than anything to disassociate myself with anything Asian,” imagining that the boys around her could never be attracted to a Chinese girl like her.⁷⁵ As a result, many adoptees report having over-performed Americanness growing up in an attempt to fit in and to be accepted. Hopgood spent “most of my young life trying to prove how American I was,” “making sure people heard me speak perfect English” and joining everything in school.⁷⁶ Trenka began in her teenage years to perm her hair and attempt to bleach it, even though her dark hair color proved impossible to lighten, eventually stressing her hair so much with peroxide and lemon juice and sun that it “broke off in chunks.”⁷⁷ Wayne A. Berry, also known as Oh Ji Soo, writes that being called names like *chink* and *Chinaman* and being made fun of for his slanted Asian eyes “only strengthened my actions to be as American as much as I could be. I was very careful not to display any signs of my Asian heritage.”⁷⁸ In a bid to fit in with her white peers and friends, Hopgood even describes allowing herself to “acquire the nickname ‘Chinky’” after accidentally being cast as the “Chink in the Wall” in a reading of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in high school. Yet, she adds, she never talked to her parents about these feelings, because they had tried hard to instill pride in her about where she came from, and she “didn’t think they would understand.”⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Hopgood, *Lucky Girl*, 156-157.

⁷⁶ Hopgood, *Lucky Girl*, 157; 78-79.

⁷⁷ Trenka, *The Language of Blood*, 59.

⁷⁸ Wayne A. Berry, “Completing My Puzzle...,” in Bishoff and Rankin, *Seeds from a Silent Tree*, 121.

⁷⁹ Hopgood, *Lucky Girl*, 79; 73.

For many adoptees, the perpetually incomplete integration of their Korean selves with white American life is a significant source of “depressive and anxious states” among adoptees, as adoptee Beth Kyong Lo writes in *Outsiders Within*, attributing these feelings to failed attempts to repress grief.⁸⁰ Kyong Lo tries to better describe and understand the mental health issues experienced by Korean adoptees as a form of *hwa-byung*, a “culture bound syndrome of a Korean folk illness” associated with “stressful life events with poor social support.”⁸¹ It is a condition resulting from the isolation and lack of belonging adoptees experience as they grow up visibly Asian in white households and communities, in families often unsupportive or even antagonistic to their exploring or remembering their past.

Indeed, adoptees frequently feel so isolated that in adoptee discourse, there is a recurring theme of adoptees seeing themselves as “alien,” “rotten” inside, or in some other way fundamentally broken, diseased, or non-whole. For Kyong Lo, the many mental health diagnoses she accrued throughout adolescence “seemed to scream what a freak I was.”⁸² This characterization is not always tied directly to mental illness. Wills writes of her fear that “my insides really are rotten and that soon hairline breaks will race across my smooth granite face and people will know what’s actually going on underneath”; acknowledging that she was “a throwaway woman the minute I was born,” she suspects that her family “must have detected that I was rotten on the inside. A fragrant peach with a festering pit made bad by a beetle consuming it from the inside out.”⁸³ When describing the incident with her mother in which she asked why her birth mother gave her and her sister away, Trenka recounts her thoughts when her mother responds by leaving the room and not returning: “Who could love such a stupid child who says

⁸⁰ Kyong Lo, “Korean Psych 101,” 172.

⁸¹ Kyong Lo, “Korean Psych 101,” 169-170.

⁸² Kyong Lo, “Korean Psych 101,” 168.

⁸³ Wills, *Older Sister*, 182.

such stupid things? There must be something wrong with me. I must be rotten, truly bad.”⁸⁴ Even in Korea, where she is American but not white, Korean but unable to speak Korean fluently, Trenka is “a deformity. I am a sort of monster, a mix of the familiar with the terribly unexpected, like a fish with a human face.”⁸⁵ There is a profound and recurring sense of something being deeply wrong with one inside, reflected in the lack of acceptance they see for who they are in the world around them.

The feeling of being a monstrosity recurs in the sentiment often expressed that one is an alien: Thomas Park Clement, in one of the earliest Korean adoptee autobiographies, *Dust of the Streets: The Journey of a Biracial Orphan of the Korean War*, writes that growing up half-Korean in an adopted white family in North Carolina, he often “had the feeling I was an alien again, a tuki”:

Not only because the adoption papers said so, but because deep down inside I felt I was. I always kept an eye out for the crash site of my flying saucer. Sometimes I’d stand on a mountain ledge at attention, looking straight ahead. I’d turn my body around in a complete circle as though relaying my whereabouts back to another planet. I did this well into my late teens. Weird.⁸⁶

Hopgood, who, like Clement, describes a relatively happy childhood with her adoptive family, still writes about feeling as if she had “been beamed in from outer space” because of her physical difference from her family: “Any of my other friends could just look at their mom, dad, or sisters and say, ‘Yeah, well I know where *that* comes from.’ Not me.”⁸⁷ And Mi Ok Song Bruining, in her essay for *Seeds from a Silent Tree*, writes that she was “culturally identified as ‘alien’” in her adolescence for looking like no one else: “I was stared at, harassed, bullied, called

⁸⁴ Trenka, *The Language of Blood*, 23.

⁸⁵ Trenka, *The Language of Blood*, 110.

⁸⁶ Thomas Park Clement, *Dust of the Streets: The Journey of a Biracial Orphan of the Korean War* (Bloomfield, IN: Truepenny Publishing Company, 2012), 45.

⁸⁷ Hopgood, *Lucky Girl*, 84.

names, insulted, threatened, and verbally abused by other kids . . . I remained silent, seethed with rage.”⁸⁸ The recurring depiction of themselves as “alien” suggests a strong sense among adoptees of incommensurable foreignness, not just a stranger but someone wholly alone, uniquely out of place, unrecognizable by those around them and with no means of translating themselves. As Trenka writes in *Fugitive Visions*, “what has always been true has been the permanency of my loneliness, this defining characteristic that I have grown like hair uncut since childhood.”⁸⁹ As Woo reminds us, Korean adoptees were scattered and isolated in white U.S. neighborhoods and towns, separated from other Asian communities and left without any knowledge that there are others like them.⁹⁰ This, we see in adoptee writings, leads to an abiding and overriding sense of isolation and loneliness. Clement had been in the U.S. for more than 40 years before he thought to search the internet for other Korean adoptees, making his first connection to another adoptee, Crystal Chappell (also featured in *Seeds from a Silent Tree*): “I was not the only one in the U.S. after all!”⁹¹ He also writes of the intrinsic and deep-seated loneliness or sadness that dwells within him that was soothed at least in part upon meeting another adoptee:

But, there is something missing way deep down inside of me. It’s like there is intangible, unfinished business, a sadness in my heart. I can’t put my finger on it, but it is definitely there. I wonder if any other adoptees have this feeling.⁹²

Other adoptees describe this “sadness in the heart” as an inability to feel whole, to properly inhabit or rectify both “selves.” Hanson writes in *Seeds from a Silent Tree* that “something is missing”: “I won’t be complete / until I come full circle.”⁹³ Bruining writes of being divided and unable to feel whole: “I could not find a way, did not know how to integrate

⁸⁸ Bruining, “A Few Words,” 66.

⁸⁹ Trenka, *Fugitive Visions*, 187.

⁹⁰ Woo, *Framed by War*.

⁹¹ Clement, *Dust of the Streets*, 166.

⁹² Clement, *Dust of the Streets*, 165-166.

⁹³ Hanson, “Behind My Eyes,” 63.

my false self—in acting and being white like my white, adoptive parents and their three children and my true self—in feeling Asian/Korean—into one complete, whole self. I was both and neither. I was suicidal.”⁹⁴ Trenka also shares a similar feeling of being still at war with herself, as the Korean peninsula remains divided in a state of war that has not, since 1953, officially ended: “How does one live in the condition of being separated from oneself?”⁹⁵ Both Bruining and Trenka express that they felt something akin to a wish to die because of this inability to rectify these two parts of themselves; Trenka says she wanted “my head to be removed” like the chickens her family would slaughter every year when she was a child.⁹⁶ Yet they also both acknowledge the eventual realization that this was not a wish for death, so much as a powerful desire to be whole: for Trenka, the desire to have her head removed was “a metaphor so strong that only later did I realize that it was not a death wish at all. . . . What I longed for was wholeness.”⁹⁷ Bruining later realized, “I did not really want to die, I just wanted to end the pain of the loneliness, isolation and alienation I felt for so many years.”⁹⁸

Yet many adoptees do, in fact, experience the pain of their loneliness, trauma, and lack of wholeness so acutely that they do end their lives, or attempt to. *The New Yorker* has reported that adoptees attempt suicide at four times the rate of other people.⁹⁹ Including those above, references to death permeate adoptee writings. In *Fugitive Visions*, Trenka recounts extensively her early years living in Korea among a community of Korean adoptees from around the world who, for various reasons and for various terms of stay, had returned to Korea and were living in Seoul; the adoptees in Seoul, she writes, were “all in various degrees of suiciding our Western

⁹⁴ Bruining, “A Few Words,” 66.

⁹⁵ Trenka, *Fugitive Visions*, 139.

⁹⁶ Trenka, *The Language of Blood*, 207.

⁹⁷ Trenka, *The Language of Blood*, 207.

⁹⁸ Bruining, “A Few Words,” 66.

⁹⁹ Larissa MacFarquhar, “Living in Adoption’s Emotional Aftermath,” *New Yorker*, April 10, 2023, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/04/10/living-in-adoptions-emotional-aftermath>.

lives.”¹⁰⁰ Attempts at suicide—not just of adoptees’ “Western lives,” but of their lives altogether—are common:

When the next suicide attempt arises, nobody is shocked and people actually laugh; this is a community where nearly everyone has either made a suicide attempt or knows someone who has, where almost everyone knows what that place feels like—the place where you don’t really want to die but you do want to stop being hurt and lonely and you don’t know how to go about doing that.¹⁰¹

Seeds from a Silent Tree contains several poems and essays about, or written to, adopted Korean friends of the writers who have committed suicide. Kari Ruth writes in “Dear Luuk”: “Our search for ourselves does not have an end—neither does the pain. You saw that, but you couldn’t see away to ease the difficulty of your earthly journey.”¹⁰² And Bruining writes a poem dedicated “to the spirit of Peter Young Sip Kim”: “We talked of suicide often, / of your two previous attempts- / when you were alive and still of this earth. / It was never a morbid topic for us- / but a secret desire and seductive fear / we shared as kindred spirits.”¹⁰³ When she’s asked by friends if she knows why he took his life, Bruining replies:

Because, I reason: it was about being adopted
and feelings—of being different,
never belonging, never feeling whole
nor complete, feeling rejected and discarded . . .¹⁰⁴

The pervasive feelings of loneliness and nonbelonging, and the consequent inability to feel “whole” or complete, are powerful and shared. And they are common enough that adoptees are overrepresented in psychiatric hospitals, addiction, programs, and therapy, with many reporting a “persistent sense that they don’t exist, or aren’t real, or aren’t human—that they

¹⁰⁰ Trenka, *Fugitive Visions*, 95.

¹⁰¹ Trenka, *Fugitive Visions*, 172.

¹⁰² Kari Ruth, “Dear Luuk,” in Bishoff and Rankin, *Seeds from a Silent Tree*, 143.

¹⁰³ Mi Ok Song Bruining, “Save a Place for Me,” in Bishoff and Rankin, *Seeds from a Silent Tree*, 141.

¹⁰⁴ Bruining, “Save a Place for Me,” 141.

weren't born from a woman but came from nowhere, or from space."¹⁰⁵ In a 2023 article in *The New Yorker* about the "emotional aftermath" of adoption, a Korean adoptee named Joy Lieberthal, who now has a private therapy practice for adoptees and adoptive parents, says, "There were some international adoptees who said, My life began at J.F.K. . . . Even if you know cognitively that's not true, no one can prove to you that it's not true." She, too, suffers a lifetime experience of loneliness, knowing that nothing and no one can connect all the periods and places of her life.¹⁰⁶ Matthew Salesses, an adoptee who, in 2023, wrote a piece for *Time* called "How I Found My Desire to Live After My Wife Died," identifies a central crux to transnational, transracial adoptees' feelings of not being "whole": being American, he says, is talked about to Asian Americans as a "state of conversion," where "conversion" indexes "white," "as if there is only one condition in which American is possible. To want conversion is to want a life in which multiple lives cannot exist. Because multiple lives could not exist if I were to be a good adoptee/convert, I wanted death."¹⁰⁷

Given the feelings of confusion, dissatisfaction, and alienation that adoptees experience around race, it is perhaps not surprising that adoptee memoirs and writings frequently feature ruminations on mirrors and an interest in bodies and comparisons between bodies. Hopgood grew up feeling alienated from any sense of Asianness, but in college, she made a half-Chinese, half-Japanese friend, and describes one night making her "stand in front of a mirror in my bedroom next to me so I could compare our eye shape," wanting to see if it was true that they

¹⁰⁵ MacFarquhar, "Living in Adoption's Emotional Aftermath."

¹⁰⁶ MacFarquhar, "Living in Adoption's Emotional Aftermath."

¹⁰⁷ Matthew Salesses, "How I Found My Desire to Live After My Wife Died," *Time*, January 13, 2023, <https://time.com/6246190/wanting-to-live-matthew-salesses/>.

looked alike, as so many said.¹⁰⁸ She describes comparing eyes shape, noses, and eyebrows with the friend. YoungHee, author of “Laurel” in *Seeds from a Silent Tree*, wrote of the image that stared back at her in the mirror, an image that “betrayed” her belief that she was not Korean: she describes her eyes, eyelashes, skin, legs, and torso.¹⁰⁹ Berry also wrote in the anthology of a desire and competing inability to deny his Koreanness: “I was always reminded of this when I looked in the mirror or paged through family photo albums, and saw my jet black hair in comparison to my mother and two sisters’ red hair.”¹¹⁰ JS Lee similarly did not see the face she “wanted to see” in the mirror, a face that looked like her family or her friends.¹¹¹ And Clement, after a conflict with a boy in junior high school in which the boy “stuck his front teeth out and gurgled some sounds,” then called Clement a “chink,” describes a new ritual he implemented after that:

That night I began to practice in front of the bathroom mirror. I locked the door and used my fingers to open my eyes as wide as I could until it hurt. I examined my eyes so closely that my nose touched the mirror. Yes, Red was right, my eyes did not look like this. I looked like I was smiling all the time. He, on the other hand, looked like he had seen a ghost. I needed to see more ghosts.¹¹²

Mirrors reveal themselves as a site at which adoptees (re-)realize their difference, where they are most aware of being physically out of place with their surroundings. They represent the shock of difference, and the same betrayal of their bodies that racist incidents and interactions force them to remember. In this, they express something of the uncanny—the perception of yourself, but as a stranger. Freud described the uncanny as “actually nothing new or strange, but something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being

¹⁰⁸ Hopgood, *Lucky Girl*, 158.

¹⁰⁹ YoungHee, “Laurel,” 86.

¹¹⁰ Berry, “Completing My Puzzle...,” 121.

¹¹¹ Lee, “The Trauma of Transracial Adoption.”

¹¹² Clement, *Dust of the Streets*, 60-61.

repressed”¹¹³: something that, once familiar, has been made unfamiliar. As Trenka recounts wanting to ask other children who ask her what it’s like not knowing her “real mom”: “What does it feel like to pass a mirror and *not be surprised?*”¹¹⁴ The ghost of a buried or denied past, represented by their undeniable racial difference, emerges each time they look in the mirror, a sharp and frequently unwelcome reminder of a history that has been suppressed.

Yet as Hopgood demonstrates, the mirror is also a site of reckoning or coming to terms with that physical difference, and preoccupation with bodies—one’s own and others’—is continued into descriptions of adoptees encountering their birth families and finding the opposite of the surprise in the reflection of the mirror: finding physical similarities and, through this, a sense of belonging.

Crystal Lee Hyun Joo Chappell, in her essay in *Seeds from a Silent Tree*, writes of first meeting her birth mother in Korea, focusing first and heavily on physical resemblances: “My birth mother sat next to me, and, looking at my hands. She laughed in surprise. . . . Our hands were identical; hers were only more wrinkled.” She writes of the indescribable “physical bond” she and her mother shared, as they discovered they had the same “feet, arms, knees, personality traits. Even a personal tic was mirror perfect: We both have a habit of scrunching our eyes tightly and repeatedly from time to time.”¹¹⁵ Hopgood, upon first being contacted by her birth family and sent photographs, recalls scrutinizing “eyes, faces, lips, and bodies. Who was taller? Who was prettier? Who looked the most like me, my mother or father? Which sister?”¹¹⁶ When she finally meets her birth family in China, including seven sisters, she remembers that they all were

¹¹³ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, translated by David McLintock (London: Penguin Group, 2003), 197, previously published as *Das Unheimliche* in *Imago* 5, no. 5–6 (1919).

¹¹⁴ Trenka, *The Language of Blood*, 35.

¹¹⁵ Crystal Lee Hyun Joo Chappell, “Now I’m Found,” in Bishoff and Rankin, *Seeds from a Silent Tree*, 129–130.

¹¹⁶ Hopgood, *Lucky Girl*, 11.

“intrigued by each other’s body parts.”¹¹⁷ Trenka, getting to know her Umma on her first visit to Korea, examined “photographs and each other. The physical similarity is striking. . . . We were amazed at how I fit into the family . . . As if our years in America should have watered us down. They didn’t. We were still intact, still genetically family.”¹¹⁸

This fascination that adoptees express in physical resemblances between themselves and birth family members illustrates a highly significant element of adoptee discourse: an investment, however conflicted and unstable, in biological relationships and heredity. Even Hopgood, who writes perhaps the most supportive account of the practice of adoption overall of all the authors whose work I read for this study, and whose disillusionment with her homecoming and birth family is documented in *Lucky Girl*, writes that although her birth mother “would remain an enigma to me,” she recalls a moment during a trip to China with her mother and her sister, where her mother made up a silly song in the hotel room: “*I do that*, I thought. I often make up random, silly songs and sing them to my husband or my dog. *I do that, too.*”¹¹⁹ For adoptees, unearthing biological connection has the comforting effect of explaining certain things about themselves, answering at least in part the many mysteries about their usually out-of-place physical appearance and biological origins. Just the establishment of a notion of heredity as connected to oneself is, for some adoptees, a radically new and affirming possibility. Trenka asserts that her body, “this body made by a Korean woman and nourished from her own,” is “proof to the world that my birth mother existed on this earth,” and is “one thing I know is real and that is indisputably my own.”¹²⁰ The body that she inherited from her mother, which also

¹¹⁷ Hopgood, *Lucky Girl*, 100.

¹¹⁸ Trenka, *The Language of Blood*, 112.

¹¹⁹ Hopgood, *Lucky Girl*, 212.

¹²⁰ Trenka, *Fugitive Visions*, 166.

serves as proof of her mother's existence, solidifies for her a sense of coming from somewhere, having a blood lineage, and along with that, confers on Trenka a sense of "realness."

The common elements of adoptee stories themselves are examples of a general preoccupation with origins: many of them feature "return" stories, in which adoptees return to their countries of birth to find birth family or reconnect with their birth cultures. Wills has noted that adoptees read themselves in their stories as "*needing or longing for* essence," and that adoptees hold on to biologism and essentialism, even as they also reject them.¹²¹ Indeed, there is a powerful thread in adoptee discourse that privileges origins, whether biological, national, or cultural; the claiming of origins by Asian adoptees becomes a political act, one that runs directly counter to the efforts they document that have been made throughout their lives to erase their pasts. This investment in origins and biology—however complicated, as we will soon see—runs counter to theories that posit adoption as a model for possibilities of new types of social kinship that challenge reified biologically-based norms of gender and parenting,¹²² and challenges the unquestioned optimism of rearing children who were, as Trenka says, "born not under my mother's heart, but in it."¹²³ In fact, adoptee writings show us that being born "under a mother's heart"—having been carried in one's mother's womb, being of her blood—has potentially profound significance, if one has been separated from that mother and denied knowledge of her existence. We see this explicitly in Trenka's first memoir, when she writes addressing her Umma, "I am made in the image of you; I am a daughter after your body and after your heart. . . . I will carry you with me, in the language of blood."¹²⁴

¹²¹ Jenny Heijun Wills, "Paradoxical Essentialism," 210.

¹²² See Bruno Perreau, *The Politics of Adoption: Gender and the Making of French Citizenship* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2014); and Jacqueline Stevens, "Methods of Adoption: Eliminating Genetic Privilege," in *Adoption Matters*, edited by Sally Haslanger and Charlotte Witt (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 68-94.

¹²³ Trenka, *The Language of Blood*, 198.

¹²⁴ Trenka, *The Language of Blood*, 140.

If adoptees respond to the involuntary withdrawal of their biological information and connections by turning to those connections to seek healing and comfort, then they also sometimes even respond to the optimism of neoliberal transnationalism by investing in the nation. Korean adoptee Bryan Pietsch wrote in *The Washington Post* that he reclaimed his South Korean citizenship after the involuntary forfeiture of his Korean citizenship when he was a baby, upon his naturalization as an American citizen: “I’m simply taking back what is mine – what was taken from me without my consent,” he writes. He describes his Korean identification card and passport as feeling like a “powerful shield,” a reminder that he, too, could have been unquestionably Korean if he had not been taken away at the age of nine months.¹²⁵ For Pietsch, political and legal affiliation is an act of reclamation, and his deliberate seizing of this political identity as a form of imperfect redress for what he calls “the original sin of my bifurcated life”¹²⁶ is a critique of a practice that moves babies so easily across borders. In *Fugitive Visions*, Trenka, who notes that the “Korean economy is built on my back, my mother’s back,” expresses the same doubts about the purported benefits of mobility in an era of globalization:

Transnationalism is supposed to look like choices, is supposed to look like breaking boundaries, is supposed to look like freedom. Transnationalism is not supposed to look like sisters trying to rebuild their relationship after being unwillingly separated, families struggling to talk to each other, shopkeepers tired of foreign militarization¹²⁷

Adoptees therefore understand themselves as a side effect, a byproduct, of transnational flows of capital and people; though they are regarded as figures of “postnational cosmopolitanism,” as Eleana Kim has put it, adoptees “expose the contradictions of the

¹²⁵ Bryan Pietsch, “Why I Reclaimed My South Korean Citizenship After Losing it as a Baby,” *Washington Post*, June 3, 2022, <http://turing.library.northwestern.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/why-i-reclaimed-my-south-korean-citizenship-after/docview/2673035473/se-2>.

¹²⁶ Pietsch, “Why I Reclaimed.”

¹²⁷ Trenka, *Fugitive Visions*, 109.

global.”¹²⁸ Wills summarizes this primary contradiction succinctly, when she wonders about the fact that her adoptive parents would never imagine themselves travelling to Korea: “I pondered how curious it is that Korea is imagined as so close when we’re taken away, infants alone on airplanes, but so far when we want to return.”¹²⁹

Though, as we will see, these renewed and unearthed biological and genetic connections do not guarantee or, in most cases, even firmly establish a genuine sense of belonging in Korea or with one’s birth family, they are retold as significant moments in the adoptee’s journey of self-discovery. This journey is, for the vast majority of adoptee writings, a prerequisite for writing in the first place, and is characterized generally by the transition an adoptee experiences between long-held feelings of inner whiteness and lack of curiosity about their adoptions and their pasts to a stronger sense of dissatisfaction with the involuntary nature of their adoptions, the histories, cultures, and families it has taken away from them, an acknowledgment of the loneliness, isolation, or sense of incompleteness that they feel, and a desire to find and reclaim their pasts, often in their birth countries. This has been described by some as a process of “coming out of the fog,” an analog, whether intentional or not, to the fog of war, a phrase used to describe the complexity, confusion, and uncertainty of military conflicts¹³⁰—apt, given transnational adoption’s beginnings in war and displacement, and the occluding discourses that have kept many adoptees enshrouded in their own “fog.” Adoptee Deanna Doss Shrodes in *The New Yorker* contrasts adoptees who have “come out of the fog”—and who therefore “feel the pain”—with adoptees who have not yet, and who are therefore content, who still feel happy and grateful, and

¹²⁸ Eleana Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 8.

¹²⁹ Wills, *Older Sister*, 49.

¹³⁰ Oxford Reference, s.v. “Fog of war,” accessed 15 June 2023, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095826962>.

don't understand why other adoptees are upset. As Larissa MacFarquhar, author of the *New Yorker* piece, summarizes:

“Coming out of the fog” . . . can mean realizing that the obscure, intermittent unhappiness or bewilderment you have felt since childhood is . . . shared by others who are adopted. It can mean realizing that you were a good, hardworking child partly out of a need to prove that your parents were right to choose you . . . or a fear that if you weren't good your parents would give you away, like the first ones did. It can mean coming to feel that not knowing anything about the people whose bodies made yours is strange and disturbing. It can mean seeing that you and your parents were brought together . . . by a vast, powerful, opaque system with its own history and purposes.¹³¹

MacFarquhar notes that it is, for many, an extremely painful and disorienting process, because it is a process of having one's beliefs or illusions dispelled. She also points out that some adoptees don't like the metaphor of coming out of the fog, because it suggests that adoptees who think or feel differently “must be deluded.”¹³² None of the adoptees whose writing I studied for this project express such feelings outright about adoptees who are more contented with their situations. They do, however, express variations on the processes of realization that MacFarquhar describes. Wayne A. Berry writes in *Seeds from a Silent Tree* that it took him “22 years to finally open the door, and explore a part of me that I so much didn't want anything to do with.”¹³³ Trenka writes of the momentousness of acknowledging that she's Korean, and likens it to “coming out of the closet”: “I am not going to magically ‘move on’ or become ‘normal.’”¹³⁴ For some adoptees, like Clement, the simple act of curiosity about other adoptees, or about one's birth culture, or both, can initiate this journey. Clement had been in the U.S. for 40 years before he thought to search “Korean adoptee” on the internet, and subsequently found Crystal Chappell and an entire Korean adoptee community through the Global Korean Network.¹³⁵

¹³¹ MacFarquhar, “Living in Adoption's Emotional Aftermath.”

¹³² MacFarquhar, “Living in Adoption's Emotional Aftermath.”

¹³³ Berry, “Completing My Puzzle...,” 121.

¹³⁴ Trenka, *The Language of Blood*, 191.

¹³⁵ Clement, *Dust of the Streets*.

The reclamation of memory and history is an important element of this journey for most adoptees. Hopgood, in noting that for most of her life she never cared about her birth family “or even thought of them as real people,” observes that “[y]ou are less likely to mourn those you do not realize you have lost—or those who have lost you. You do not yearn for a life that you don’t know exists.”¹³⁶ Adoptees also recognize that the choice to remember—to either literally validate one’s memories of life pre-adoption, or to seek out one’s history and birth family, or both—is a political act that means in some way shattering the illusion of adoption as a frictionless process in which all parties involved have been forthcoming and forthright. “Remembering, after all,” Trenka writes, “dredges up the past and provides numerous opportunities to reframe family separation as something other than charitable.”¹³⁷

In fact, an important element of some adoptees’ “coming out of the fog” experience is often learning about malpractice or misrepresentation about their (and others’) adoptions. Many adoptees do not trust the information written in their files, including their date of birth and information about their birth parents, because that information is so often fabricated. Wills learned during her research into her past that her adoptive parents intended to adopt a baby named So Young, who died before she could be sent overseas: “I was sent in her place. It would not have looked good to go back on a promise. No one could tell. There is no formula to the matching. The contracts were already signed.”¹³⁸ Deann Borshay, writing in *Seeds from a Silent Tree*, tells the story of how she was passed off as another child named Cha Jung Hee, whom her parents, the Borshays, were contracted to adopt. Cha Jung Hee’s mother had a change of heart at the last minute, and the social worker at the orphanage sent Borshay in her place, with a warning

¹³⁶ Hopgood, *Lucky Girl*, 13.

¹³⁷ Trenka, *Fugitive Visions*, 94.

¹³⁸ Wills, *Older Sister*, 118.

to Borshay before putting her on the plane: “Don’t tell them who you are really are until you’re old enough to take care of yourself.”¹³⁹ (Borshay, now Deann Borshay Liem, has directed three documentary films about her adoption from Korea, *First Person Plural* (2000), *In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee* (2010), and *Geographies of Kinship* (2019), which have become seminal examples of adoptee-produced media about adoption.) Trenka’s Korean adoptee friend Dominique, with whom she lives briefly in Seoul, visits his adoption agency and has his social history and file interpreted to him in a way that differs from the last time: “The same file, the same life, would be reinterpreted over the years again and again,” causing him to ask: “What is the reality?”¹⁴⁰ Trenka notes the myriad ways that adoptees’ files were amended: mothers represented as single mothers instead of married to the child’s father; siblings excluded; health histories, names, birth dates, birth places changed. Some adoptees, she adds, have found “more egregious abuses”:

. . . children were switched for others who were scheduled to be adopted, but who for some reason couldn’t go on the scheduled day (the white adoptive parents couldn’t see the difference between the child they got and the child whose photos were sent to them); Korean parents who either lost their children or put them in orphanages on a temporary basis were not allowed to take their children back later . . . children were sent to orphanages and then overseas without the permission of their mothers.¹⁴¹

In Trenka’s case, four girls with her name were sent to four different families in the U.S. and northern Europe. She suspects that “Jeong Kyong-ah, born on March 8, 1972, had been promised to four different families,” and that the other three adoptees, now grown, never realized that they were not the same baby as in the picture their parents received.¹⁴² These widespread dishonesties, bureaucratic elisions, and outright lies are a common and understandable

¹³⁹ Deann Borshay, “Remembering the Way Home: A Documentary Video Proposal,” in Bishoff and Rankin, *Seeds from a Silent Tree*, 117.

¹⁴⁰ Trenka, *Fugitive Visions*, 176.

¹⁴¹ Trenka, *Fugitive Visions*, 92.

¹⁴² Trenka, *Fugitive Visions*, 94.

foundation for adoptee critiques of the practice, which, they contend, manufactures orphans to meet white Western consumer demand. After all, as Trenka puts it, “pretty much nobody wants to adopt a child who comes from an intact family with married parents. Nobody wants to adopt a child who has been taken from her mother and whose mother is desperately searching for her. People want real orphans.”¹⁴³

It is no small wonder, then, that Asian adoptees in their writings are critical and suspicious of the practice of transnational adoption upon “coming out of the fog.” Though few go so far as to call for abolition of the practice, some are more explicit in their politics, like Korean Swedish adoptee and prominent critical adoption scholar Tobias Hübinette, who has stated himself to be “totally against any kind of continuation of international adoption from Korea.”¹⁴⁴

For many adoptees, another important element of “coming out of the fog” is rejecting the pressure to perform gratitude for their white parents and adoptive culture. Bruining, who was adopted at five years old after having lived in a Korean orphanage for several years, was “told that I was abandoned, rejected, and unwanted. My parents told me I should be grateful and lucky to be adopted and should not feel sad about anything.” The adoption agency convinced her parents to adopt her after having “sponsored” her for several years by telling them that she would “be a prostitute if I remained in Korea. . . . My adoptive parents believed that they rescued me—a poor, little, helpless ‘orphan’ child”.¹⁴⁵ And Bruining is far from the only one. Trenka writes of having heard this same line: “I would have died, I would have become a prostitute, I would not

¹⁴³ Trenka, *Fugitive Visions*, 92-93.

¹⁴⁴ Tobias Hübinette, *Comforting an Orphaned Nation: Representations of International Adoption and Adopted Koreans in Korean Popular Culture* (Stockholm, Sweden: Stockholm University Department of Oriental Languages, 2005), 16.

¹⁴⁵ Bruining, “A Few Words,” 64-65.

have gotten an education . . . My American mother believes all of the above.”¹⁴⁶ When a friend asks Trenka if she would rather have been raised in Korea, Trenka believes that to the friend, the answer is clear: “She’s been told that I was ‘saved’ . . . I have been rescued by adoption . . . I would have turned into what Asian girls turn into if left to their own devices: a prostitute.”¹⁴⁷ The repeatedly expressed belief that a female adoptee “would have” become a prostitute had she not been adopted reveals an insidiously gendered dimension to adoption discourse: where do adopted children come from, after all, if not from Korean prostitutes who bedded American GIs during the Korean and Vietnam wars?¹⁴⁸ The durability of the trope of Asian adopted girls who “would have become prostitutes” suggests the perpetuation of deeply gendered notions of Asian femininity, which are then projected onto the bodies of Asian American adopted girls and women.¹⁴⁹

JS Lee affirms that intercountry adoptees of color are “considered ‘lucky’ to have escaped the poverty and crude treatment” of their homelands, and that adoptees are expected to demonstrate “reassurance that most of us are happy, well-adjusted, and grateful.”¹⁵⁰ Wills, whose adoptive family celebrated the anniversary of her arrival in Canada (sometimes referred to by adoptive families as one’s “gotcha day,” to the chagrin of adoptees generally), wonders how such an event can be considered something you “memorialize with happiness”: depending your perspective, “it is the anniversary of the time you gained something or the anniversary of the

¹⁴⁶ Trenka, *Fugitive Visions*, 47.

¹⁴⁷ Trenka, *The Language of Blood*, 198.

¹⁴⁸ See Woo, *Framed by War*; and Ji-Yeon Yuh, *Beyond the Shadow of Camptown: Korean Military Brides in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2004).

¹⁴⁹ See Eleana Kim, *Adopted Territory*; and Jodi Kim, “An ‘Orphan’ with Two Mothers: Transnational and Transracial Adoption, the Cold War, and Contemporary Asian American Cultural Politics,” *American Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (2009): 855-880.

¹⁵⁰ Lee, “The Trauma of Transracial Adoption.”

time you lost everything. For a while, I feared that day as it edged closer each year. Performing happiness and gratitude, while hiding sorrow, also hurts.”¹⁵¹

These acknowledgments demonstrate clearly that the impulse described by Woo—to encourage adopted Korean children to silently and obediently adhere to white American norms in order to be granted love and acceptance¹⁵²—is felt and recognized by adoptees. The unavoidable imbalances in power between “parents and children, institutions and individuals, white people and people of color, and rich and poor nations” are so great, as Kim Park Nelson points out, that the potential for abuses of power are “enormous.”¹⁵³ With adoptive parents choosing to adopt because of motivations borne of a desire to rescue, or to “enrich their lives by parenting a child from a foreign culture,”¹⁵⁴ the effects—discussions about what “would” have become of the child and suggestions that the adoptee should be grateful for their “rescue”; disregard for the realities and consequences of race and lack of adequate recognition for, and responses to, racism; and lack of acknowledgment of, or even negative reactions toward, adoptees’ pasts and birth families—are borne and felt by adoptees, who express a clear recognition of those circumstances and, as a result, frequently a rejection of those experiences, and a new reality of attempting to reckon with the emotional and mental landscape they have wrought.

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that so many adoptees return to their birth countries as adults, to search for or meet their birth families, to connect with their birth cultures, or to try to heal the rift within, the sense of incompleteness that so many of them describe. Some find that they feel much more at home and accepted there. For the vast majority of adoptees, however, returning to their home countries does not provide all of the answers, and instead yields a

¹⁵¹ Wills, *Older Sister*, 108.

¹⁵² Woo, *Framed by War*, 134.

¹⁵³ Park Nelson, *Invisible Asians*, 90.

¹⁵⁴ Park Nelson, *Invisible Asians*, 89.

knowledge that the adoptee will never quite belong there, either. Korean adoptee Tori Smith wrote in *Quartz* that returning to Korea for the International Korean Adoptee Association (IKAA) gathering yielded mixed feelings: though she was filled with “immeasurable pride at the beautiful, resilient country” where she was born, she was also “filled with agony that I was denied the chance to be raised among my culture.” She felt the burden of wanting to blend in, and an intense sadness watching Koreans living their daily lives knowing that she was potentially deprived of the opportunity to do the same; she also felt a strong sense of loneliness, stemming from the fact that, although the trip was a type of homecoming for her, she “had no family, no friends there to welcome me back.” Ultimately, Smith concludes that she has two homes, Korea and the U.S., and although she’s comforted knowing “there’s a part of me in both countries,” she also acknowledges that “wherever I go, I’ll be leaving something behind.”¹⁵⁵

When adoptees are reunited with their birth families, the reunions are often not joyful, or at least not uncomplicatedly so. Wills remembers that when she met her birth mother in Korea, her Ummah threw her arms around her, but “the situation was uncomfortable. . . . Ummah clung to me, but I didn’t soften.”¹⁵⁶ Her country of birth felt vast and unknowable. And although she felt deeply comforted to be surrounded by people who look like her, she felt a unbreachable rift between herself and her Ummah, whose body had “become foreign to me,” and to whom she “could never be the kind of Korean daughter she’d fully be able to recognize.”¹⁵⁷ After all, they required a translator to speak to one another: “our kinship has always needed to exist [through] third parties. My mother told me about the day I was born, but we needed strangers to bear

¹⁵⁵ Tori Smith, “Returning to Korea as an Adoptee Changed the Way I Think about Home,” *QZ*, Apr 19, 2020, <https://qz.com/1833741/returning-to-korea-as-an-adoptee-changed-how-i-think-about-home>.

¹⁵⁶ Wills, *Older Sister*, 25.

¹⁵⁷ Wills, *Older Sister*, 46.

witness.”¹⁵⁸ Trenka similarly describes a stilted first reunion: “I didn’t feel anything, not my own emotions, not hers. . . . The sky did not open up, the angels did not descend.”¹⁵⁹ And when Trenka’s mother is diagnosed with cancer and begins to decline, Trenka has to ask a Mormon missionary to come to the hospital and translate for her as she tries to find the words to say goodbye. Unless the adoptee speaks the language of their birth country or their birth mother, or a family member, speaks English, the barrier of language always exists between them, preventing them from surmounting the already mountainous hurdle of sharing blood but having spent their entire lives apart.

There are also stories in adoptee narratives of troubled situations with birth families, sometimes exacerbated by their reappearance in their lives. Wills’ reappearance incites the reunion of, and renewed relationship between, her birth mother and birth father, who had previously separated, but Wills learns over time that her father is controlling and abusive. Hopgood describes a happy reunion with her large birth family in China, which quickly turned tiring—“I was tired of the talking and of not understanding, of being bossed around, of being on display, and of constantly being photographed as if I were a baby learning to walk”¹⁶⁰—and a similarly difficult situation with her birth father, who, she learned, had had multiple prolonged affairs resulting in a son with another woman. He forced his wife—Hopgood’s birth mother—to endure bringing this son into her home, angering both her and her birth sisters.

And of course, adoptees face the challenge of not connecting with their birth families, being disappointed or aggravated by them, or simply feeling distant. Hopgood acknowledges the gulf that will forever exist between her and her birth mother:

¹⁵⁸ Wills, *Older Sister*, 54.

¹⁵⁹ Trenka, *The Language of Blood*, 98.

¹⁶⁰ Hopgood, *Lucky Girl*, 107.

I went to bed that night and thought about how Ma and I would never truly know each other. Perhaps we could, if I gave up the life I knew, moved here, and gave everything to Taiwan, but I wasn't willing to do that. I had a feeling that no matter how hard I studied Mandarin or Taiwanese, or how much time I spent in the town where I had been born or the island where my parents had been raised, my birth mother and I would never have a fraction of the relationship she has with Min-Wei or Jin-Hong or my other sisters, or that I have with my own mom in the States.¹⁶¹

Hopgood also describes her annoyance at being constantly asked by extended family in Taiwan and China why she is so “black,” meaning tanned or darker skinned: “Despite my best efforts to understand their culture, I felt like some members of my family didn’t even try to understand mine.”¹⁶² She eventually acknowledges the idea of “return” to her birth country and town with clear-eyed realism: “I could admit that coming ‘home’ to Taitung did not evoke a feeling of nostalgic longing. By now, I believed it was dishonest to try to stir up some kind of fond memory for someplace I had never lived.”¹⁶³

Trenka, who has chosen to remain in Korea and still lives there, has extensively detailed the mixed feelings she’s felt about her attempts to reconnect to Korea, her family, and Korean culture and people. She describes the many ways that Koreans tell her she’s not Korean enough—“in Korea I know better than to claim I am Korean. . . . I have not yet learned how to say, ‘This is what a Korean person looks like and sounds like. Haven’t you met a Korean before?’”¹⁶⁴—and the impossible and conflicting standards for full membership in Korean culture and society. She writes a list of things she heard or overheard at a program for adult adoptees at Inje University in Korea one year: “‘You are not Korean unless you can sing ‘Arirang.’ ‘You are a real Korean because you feel emotions like we do.’ ‘You might not

¹⁶¹ Hopgood, *Lucky Girl*, 211.

¹⁶² Hopgood, *Lucky Girl*, 163.

¹⁶³ Hopgood, *Lucky Girl*, 217.

¹⁶⁴ Trenka, *Fugitive Visions*, 124-125.

understand this movie because it has Korean emotions.’ . . . ‘Why don’t you speak Korean?’”¹⁶⁵

The inability to gain fluent command of Korean without a noticeable accent marks her and other Korean adoptees as foreigners, opening them to probing questions and doubts and judgments. Still, she writes, many adult adoptees who have found their way to Korea choose to remain there, and endure, despite the extreme challenges. It is, she explains, a maddeningly difficult prospect of figuring out the small details of everyday living in “a language we have forgotten, in a country where we have to explain ourselves more than we had to do in our adoptive countries,” vulnerable to exploitation or manipulation and needing to accept precarity in “a society that is (with our adoptions as proof) unsympathetic to vulnerable people, judgmental about difference, and hostile to outsiders.”¹⁶⁶

For women and queer people, there is the additional layer of gender-based violence and strict social norms in adoptees’ birth countries that can lead to abuse or manipulation. Beth Kyong Lo wrote about stereotypes of adoptee women in a poem in *Seeds from a Silent Tree*: “tramp / whore / slut / You know the type . . . / can’t cook / can’t clean / can’t eat right . . . bad girls yearning to be good, / but can’t. Not like the real / Asian butterflies. . . / American girls / we want to fuck / like we’d never do / to a proper Asian born.”¹⁶⁷ Being “Americanized” becomes another insurmountable barrier to full inclusion into Korean culture and society, this time on the basis of a woman adoptee’s inability to fit into the submissive role assigned to women in Korean society. Pietsch, the adoptee who reclaimed his South Korean citizenship, writes of his pride in reclaiming some part of what has been lost to him; but still, he adds that he’s not likely to stay in Korea, because, as an openly gay man, he is not welcome or accepted

¹⁶⁵ Trenka, *Fugitive Visions*, 63.

¹⁶⁶ Trenka, *Fugitive Visions*, 171.

¹⁶⁷ Beth Kyong Lo, “From the Eyes of a Real Asian Man (on Korean adopted females),” in Bishoff and Rankin, *Seeds from a Silent Tree*, 85.

there. He also finds he is constantly questioned about his origins in Korea, and, like Trenka, finds himself wishing he could “go about my life here . . . without a daily recollection of the complexities of my identity or the trauma from which my life began.”¹⁶⁸

That so many adoptees find only part of the solution to the loneliness, pain, and trauma they feel upon revisiting their birth countries is an important contributing factor to the need that adoptees commonly express to forge their own identities and their own sense of belonging, one that does not rely in its entirety on membership in either country, society, or culture into which they were born and in which they were raised. As Rebekah Jin Turner writes in her poem in *Seeds from a Silent Tree*: “I am my own generation. / I’m not first, second, or even third; / like so many of you. / I am Generation Me.”¹⁶⁹ Noting that Korean adoptees have increasingly begun to see “our culture as separate and different from the cultures of both Korea and our adoptive countries,” adoptee Sunny Jo writes in *Outsiders Within* that Korean adoptees, or KADs, have developed their own culture, which she describes as “the evolution of a new ethnic group through the blending of other cultures, with the subsequent creation of a new and distinct culture made up of more than merely the sum of its parts.”¹⁷⁰ This process is a forging of a new identity, an act of creation, and for adoptees, it requires an entirely different way of thinking about family, kinship, culture, and belonging. As both Sunny Jo and Eleana Kim point out, Korean adoptees share in common a sense of nonbelonging and feelings of loss. Kim notes in her ethnographic study that “in-betweenness” is a hallmark descriptor of the experience of KAD personhood, referring to a “misfit identification” adoptees feel with both their birth and adoptive cultures¹⁷¹;

¹⁶⁸ Pietsch, “Why I Reclaimed.”

¹⁶⁹ Rebekah Jin Turner, “Generation Me,” in Bishoff and Rankin, *Seeds from a Silent Tree*, 139.

¹⁷⁰ Sunny Jo, “The Making of KAD Nation,” 287.

¹⁷¹ Eleana Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 93-94.

Sunny Jo refers to a pervasive sense of “nonbelonging and rootlessness.”¹⁷² Adoptees are therefore moved to build community based largely on loss, on absence, on a collective state of *nonbelonging*; perhaps this is what Trenka means when she writes that she begins to “chart a commonography of souls,” based around her “own center,” her body, the “one thing I know is real and that is indisputably my own.”¹⁷³ Her friend Dominique, the adoptee who receives multiple contrasting versions of his own origin story and is ultimately unable to know the truth of his own history, is similarly described as dedicating his focus and his emotional investments into the present, giving up the past as a potential source of affirmation: “Every day he started a new diary. His reality became the sum of his story in the present, because there was only the present.”¹⁷⁴

Adoptees, then, attempt to construct and inhabit a “third space” of hybridity, as proposed by Homi Bhabha,¹⁷⁵ which emerges from the incommensurability of cultures. Liberal frameworks of multiculturalism and cultural diversity entail a “*containment* of cultural difference” alongside its encouragement¹⁷⁶—what Stuart Hall has called “carefully regulated, segregated visibility”¹⁷⁷—and the best way forward, according to Bhabha, is to think of cultural hybridity not in a genealogical or contained sense, in which one is “able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges,” but rather as a third space of difference from which other positions emerge: “The third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through

¹⁷² Sunny Jo, “The Making of KAD Nation,” 289.

¹⁷³ Trenka, *Fugitive Visions*, 166.

¹⁷⁴ Trenka, *Fugitive Visions*, 176-177.

¹⁷⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Jonathan Rutherford, “The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha,” in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, edited by Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 207-221.

¹⁷⁶ Rutherford, “The Third Space,” 208.

¹⁷⁷ Stuart Hall, “What Is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?” *Social Justice* 20, no. 1-2 (1993): 107.

received wisdom.”¹⁷⁸ For Hall and Bhabha, modern discourses of culture that rest on the primacy of the sovereign notion of self and on essential(ized) identities create an unsuitability with available identity categories, particularly when it comes to minority identities and cultures: for Hall, this means there is always “an over-determination or a lack,”¹⁷⁹ which we see quite clearly in adoptees’ own descriptions of their “misfit identification” with the very limited available categories of identity, nationality, race, and culture. For Hall and Bhabha, identity is not essential but rather “strategic and positional,”¹⁸⁰ and therefore, “hybrid” identities are processual, never settled, heterogeneous, and capable of significant creative potential. As Bhabha puts it, “It is only by losing the sovereignty of the self that you can gain the freedom of a politics that is open to the non-assimilationist claims of cultural difference.”¹⁸¹

Adoptee discourse, which ultimately rejects a totalizing identification with either one’s adoptive culture or one’s birth culture, is illustrative of the shortcomings of liberal segregationist identity categories and of the crucial significance of third spaces, or identity in difference. Though they have pasts that have been denied them through their involuntary adoptions, Asian adoptees also recognize that reconnecting with or reclaiming their birth families and birth countries cannot give them the wholeness they desire. They are therefore moved to look away from the past—from past generations, from past affiliations—to create identity, rooting their developing sense of community in nonbelonging, in in-betweenness, in loneliness, in the shared experience of having been sundered as a child and now containing two incommensurable selves that cannot become fully realized, and cannot fully heal. Adoptee rhetorics that describe a

¹⁷⁸ Rutherford, “The Third Space,” 211.

¹⁷⁹ Stuart Hall, “Introduction: Who Needs ‘Identity’?”, in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, edited by Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 1996), 3.

¹⁸⁰ Hall, “Who Needs ‘Identity’?”, 3.

¹⁸¹ Rutherford, “The Third Space,” 213.

grappling with the inadequacy of either birth or adoptive culture as a satisfactory “fit” and a subsequent tentative embracing of these “nonbelonging” or “in-between” identities, which are always in process and in flux, are an apt example of Hall and Bhabha’s theories of culture and an indictment of dominant discourses that have constructed so few pathways for transnational, transracial adoptees to imagine their own belonging. That many adoptees have indicated a recognition of the fact that “wholeness” of self is impossible is a radical act, not just in the face of their adoptive culture, which would contain their identities, but against Western notions of the essential self altogether. A further step forward might push adoptee theorizing beyond the sovereign self, on which such identity categories rest, like Trenka’s friend Dominique, for whom every day brings a re-sketching of his story and, by extension, his selfhood.

In adoptee writings, we see clear evidence of systems and structures that constrain Asian American adoptees through complex systems of power that wield race, gender, white saviorism, and modern Western colonialism to maintain Asian American adoptees as beholden or abject subjects. We also are forced to encounter the question of whether transnational, transracial adoption as a practice should be continued at all, and if so, how they ought to be better managed. It is not only the responsibility of adoptees’ parents and families to improve conditions for adoptees, although in many cases they obviously have much work to do. Adoptee discourse shows us that it is also the responsibility of adoption agencies, placement centers, structures and institutions responsible for social services in the U.S. and in Asia, media, those who set government policy, and all people who hear, contribute to, or perpetuate discourse that constrains and contains adoptees. And of course, there is a powerful role to be played by willing adoptees

who, like those quoted in this chapter, are courageous enough to take on the burden of public advocacy.

It is important to note that adoptee writings do not express a universal experience for all adoptees. As with any group, transnational adoptees are not a monolith. Even within the examples in this chapter, adoptees are not in full agreement; Hopgood, for example, ultimately concludes in *Lucky Girl* that “people tend to forget on a basic level our relationships with our adopted parents are normal parent-child relationships. The only difference is how we became parent and child . . . It’s not biology that defines a relationship.”¹⁸² She recognizes that “my adopted parents loved us more than anything,” which helped her and her brothers “keep our pasts in perspective,” but that other adoptees “do feel a tremendous loss.”¹⁸³ Between 1948 and 2004, over 358,000 international adoptions to the U.S. took place¹⁸⁴; it is unavoidable that such a large number of people sharing a common experience would feel differently about that experience. A clear example was one door down the hall when I was growing up: my younger brother, a fellow Korean adoptee who was born in Seoul and adopted by my parents two years after me as an infant, has never been interested in his adoption as such, has never chosen to discuss it, feels no particular angst or complicated feelings about his adoption, and has said that he would not be interested in a birth family search for any reason except, potentially, to learn about his medical history. There are doubtless many, many adoptees like him. Larissa MacFarquhar, author of *The New Yorker*’s adoption piece, or the adoptees interviewed therein, may describe this as not having yet “come out of the fog.” I approach these attitudes as simply examples of the varied

¹⁸² Hopgood, *Lucky Girl*, 151.

¹⁸³ Hopgood, *Lucky Girl*, 152.

¹⁸⁴ Hübinette, *Comforting an Orphaned Nation*, 79.

experiences of transnational adoption, and the myriad responses that adoptees have to that experience.

But it is also undeniable that a large number of Asian American adoptees have, since the 1990s, increasingly sought ways to connect and to process, individually and collectively, what their adoptions have meant to them, and to overcome the barriers of discursive silence that cloak adoptees in their usual isolation. The Gathering, formerly known as the International Gathering of the First Generation of Korean Adoptees, has been taking place since 1999, and is regarded as “the beginning of the international adoptee community.”¹⁸⁵ According to the website for International Korean Adoptee Associations, which now hosts the Gathering, more than 700 attendees come to Seoul for the Gathering that takes place once every three years.¹⁸⁶ Organizations like IKAA, G.O.A’.L. (Global Overseas Adoptees’ Link), and KAAN (the Korean American Adoptee Adoptive Family Network) work with hundreds of adoptees. G.O.A’.L., which was established in 1998, initiates birth family searches and helps Korean adoptees recover their Korean citizenship (a legal right that the organization itself played a large role in securing)¹⁸⁷; KAAN, which was founded in 1998 to “improve the lives of Korean-born adoptees by connecting the community and providing opportunities for dialogue, education, and support,” hosts a major conference every year with sessions for adoptees only as well as for birth families, family members, and service providers.¹⁸⁸ KAAN’s website describes the organization as one of the many groups that spawned around the world as a response to the “1990s coalescence of a

¹⁸⁵ Eleana Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 114.

¹⁸⁶ “IKAA International Gatherings,” International Korean Adoptee Associations, accessed 18 June 2023, <https://www.ikaa.org/what-we-do/ikaa-gatherings/>.

¹⁸⁷ “G.O.A’.L.,” Global Overseas Adoptees’ Link, accessed 18 June 2023, <https://goal.or.kr/>.

¹⁸⁸ “About KAAN,” Korean American Adoptee Adoptive Family Network, accessed 18 June 2023, <https://www.wearekaan.org/about-kaan>.

critical mass of first-wave Korean-born adoptees reaching adulthood.”¹⁸⁹ A 2009 study by Hollee McGinnis of the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute found that both adoption and racial/ethnic identity are increasingly important aspects of identity for transracial adoptees as they grow older, with 81% of Koreans indicating that their identity as an adopted person was important or very important during young adulthood, and with 81% of Korean adoptees responding that their racial/ethnic identity was important to them.¹⁹⁰

Indeed, the significance of one’s having been transnationally, transracially adopted is borne out not only by the proliferation of formal and informal organizations for adoptees and participation in institutional events, but also by membership in social media circles devoted to adoptees. Eleana Kim notes that since the late 1980s/early 1990s, adoptee groups have been “identifying and addressing what adoptees need by providing spaces for virtual or actual dialogue, circulating information about Korea and adoption, and educating adoptive parents or mentoring younger adoptees.”¹⁹¹ Today, this is borne out in avenues like local meetup groups and Facebook groups; G.O.A’.L. and KAAN have 6,200 and 5,800 followers on Facebook each, respectively, while private groups, like Korean American Adoptees (7,300 members), Transracial Adoption (8,400 members), and Korean Adoptees (5,800 members)—I am a member of all three groups—provide private venues for adoptees to discuss their feelings, experiences, frustration, anger, or confusion; their interest in Korean culture; and their desire to connect with others who have had the same experiences and might feel the same way they do. In addition, popular adoption-related Instagram accounts like @adoptee_thoughts (9,967 followers),

¹⁸⁹ “The History of KAAN,” Korean American Adoptee Adoptive Family Network, accessed 18 June 2023, <https://www.wearekaan.org/history>.

¹⁹⁰ “Beyond Culture Camp: Promoting Healthy Identity Formation in Adoption,” Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, November 2009, https://www.adoptioninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/2009_11_BeyondCultureCamp.pdf.

¹⁹¹ Eleana Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 121.

@wreckageandwonder (11,400 followers), and @hannahjacksonmatthews (22,200 followers) educate wide audiences about the complexities of transracial adoption, and figures like writer Nicole Chung, whose bestselling memoir as a transracial adoptee, *All You Can Ever Know*, published in 2018, was named Best Book of the Year by multiple publications, continue to spur important public conversations around adoption. There is strong evidence, in other words, not only for a need among adoptees for connection and meaning, but for the existence of adoptee counterpublic communities, in which transnational and/or transracial adoptees work through and contest dominant meanings, strengthen connections with one another, and create new forms of knowledge with which to think adoption in common.

Not *all* adoptees, therefore, can be said to feel the same way about their adoption experiences as those who have chronicled those experiences in the writings studied in this chapter. But the number of adoptees who are interested in questioning, connecting, searching, and critiquing around their adoption is demonstrably large enough, and the institutions and venues available for such community-building activities long-standing and developed enough, that these works can be understood to be important—for the adoptees who have written them and put them into the world, and for the adoptees reading and discussing them in private. Studies of private adoptee discourse and interviews¹⁹² further strengthen the case that published works voice publicly the concerns and experiences that many adoptees express in private. Continued research into the various media expressions of transnational adoptees is likely to reveal even deeper nuances to a highly textured and diverse pattern of adoptee experience.

¹⁹² See Eleana Kim, *Adopted Territory*; and Park Nelson, *Invisible Asians*.

The anatomy of adoptee experience that is yielded by analysis of adoptee writings that span across authors, time, contexts, and media demonstrates that, while adoptee “identity” is shifting, complex, and unstable, adoptee *experience* as articulated by adoptees themselves encompasses recurring themes that highlight the consistent detrimental effects that dominant discourses have had on adoptees as uniquely positioned minorities who are widely believed to have been “rescued.” From widespread recognition of stolen histories and deliberate “forgetting,” to the effects of racial ignorance and denial and outright racism from one’s friends and family, to persistent feelings of alienation, to reinvestment in some essential categories of biology and nationhood, to the disillusionment of “coming out of the fog,” to the revelations and shortcomings that accompany “motherland” trips and birth family searches, to acknowledgment of perpetually destabilized identities, the themes that emerge through analysis of adoptee discourse demonstrate a direct response from adoptees to the cultural, social, and political conditions that dominant discourses have circumscribed for them, and the limited capacity that all people—adoptees, family, friends, and non-relation alike—have therefore developed to adequately manage the complexities of the adoption process. These characteristics are not exhaustive by any means; and further analysis of adoptee discourse in more diverse media sources, including films, podcasts, YouTube series, and stand-up comedy, will likely reveal more nuances, complexities, affirmations, and counterexamples, all of which should be considered as a part of the profile of popular expressions of adoptee experience. Yet this study of adoptee writings builds a compelling model of the rhetorical resources used by adoptees to both respond to structuring pressures and to create their own identities and communities, which helps us better understand what it means to inhabit third spaces, and to construct identities in difference, outside of normative models of cultural diversity.

These themes in adoptee discourse invite the contemplation of broader questions of abolition and decoloniality. As Grace Lee Boggs and Scott Kurashige have written, activists who are engaged in trying to bring about radical justice must think of the need to “grow our souls.” For Boggs and Kurashige, this means not just engaging in protest and tearing down existing structures, but building community, because “community is the most important thing that has been destroyed by the dominant culture.”¹⁹³ If Asian America was born out of a movement of pan-ethnic solidarity in an attempt by minority communities to seize and enact self-determination, Asian American adoptee rhetoric can, in part, be understood as a community-based struggle to “grow our souls,” to define, educate, and gain control of our own communities in the face of decades of deeply entrenched discourses that have constrained us.

Transnational adoptee rhetoric, therefore, represents a profoundly important example of a rhetoric of difference, one that both talks back to dominant framings and discourses of adoption, and one that provides a “sense of home within”¹⁹⁴ for adoptees—more than this, it enacts the *creation* of a “home” in the form of a nascent group identity by articulating the host of feelings and experiences that adoptees share, despite their wildly varied life experiences and their inability to find kinship among other established communities, cultures, or nations. Through their cultural production, adoptees do not only take on the role of the McKee’s adoptee killjoy, publicly refusing to perform gratitude and countering the expectations of feeling and behavior placed upon them by their white adoptive cultures and communities; they also dare to imagine what it means to create a fledgling, fragile, but very real community based on the radical premise of nonbelonging. Word by word, year after year, they chart their own commonography of souls.

¹⁹³ Grace Lee Boggs and Scott Kurashige, *The Next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the Twenty-First Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 41.

¹⁹⁴ Flores, “Creating Discursive Space,” 146.

CONCLUSION

New Directions and New Questions

Adopted children from Asia, as this dissertation has shown, have long had their uses for the United States, both to individual families and to the U.S. as a whole: as symbols and pawns in the fight to prevent the spread of communism in Asia; as bodies on which to project Western impulses to save and control the East and the global South; as answers to the infertility of American couples; as possessions onto which fantasy and entitlement have been mapped; as nonwhite bodies whose compliance can be used to further entrench anti-Blackness; as political tools; as symbols of “digestible diversity” attesting to a multicultural America. In the age of social media, family vloggers, and influencers, the consequences of online virality for transnational, transracial adoption have heightened, and the exploitation of transnational, transracial adoptees, particularly children, has become, if anything, more obvious. Lifestyle and family YouTube vloggers Myka and James Stauffer adopted a child from China in 2017, releasing a series of videos with search engine optimization-friendly titles like “Huxley’s EMOTIONAL Adoption VIDEO!! GOTCHA DAY China Adoption,” “My CHINA ADOPTION Experience: The Truth,” and “5 Things I Didn’t EXPECT About Our China ADOPTION! International ADOPTION,” making unabashed use of Huxley and the story of his adoption in a bid to gain viewers for their channel. But Huxley, who was soon diagnosed with a severe form of autism spectrum disorder, began appearing less frequently in the couples’ videos after a period in which the Stauffers chronicled the challenges parenting a child with special needs, and in May 2020, the couple released a video in which they revealed that, after fraught decision-making and consultation with experts, they had decided to place Huxley with another family for his well-

being. He was now, they said, living happily in his “forever home”—all of which, one writer pointed out, made Huxley sound like “a pet and not an actual human child.”¹

In 2018, another pair of family vloggers, Nikki and Dan Phillippi, announced on their YouTube channel that their process to adopt a child from Thailand had encountered a “road bump”: the Thai government does not finalize the adoption until a year after it takes place, and therefore does not allow adoptive parents to share images, video, or other content of the child online for the first year. In the video announcing that they were no longer adopting from Thailand, Nikki first named the inability to post online content of the child for a year as the first and primary issue: “When that hit, we were like, *what?*” Dan added: “Nikki’s got a YouTube channel, we share our whole lives.”² The couple also took issue with the fact that “the kid’s going to be living in our house for a year and that whole time, not our kid.” When the video resurfaced several years later, making the rounds on TikTok and Twitter, the couple was roundly criticized for prioritizing the ability to produce content over the child, and their seeming openness about their desire to use their adopted child for content.³

The presence of transnational, transracial adoptees as a significant piece of online content creation is a new and alarming branch of adoption discourse, starkly demonstrating the unequal powers at play and the consequences of decades of discourse that has subtly othered Asian American and other nonwhite adoptees. Content creators don’t focus as much as older discourses on “rescuing” orphans, but the idea of *making use* of such children finds its roots in discourse

¹ Stephanie McNeal, “A YouTuber Placed Her Adopted Autistic Son from China With A New Family — After Making Content With Him For Years,” *BuzzFeed News*, last updated May 28, 2020, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/stephaniemcneal/myka-stauffer-huxley-announcement>; Caitlyn Moscatello, “Un-Adopted: YouTubers Myka and James Stauffer Shared Every Step of Their Parenting Journey. Except the Last.” *Cut*, August 18, 2020, <https://www.thecut.com/2020/08/youtube-myka-james-stauffer-huxley-adoption.html>.

² kie (@criminalplaza), “i hate family vloggers so bad,” Twitter, June 1, 2023, <https://twitter.com/criminalplaza/status/1664289003435094018>.

³ Kerry Bren, “YouTubers Who Euthanized Dog Criticized Over 2018 Video About Adoption Decision,” *Today*, May 25, 2021, <https://www.today.com/parents/nikki-dan-phillippi-criticized-over-2018-adoption-video-t219530>.

that has long justified adoption for similar reasons. The new ability to monetize the celebratory multicultural act of family formation through adoption is indicative of the continued effects of racial capitalism on adoption and on nonwhite adoptees, and of the expanded and unregulated forms of commodification of adoptees that are made possible through social media.

Recent years have also revealed significant legal dangers for adult adoptees. Shimakawa's depiction of the Asian American figure, the simultaneously accepted and abject body, is one that cannot be "openly, completely, or permanently expelled" by "an exclusion carrying the force of law."⁴ Asian American adoptees, however, can, and have, been jettisoned, the conditional nature of their offer of assimilation into white America exposed and their precarious belonging revoked through deportation. Until 2000, adoptees to the U.S. were not automatically granted citizenship as part of the adoption process. Adoptive parents were responsible for obtaining citizenship separately for their child—and some, unbeknownst to the adoptee, neglected to do so. Phillip Clay, a Korean adoptee who was adopted at the age of eight by a family in Philadelphia, was deported back to South Korea in 2012 after multiple arrests. He did not know the language or any people, and did not receive appropriate mental health care. He committed suicide in Seoul at the age of 42. In another high-profile case, Adam Crapser, a Korean adoptee, was deported back to South Korea in 2016 at the age of 41 after a green card background check revealed a burglary conviction, where he lived alone, separated from his wife and family, for several years.⁵

Crapser, who was abused by two sets of adoptive parents in the U.S., has been outspoken about both the illusion of American belonging offered to adoptees and about the abuses of the

⁴ Karen Shimakawa, *National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 10.

⁵ Sang-Hun Choe, "Deportation a 'Death Sentence' to Adoptees After a Lifetime in the U.S.," *New York Times*, July 2, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/02/world/asia/south-korea-adoptions-phillip-clay-adam-crapser.html>.

adoption system that placed him. “I was told to be American,” he told the *New York Times*. “And I tried to fit in. I learned every piece of slang. . . . I was told to stop crying about my mom, my sister, Korea. I was told to be happy because I was an American.”⁶ His statements reflect the impact of the involuntary migration of adoptees that so inexorably shape their lives. “I didn’t ask to be sent to the United States. . . . I didn’t ask to be a culturalized American,” he had said.⁷ His words express frustration at a process in which adoptees are removed without their consent from their home countries and families, placed in the U.S., asked to assimilate, and then, in some cases, removed without warning. The logic of adoption as charity offers only conditional belonging to Asian American adoptees, which can be revoked at the discretion of the white adoptive nation.

There are an estimated 18,000 Korean American adoptees in the U.S. without citizenship. The Adoptee Citizenship Act, a law proposed in 2015 that would grant citizenship to anyone in the U.S. who had been adopted before the age of 18, regardless of how long ago their adoption took place, is still working its way through Congress.⁸ Until its protections are in place, thousands of adoptees are vulnerable. Asian American adoptees can, like Arthur C. Brooks’ daughter, master Instagram and do well in school. They can, like Woody Allen’s wife Previn, make friends, become educated, travel, and gain sophistication. Like Crapser, they are raised as culturally American, usually knowing only English, only life in the U.S. And still, their belonging is precarious at best; as I noted in Chapter 3, adoptees are contained on one hand by discourses that erase their racial difference by claiming inclusion in “raceless” multicultural family formations, and on the other hand by discourses that single out their race and their

⁶ Maggie Jones, “Adam Crapser’s Bizarre Deportation Odyssey,” *New York Times*, April 1, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/01/magazine/adam-crapser-bizarre-deportation-odyssey.html>.

⁷ Choe, “Deportation a ‘Death Sentence.’”

⁸ “Legislation,” *Adoptee Rights Campaign*, accessed June 22, 2023, <https://adopteerightscampaign.org/legislation/>.

countries of origin with pity or condescension, as a constant reminder of their having been saved. The very material threat of deportation is a legal companion to these discourses, realizing the tension between belonging and nonbelonging that lingers like a specter over so many adoptees: it reminds us that the offer of assimilation, the offer of belonging to white America, can be revoked at any time—that, in fact, it has been, and will again.

Perhaps no arena demonstrates the resonances of transnational adoption's history in today's discourse and practices like the repeated attempts at "disaster rescue," where, just as in the past, Christian evangelicals attempt or propose to rescue, or "airlift" (evoking strong connotations with Vietnam's famous "babylift"), children out of disaster zones around the world. Last year, a far right evangelical who was suspended from the Washington State House of Representatives for his ties with far-right militia groups turned up in Poland with 63 Ukrainian children that he said were orphans he hoped to bring to the U.S. for adoption. In 2010, after the devastating earthquake in Haiti, an Idaho woman led a group of Baptist missionaries to Haiti, where they "[gathered] . . . orphans from the streets" and attempted to cross the border into the Dominican Republic, where they were arrested. In 2005, after the Indian Ocean tsunami, one U.S. missionary group announced plans to airlift 300 Muslim children out and "raise them according to 'Christian principles.'" And two years later, a French charity kidnapped 103 children with families, claiming they were Sudanese war orphans.⁹

These incidents offer disturbing evidence that the initiation of large-scale transnational adoption in a discursive field structured by war and the ubiquity and prevalence of evangelical Christian calls for rescue as a form of charity generated a lasting blueprint for future generations. It has proved incredibly difficult to disentangle transnational adoption from coercion and

⁹ Kathryn Joyce, "Ukraine's Kids and Adoption: Will an Ugly History Repeat Itself?", *Salon*, March 22, 2022, <https://www.salon.com/2022/03/22/ukraines-kids-latest-target-for-the-christian-adoption-industry/>.

profound imbalances in power, which are obscured by the easily digestible picture offered by narratives of rescue. This dissertation has sought to document the genealogy of a discursive formation, to demonstrate and account for its durability. These modern-day manifestations of decades-long justifications and processes in the making are further evidence that instances of transnational adoption do not occur in a vacuum, and nor do the things we say to manage, justify, and explain them.

Still, some progress has been made. Earlier this year Crapser won a lawsuit against Holt, which facilitated his adoption in 1979, with a South Korean court ordering the agency to pay Crapser 100 million won, or US \$74,700, in damages.¹⁰ And in December of last year, South Korea set up a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, with the goal to investigate cases of South Korean adoptees in Europe and the U.S. where records were falsified, particularly in cases where documents portrayed children as orphans when they actually had living parents.¹¹ The progress is imperfect—Crapser had also accused the South Korean government of “creating an aggressive, profit-driven industry that carelessly removed thousands of children from their families during a child export frenzy in the 1970s and ‘80s,” and that case was dismissed.¹² But more and more, adoptees are speaking out, reckoning publicly with the various forms of containment—social, cultural, legal—that have structured their lives since they were removed from their home countries as children. This dissertation engages both sides of adoption discourse—dominant,

¹⁰ Tong-Hyung Kim, “South Korean Court Orders Agency to Compensate Adoptee Over His Mishandled Adoption to US,” *Associated Press*, May 16, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/south-korea-adoption-adam-crapser-lawsuit-3065e00fc9e7889e3cb4862700d88aef>.

¹¹ Tong-Hyung Kim, “South Korea’s Truth Commission to Probe Foreign Adoptions,” *Associated Press*, December 7, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/europe-business-adoption-south-korea-government-a9fd3d7670e07655f93cfcde9ad87481>; “South Korea Sets Up a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to Investigate Adoptions,” *NPR Up First*, heard on Morning Edition, December 30, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/12/20/1144311584/south-korea-sets-up-a-truth-and-reconciliation-commission-to-investigate-adoption>.

¹² Tong-Hyung Kim, “South Korean court orders agency.”

containing, marginalizing; and alternative, generative, worldmaking—in the hopes that not only will more rhetorical scholars be encouraged to take transnational adoption seriously as a unique form of racemaking and neocolonialism, but that more of us will remember to attend to the fragile, but crucial, elements of community creation that find purchase under the pressure of such projects, and that only need more light to grow.

In Chapter 2, I examine the rhetorical forces shaping transnational adoption for public consumption in its period of infancy and institutionalization, as the U.S. attempted to rehabilitate its role in the Korean War by aiding its recovery while at the same time attempting to combat the spread of communism in Asia and fighting to improve its image abroad. I note the establishment in this period of several key themes—the figure of the waif or orphaned child in need of saving; adoption as altruism and a form of foreign aid; the objectification of the child; the obliteration of his or her past in the act of adoption to the US; and the framing of (Asian) birth countries as inferior, unfit, and incapable of caring for its own children—that helped to shape public understandings of transnational adoption from Asia as an uncomplicated, and, indeed, necessary, act of rescue. Tracing these themes through time, I move ahead to the 1980s, a time when a “market mentality” developed around transnational adoption, noting that paternalist logic in this period had expanded to encompass the rescue of children from all over what was known as the “third world,” and that the significance of adoptees’ past connections was downplayed in favor of what was repeatedly framed as the better capacity and suitability of the adoptive parent to raise them.

In Chapter 3, I turn directly to the implications of adoption discourse for race, focusing particularly on the concept of postracialism, which forwards the belief that society has entered a period in which race is no longer a defining factor of U.S. life. I differentiate postracialism from

ideologies of colorblindness, positing that unlike colorblindness, the postracial marks an acknowledgment of racial difference, but one that is accompanied by a belief that new racial hierarchies have supplanted old ones. Postracial discourse, in other words, signals an attempt to reframe old racial hierarchies in new ways, for new ends; and as such, it is a phenomenon that is not limited only to recent decades, or to the era of President Barack Obama's election and beyond—rather, it has appeared in different forms throughout the life of transnational adoption from Asia, covering up the violence, coercion, and harms perpetuated by very much still-existing racial hierarchies. This discourse has had the effect of both obscuring the othering and objectification of Asian American adoptees through appearances of celebratory inclusion, *and* of perpetuating anti-Blackness as the unassimilable foil against Asian American “model minorities,” of which the adoptee is the idealized figure.

Throughout the chapter I trace major themes that mark the presence of postracial discourse in rhetorics of transnational adoption: the simultaneous fixation on and dismissal of physical difference, including references to “rainbow children” or the creation of “rainbow families”; the changing of adoptees’ original names, which is rhetorically associated with Americanization of the child; an emphasis on cultural education; and the idea that love can overcome prejudice. I examine the celebratory assimilationist approach in public discourse of Asian adoption in the 1950s and 1960s, which served the purpose of furthering U.S. Cold War aims in Asia by developing intimate relations between Americans and Asia, offering up the U.S. as a more tolerant foil to the racist East, and downplaying domestic racism; it also provided an opportunity, through limited diversification of white U.S. suburbs, to justify continued exclusion of Black Americans from suburban communities. A few decades later, as multiculturalism came into favor, adoptees were framed as just one element of multicolored “rainbow families,” their

racial difference, and any attendant negative experiences related to existing in their families and in U.S. society as racial minorities, was downplayed in favor of optimistic portraits of “digestible diversity.”¹³ And in a more contemporary moment, I demonstrate the deployment of postracial discourse, and the celebrations of racially diverse children adopted in white families, as a persuasive political tool, weaving together the same potent themes of rescue from Chapter 2 with postracial triumph about integration of multiple races in one family to make a case for the racial tolerance of one group or political party over another.

In Chapter 4, I turn to the other side of adoption discourse: public works and writings from adoptees themselves, largely a missing voice in dominant narratives about transnational, transracial adoption. Analyzing a breadth of adoptee writings in memoirs, anthologies, and articles, I examine the material effects of lifelong, even generations-long, expectations of adoptee gratitude; of powerful discursive erasures of adoptees’ histories, birth families, and birth countries; of pervasive experiences of racism in their all-white families and communities, even *within* adoptees’ own families; of adoptive families’ denials of racial difference and its consequences; and of simply growing up surrounded by white family members and people. I trace expressions of adoptees’ feelings of being alien, rotten, or monstrous; of loneliness, of impossible and unhealable division of the self; of trauma and suicidality. I note how insufficient return journeys to adoptees’ birth countries, and even reunions with birth families, are at healing these traumas. And finally, I situate adoptee rhetoric as a rhetoric of difference, not only a crucially important political act of refusal against dominant narratives that have contained

¹³ Arissa H. Oh, *To Save the Children of Korea: The Cold War Origins of International Adoption* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 12.

adoptees' subjectivities for decades, but also an act of creation, of the affirmation of community or "home within,"¹⁴ in which adoptees have begun to narrate their own identities.

Together, these chapters offer a genealogical approach to a discursive formation that grapples with the complex evolution of adoptee discourse and the forces that have structured it. They demonstrate the stickiness of ideological practices, the lasting and durable lives of racism and colonialism, and the vagaries and realities of deeply entrenched practice of othering transnational, transracial adoptees through discourse. This dissertation also demonstrates the benefits of a wide scope analysis of adoptee cultural production *in conversation with* an analysis of dominant discourse, where analysis of the former reveals the lasting consequences of the latter, in addition to revealing the slow ground-up development of a new identity category over time. This project does not exhaust potential objects for analysis, nor does it extend its reach fully to encompass the implications of adoption of nonwhite children from countries in Latin America, Africa, and the Caribbean, the narratives of which all bear both similarities and significant differences to Asian American adoption, particularly as they intersect with historical U.S. anti-Blackness and anti-Latine sentiment; the growth of cultural and economic U.S. imperialism, the advent and spread of neoliberalism beginning in the late 1970s and 1980s, and its effects on how the "availability" of children from the global South was framed; and the changing tone, content, and impact of adoptee cultural production in new media forms, particularly as adoptees engage wider audiences more frequently through social media and podcasts.

This dissertation also raises questions around several broader issues connected to the analysis herein, as well as provides some theoretical equipment for thinking through them. First,

¹⁴ Lisa A. Flores, "Creating Discursive Space through a Rhetoric of Difference: Chicana Feminists Craft a Homeland," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 82, no. 2 (1996): 146.

there is the question of postracialism and its relationship to racial justice. Other scholars have persuasively demonstrated the insufficiency of colorblind ideology to substantially address racism;¹⁵ and Chapter 3 demonstrates convincingly that the way that postracial discourse has historically been deployed has created persuasive but illusory ideas around the radical potential of “multicultural” families and communities, and furthered the false promises of Asian Americans’ full acceptance into white America. Chapter 4 shows us that no matter how persuasive optimistic rhetorics of postracialism may be to large swaths of Americans, there is always an excess, a population who is burdened with managing the contradictions those rhetorics create—in this case, Asian American and other nonwhite adoptees. If, as we see through the analysis in these chapters, deep structures of coercion, manipulation, and inequality predicated on profoundly entrenched ideas about the superiority of the U.S. over other countries in the global South inevitably structure both the practice of transnational adoption and the discourses that manage it, then the only recourse for achieving a racially just form of this practice, and of achieving some form of racial justice in general, is to address those structures at their roots. This means asking fundamental questions about practices that irrevocably affect the lives of nonwhite persons and adoptees in particular: why, for instance, do we consider adoption an acceptable and even primary response to a country’s or a region’s instability, devastation, or war? Closer to home, why do we consider the adoption of Black children to white families to be more ideal than providing social support to Black mothers and families so that they can better care for their children? What is the relationship between U.S. demand and coercive adoption practices abroad?

¹⁵ See Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*, 5th ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018); Michael G. Lacy and Kent A. Ono, eds., *Critical Rhetorics of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2015); Darrel Wanzer-Serrano, *The New York Young Lords and the Struggle for Liberation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015).

How has the U.S. manipulated local social welfare practices abroad through the conditional distribution of aid and relief funds? These questions get to the root of the xenophobia and racism that are baked into the practice of transnational and transracial adoption at every level; and until more Americans are comfortable sitting with those questions and thinking through our complicity in them, discussions of whether postracialism is a possible or desirable ideal miss the point.

This dissertation also highlights the importance of cross-racial, global, and transnational solidarities in achieving justice. Maeda and Omatsu have shown that student activists at San Francisco State University who adopted the label of “Asian American” during their historical 1969 strike as an act of multiethnic solidarity among Asian student groups also saw themselves in solidarity with other oppressed minority groups, particularly Black Americans, and people of the Third World fighting for liberation from colonial occupiers.¹⁶ The strike, Omatsu tells us, was not a movement “seeking legitimacy and representation within American society,” but rather, “the larger goal of liberation” for all oppressed peoples.¹⁷ Transnational adoption is, by definition, a global phenomenon, with its center of power focused on the West, mainly the U.S. and Europe. It is impossible to consider full and true justice for adoptees without also considering the conditions under which their birth mothers and birth families were forced to give them up, and this widened scope implicates neocolonial powers exercised by the West over Asia and countries in the global South, as well as implicating institutions and cultural norms in sending countries, which have historically oppressed and marginalized women, single mothers,

¹⁶ Daryl J. Maeda, *Chains of Babylon: The Rise of Asian America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Glenn Omatsu, “The ‘Four Prisons’ and the Movements of Liberation: Asian American Activism from the 1960s to the 1990s,” in *Asian American Studies Now: A Critical Reader*, edited by Jean Yu-wen Shen Wu and Thomas C. Chen (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 298-330.

¹⁷ Omatsu, “The ‘Four Prisons,’” 299.

and the poor. As I have mentioned above, adoption from one country to another is not merely a carbon copy of a process; but the history in the Asian American movement of multiethnic, multiracial, and global solidarity is instructive about the potential power of recognizing similarities among oppressed groups, across difference. Further, as this dissertation has demonstrated, Asian American adoption has been used as another wedge to shore up anti-Blackness in the U.S.; both Asian American adoptees and Black Americans are, in this case, used as tools by hegemonic whiteness to maintain the racial status quo. It is therefore crucial for Asian American adoptees and adoptee advocates to recognize circumstances of shared marginalization with other minority groups, which includes both nonwhite adoptees *and* non-adopted minorities, as well as populations around the globe who, though for the most part no longer fighting actually existing colonialism, continue to struggle against soft colonial powers.

This point brings me to perhaps the biggest unresolved question raised by this dissertation: what is to be done about transnational, transracial adoption? Is it possible to envision a version of the practice that is just, that restores power and agency to adoptees and birth mothers, and is somehow freed from the paternal expectations and ideologies of rescue and charity that have informed it for over 70 years? Alternatively, what does care for children look like in a world without adoption? And what is the relationship between that more just practice and how we talk about it? In the first place, the analysis in this dissertation should demonstrate that at the very least, public discourse around adoption must be changed. The justifications, rationales, and ideologies that are expressed in discourse find their way, as we have seen, into the relationships between adoptee and adoptive parent, between adoptee and family, between adoptee and community, profoundly shaping adoptees' identities and relationships with the world, and the people, around them. Adoptive parents and those who are invested in adoption but

are not themselves adoptees should take a step back from participating in adoption narratives, allowing adoptees themselves to take control of the production of discourse. It is an uncomfortable place to be for many adoptees—not least because when we voice the complexities of our experiences, we are usually dismissed—but, as the Black Lives Matter protest of summer 2020 demonstrated, large shifts in public discourse *are* possible.

On a broader scale, however, I am inclined to take an abolitionist perspective on transnational adoption. That is to say, I believe that the focus on whether or not to abolish adoption does not capture the full scale and scope of a just world for adoptees and birth mothers, much in the same way that the sole focus on whether to abolish prisons does not begin to capture the full picture of abolition's reach in its goals.¹⁸ The modern day abolition movement not only points out the inefficacy of incarceration for their stated purpose; it centers “strategies of decarceration,” from the decriminalization of drug use and sex work to focuses on restorative justice over the exclusive use of punitive justice.¹⁹ It attempts to envision and create the tools for a new society that operates without the violent, racist, oppressive logic of prisons. We see inarguable proof in Chapter 4 that transnational adoption as an institution does irreparable harms, creating incommensurable conflict, division, and trauma; if transnational adoption is, in this sense, inefficacious, what form would abolition take? An abolitionist perspective on transnational, transracial adoption would not simply argue for a stop to the practice of adoption, which, under the current state of conditions, would be disastrous for children and families around the globe, particularly in the global South. Rather, an abolitionist perspective guides us to address the structural issues undergirding adoption, a transformation in which could create the

¹⁸ “What is the PIC? What is abolition?”, *Critical Resistance*, accessed June 23, 2023, <https://criticalresistance.org/mission-vision/not-so-common-language/>.

¹⁹ Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003), 20.

conditions of possibility for a more just world. It would mean, for example, not engaging in practices that displace people around the world, from economic deprivation to war. It would mean ensuring that currently under-resourced people, particularly minorities, particularly women, in the U.S. and abroad are supported with the necessities required to raise a child. It would mean establishing compassionate (im)migration policies that welcome, house, and feed migrants fleeing war, violence, or poverty, and the dissolution of punitive, restrictive immigration policies, deeply rooted as they are in xenophobic racism. It would also potentially mean the establishment of communities of care that are capable of, and willing to, care for children whose parents are deceased or no longer able to care for them, arrangements that, according to the desire of the birth parents, retain full transparency and contact between birth parents and the child. This last proposal reclaims models of non-Western forms of adoption that predate the Western form of the practice, with its investment in the formation of the nuclear family, and, perhaps most significantly, its singular custom of stranger adoption, which “[obliterates] the bonds between the child and the biological parents and [changes] the identity of the adoptee.”²⁰ An abolitionist approach to transnational adoption would, therefore, be joined with the decades-long struggle of domestic adoption advocates to establish adoptees’ unrestricted access to their birth records, and for movements that have fought for birth mothers’ rights.²¹

This dissertation, therefore, offers analysis that can build towards a more comprehensive understanding of the systems and structures that have long been in place that ensure that the burden—physical, emotional, social, political—of adoption’s contradictions falls on adoptees and adoptees alone. In so doing, it offers multiple paths forward, addressing adoptee justice on

²⁰ Tobias Hübinette, *Comforting an Orphaned Nation: Representations of International Adoption and Adopted Koreans in Korean Popular Culture* (Stockholm, Sweden: Stockholm University Department of Oriental Languages, 2005), 43.

²¹ See Bastard Nation, accessed June 23, 2023, <http://bastards.org/>.

multiple scales: broader goals of abolition, but also adoptee representation in media and public discourse, a push for a broader understanding of the complexities that inhere for all parties in the practice, and adoptee community building—all of which help to address, in multiple registers, the harms that have been perpetuated by 70+ years of adoption discourse rooted in patriarchal, colonial, xenophobic, racially othering impulses and ideologies. My hope is for this project to contribute to a process of thinking adoption anew in common, and in so doing, thinking a more just society, at home and around the world, in common too. In this light, Trenka’s “commonography of souls” takes on new meaning: as a vision, a hope, for a future in which our shared knowledge of adoption is one element of a fabric of a more just, more equal world.

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