

IMPACTS OF RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION ON TRANSRACIAL ADOPTEE
IDENTITY

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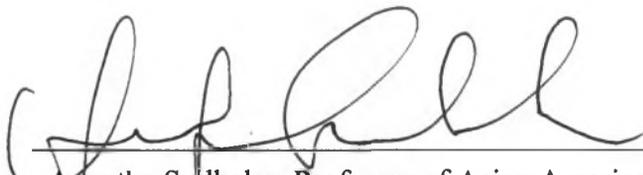
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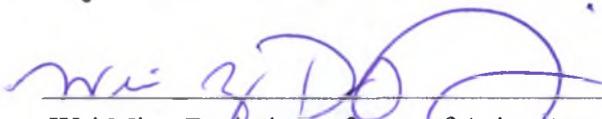
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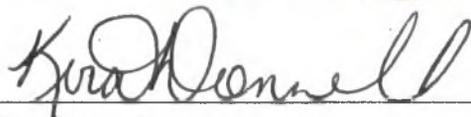
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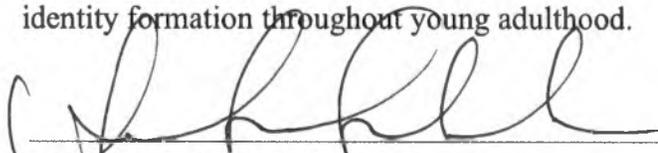


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IMPACTS OF RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION ON TRANSRACIAL ADOPTEE
IDENTITY

Sophie Yan Yun McHenry Navarro
San Francisco, California
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Transracial adoptees, though they often differ in interests, religious affiliation, cultural upbringing, and geographic location, are often united by one shared quality, which is what I call cultural and racial discordance. As individuals with cultural identities that appear mismatched with their racial identities, transracial adoptees occupy a socio-political space that is often perceived by mainstream society as conflicted. This thesis explores the different journeys of six transracial adoptees as they confront these challenges and develop a sense of self. In particular, this thesis also analyzes the paths that these six adoptees, all of whom were raised with religious affiliations, choose with relation to religion or spirituality as adults. Firstly, this thesis discusses the qualities, such as familiarity and support, that encourages adoptees to maintain religious connections, while also exploring reasons, such as ideological disconnect or feelings of restriction, that encourage adoptees to seek community elsewhere. I consider both queer belonging and religion as potential alternative spaces for adoptee identity exploration. In conclusion, this thesis draws attention to Adoption Studies research that centers on transracial adoptee agency and critical self-perception as a way of surviving and thriving. Finally, through the anecdotes and reflections of the six adoptees, I argue that attention must be paid not only to the childhood developmental of transracial adoptees but, also, to their identity formation throughout young adulthood.



Chair, Anantha Sudhakar Professor

I certify that the Abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis.

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Introduction

The increased accessibility of transnational adoption in the United States has changed the demographics of families across the country. Adoption Studies as a discourse has, in turn, reflected the interests of social workers, policy-makers, and psychologists as they study and debate best practices for raising, acculturating, and supporting transnational, transracial adoptees and their families. As waves of transracial adoptees continue to age and progress through academia and higher education, Adoption Studies has experienced a shift that now also incorporates the interests and perspectives of transracial adoptees themselves--not just as the subjects of study, but also as analysts and scholars of adoption, as well.

Transracial adoptees are often more different than they are similar. These differences range from hobbies and interests to geographic upbringing and cultural identities. There is one shared identity, however, that I argue is incredibly important and crucial to recognize. The inherent racial and cultural discordance that all transracial adoptees experience creates distinct challenges in identity development, particularly during childhood and adolescence. As individuals who occupy a social-political space that is often perceived by mainstream society as queer, i.e. having a cultural identity that appears at odds or mismatched from their racial identity, transracial adoptees are privy to an experience that relates to what critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw calls intersectionality. Crenshaw uses the term intersectionality to study the distinct forms of marginalization that individuals, who occupy a confluence of identities, experience. In

particular, Crenshaw uses this theoretical framework to argue that black women experience marginalization that is shaped by and in response to both their race, gender, and overlap of race and gender.¹

In the first half of this thesis, I discuss the intersections of two other dimensions of identity among transracial adoptees: culture, and race. This exploration seeks to illuminate, complicate, and recognize that the combination of racial and cultural identities with which Asian transracial adoptees are raised produces distinct forms of marginalization and subsequent challenges related to identity development. I add to conversations pioneered by transracial adoptees, draw on Queer Studies, and apply Critical Race Theory to speculate on the patterns with which transracial adoptees develop their respective identities. I argue that it is precisely due to this inherent intersectionality of racial and cultural discordance that transracial adoptees must develop strategies to cope with tension instigated by interactions with family, friends, or other community members. Furthermore, through interviews with six young adult Chinese and Korean adoptees, I emphasize the potential for critical self-awareness that transracial adoptees can and do develop. I challenge traditional Adoption Studies that prioritize the familial relationships between transracial adoptees and chosen families; instead, I draw on queer theorist Anee Carrillo Rowe's concept of radical belonging to shift the analysis of transracial identity toward other impactful communities aside from merely biological, familial ones. In these explorations of identity development, belonging, and community, I

¹ Crenshaw, Kimberle Williams. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. (Women of Color at the Center: Selections from the Third National Conference on Women of Color and the Law)." *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241.

contrast the respective experiences of transracial adoptees. I group my interviewees into two subgroups: those who have maintained connections with religious communities into adulthood and those who rejected religious communities as adults. Through both these subgroups, I acknowledge both queer belonging and religion as potential spaces of identity exploration for transracial adoptees.

Autocritique

As a transracial adoptee who was raised in a Jewish community, I first became aware of the coexistence and inherent, unapologetic combination of my racial and cultural identities when I left home for college. After spending my first nine years of school in a Chinese American elementary and middle school and the next four in a private Jewish high school, I finally found myself among a community of peers who represented an amalgamation and array of identities. Living on my own in a new city, I began to experience what being me, just me, without the presence or buffering of my parents, really felt like. As a fairly social, affirmation-seeking youth, I was caught off guard by how disconnected I felt from not only other Chinese American and Chinese students but Jewish students as well. Through this discomfort, I reflected on who I had been in each of my previous institutions, recognizing each stage by distinct, defining qualities. I began to see myself as a performer, internalizing social and cultural contexts and configuring myself in accordance with my greatest concerns at each developmental stage.

I remember being loud and boisterous in my Chinese immersion middle school, blocking hallways, laughing-- cackling alongside my other friends, aware but unbothered

by what I was sure my teachers and other peers perceived as rowdy and improper behavior. I wanted to have fun; I wanted to make my friends laugh; I wanted to love life. In my freshman year at a private Jewish high school, I think I had on average, about two conversations a week. I was in a new environment with different rules, and suddenly, I was one of maybe four other people of color in my school. I spent the next four years learning how to perform as the token Asian woman so that my community would both think highly of me, yet not feel burdened by their own racial assumptions and stereotypes. I became the exception, the person they quietly listened to and then magically forgot was Asian until they looked at my face. I gave informal, weekend tours of Chinatown and founded an Asian Appreciation Club where we received budgeting from the school to buy supplies and teach students to make spring rolls. I graduated high school feeling like an expert at playing the game of assimilation, I knew how to fit in with a White crowd without making anyone uncomfortable.

When I got college, a private liberal arts institution in the Midwest, I felt lost and confused. My anxiety and internalized shame, guilt, and pain took years to process because it meant acknowledging that toxicity of specifically my high school community and the fundamental confidence and pride in self that I severely lacked. By senior year, most of my friends were neither Chinese American nor Jewish. I stumbled through courses about Asian American history and friendships with Queer Theory and Critical Theory majors. For the first time, I began unapologetically identifying as a woman of color. I felt nuanced in my political ideology and ready to connect with and find my community. A year after graduating, however, I found myself back in San Francisco. I

decided to apply and then enroll in the Asian American Studies Program at San Francisco State University to embrace an opportunity to have what I anticipated to be an academically-guided two-year “therapy.”

I wanted to understand what it meant to be an Asian American transracial adoptee not just as an individual, but as an individual within a greater political, historical, and social context. Remarkably, ten months into my program, I was offered a job at my old high school and decided to revisit that part of my life. Whether it was through a desire to prove to myself that I had grown, or because I still harbored the need for affirmation and validation, I took the job and was immediately thrust into an internal debate. I felt more aware of my positionality because I refused to fragment myself. I joined a committee of adults in the school who met monthly to discuss equity within our community. Equipped with the vocabulary and platform to address issues of race and identity, I took initiative and leveraged my power and voice to bring about more awareness of racial inequities.

The topic of my research developed as I grappled with understanding why I had returned to my high school community and how I was joining that same homogenous community as an underrepresented woman of color, though with a slightly enhanced critical awareness than my teenage self. The combination of being in an Asian American Studies graduate program as well as being an administrator at my former high school reminded me of the fractures I had felt between my middle and high school years. The confusion that I felt between reconnecting with a formerly toxic childhood community that happened to be religious, and embracing the challenge of academic-led self-growth, fostered a curiosity that eventually led to this thesis. I wondered if my attraction to this

religious community was inevitable and what that inevitability stemmed from. Was it the community? Or ideology?

In this thesis, I combine this curiosity and my positionality as a transracial adoptee who grew up affiliated with religious communities. In the chapters that follow, I explore and discuss the patterns that other transnational adoptees incorporate into their lives, to better negotiate their identity and belonging in relation to religious communities. Heavily influenced by an Ethnic Studies point of entry and Queer Theory paradigm, my positionality within the transracial transnational adoption community guides the subjectivity of my analyses and critiques, not as an outsider looking in, but rather as a member of the demographic that I am studying.

I began this research to better understand my own ponderings of belonging: am I forever doomed to feel cultural and racial dissonance? My ethnographic research is an attempt to crowdsource ideas, reflections, and journeys of other transracial, transnational adoptees. I wonder if other transracial adoptees raised in religious communities feel this inescapable connection to whiteness not only through kinship, or familial belonging but also from the white religious communities they were and potentially are a part of? Thus, I very much ground this research within my own journey of belonging as a transracial, transnational, Chinese-Jewish-American woman of color straddling both communities that raised me and communities where I found myself. This research is motivated by curiosity, trauma, confusion, and hope. I acknowledge and celebrate other transracial adoptees because we as a diasporic community are united in our genesis. As individuals

plucked from our birth country and scattered throughout the world, we are knowledge producers and trailblazers.

Chapter One: Methodology and Literature Review

Research Aim and Question

The purpose of this research is rooted in self-exploration. As a recent four-year college graduate and transracial adoptee, I've found myself in a distinct position of both being acutely aware of traumas from my past, and feeling drawn back to some of those very communities where I experienced trauma: my Jewish community. Compounded by the unique experience of being an Asian woman adoptee, my research asks the question: For transracial adoptees raised with religious affiliations, what is it that compels some, as adults, to reject their religious communities, while others return to or maintain their connection? Grounded in a methodology of autocritique, and substantiated by interviews with participants, this research draws from Anthropological methodologies, Ethnic Studies, Asian American Studies and Queer Studies paradigms. Few Adoption Studies discourses explore the relationship that transracial adoptees maintain or renounce with respect to non-familial communities; this thesis contextualizes transracial adoptee identity through their relationships with various other communities both religious and nonreligious.

Through semi-structured, open-ended interview questions, this research focuses on the positionality of the participants by using qualitative data. Specifically, I explore how six transracial adoptees, with a variety of relationships to religious communities, navigate their belonging among religious or secular communities as adults. The anticipated significance of this research is to contribute to the growing scholarship

centered on and produced by transracial adoptees as a part of a greater shift in discourse away from a narrative in which adoptees lack agency.

My research population is comprised of transracial and transnational adoptees. Four of my interviewees were mid-twenty-year-old Chinese adoptees, Dolores, Erica, Sharon, and Tracey, while the other two were mid-twenty to early thirty-year-old Korean adoptees, Frances and Michael. All six of my interviewees were raised in the United States by white parents. During their childhood, all of my interviewees had some involvement with religious communities. A majority of my participants are individuals whom I met either through the adoption group Families with Children from China, through an adoption collective at my undergraduate institution, or through the Alliance for the Study of Adoption and Culture 2018 conference. I have kept the identities of each of my interviewees anonymous by using pseudonyms in this paper.

Research Method and Tool

My research relies on six semi-structured open-ended interviews. Participants were invited to join 45-minute to an hour long one-on-one sessions using an online platform called Zoom. Through Zoom, I was able to record the audio and later use a website called Temi to convert the audio transcript into a typed transcript. Following this, I listened to the audio as I read the transcript, which allowed me to correct any errors from the automated transcription. I relied on a list of questions that I separated into four categories: childhood community; adult community; adoption, childhood, and family; and adoption, adulthood, and family.

While reading through the transcripts, I looked for participants' reflections regarding their decision to be a part of or reject certain communities, as well as anecdotes of their experiences in religious communities growing up. I looked for similarities among participants who recalled having positive experiences in religious communities to better understand what circumstances and what ways of belonging within those communities sustained their connections. Conversely, I compared narratives of individuals who chose to discontinue their participation in non-religious communities and looked for patterns that reflected how religious experiences inform community building within non-religious communities.

Capturing and expressing data through the words of transracial adoptees is paramount. I am interested in the diction, anecdotes, and feelings that participants express in their answers. As a transracial adoptee, I am drawn to the words of other transnational adoptees. There is a strong need to contribute to a movement wherein the transracial adoptees are centered not as the object of research, but rather as active agents in the knowledge production process.

As Serie McDougal discusses in his *Research Methods in Africana Studies* ethnography provides a more open-ended format to “produce data in the form of words, descriptions, and images.”² This approach, further discussed by Monette, Sullivan, and DeJong allows researchers to capture “the meaning people attach to their lives” in a way that quantitative methods cannot.³ Focusing on qualitative ethnographic data is

² McDougal, Serie. *Research Methods in Africana Studies*. *Black Studies & Critical Thinking*; v. 64. 2014. 100

³ *Ibid.*, 100

particularly appropriate here because my research emphasizes subjectivity through explorations of participant self-awareness and reflection. Furthermore, the ethnographic method protects the integrity of participant reflection, as best possible, and creates a clear distinction between the evidence and the analysis of the researcher. Transparency is particularly important as I place the reflections of my participants in conversation with my own reflections and experiences.

Of course, there are both benefits and drawbacks to ethnographic interviewing. The goal of this thesis is to disrupt the victim-centric narrative of transracial adoptees and emphasize the influence and value of communities, beyond that of family, on the development and growth of adoptee identity. Whereas surveys allow researchers to poll, collect, and analyze data from hundreds or even thousands of subjects systematically, ethnographies are much more limited in scope. With small sample sizes, data can also be strongly influenced by biases within the sample pool. By exploring the journeys of six fellow transracial adoptees, I invite other scholars to continue to critique and celebrate the mechanisms and strategies through which transracial adoptees embody their racial and cultural discordance. Through this, I outline and substantiate theoretical identity development models that take into consideration the value of other forms of kinship in addition to familial bonds during childhood.

Quantitative surveys are wholly insufficient for capturing the reflections of interviewees in studies aiming to highlight personal reflection. The structure of open-ended questions also allows for more variability of answers. Instead of quantitative measurements, which risk forcing subjects to choose between an irrelevant and less

relevant answer, interviewees have the space to construct their own expressions which can lead to rich, nuanced and more genuine responses. Qualitative data collected from each interview, however, can also be difficult to connect and analyze uniformly. My relationship and rapport with each participant vary from childhood best friend to academic-conference colleague, for this reason, the flow of conversation and subsequent breadth and depth appear more variable. Semi-structured interviews allow for flexibility but may also differ more noticeably from a more structured format, which places more restrictions on how interviewees reflect and respond to questions. It is through this exploratory ethnographic methodology that I intend to research the contribution or influence that religious upbringings have on the experiences of belonging that transracial adoptees carry with them. A detailed list of the interview questions can be found in the appendix.

Because my research is a comparative analysis of how transracial adoptees in secular and religious upbringings engage in belonging, it is important to have a section that is focused on the current and past role of religion. I ask each interviewee to reflect on both their personal relationship with faith, as well as their family's relationship to faith. I also ask my interviewees to reflect on and share stories from their childhood, and then to share their current reflections regarding that same subject. Some of my questions are explicit, others less so. As much as possible, I tried to word them using open-ended language in a way that encourages my interviewees to tell stories rather than simply recount their self-reflective analysis. With regards to explorations of childhood memories, I hoped to elicit storytelling that, as best as possible, reflects the memories

each interviewee had of their reactions as a child rather than their adult reflections of that experience.

I have broken my questions down into four domains (all of which arguably overlap). The community section focuses on encouraging the interviewee to reflect on the communities of which they are apart. Communities bring people together and unite folks through shared values or identities, and across difference. Through these questions, I prompt each of my interviewees to reflect on their different identities and values. These questions are largely descriptive and help set a foundation for more comparative questions that I address in the final section.

Finally, I ask my participants questions about adoption and family that specifically focus on how my interviewees seek out and engage in “belonging” or support with their friends and communities. While I am tempted to ask straight-forward questions, such as “who do you go to when you are grappling with problems related to race or adoption,” I do not want to assume that my interviewees experience that trauma or pain just because I do. Instead, I return to the communities mentioned in the first section. Here I ask questions or ask for stories that explore which people and communities my interviewee goes to when seeking different kinds of support. Through these questions and stories, I hope to learn more about the tacit boundaries (“dos” and “don’ts”) of the different communities my interviewee identifies with. Through exploring these shifting ways of belonging, I hope to gain insight into how the interviewee embodies belonging and intersectionality.

Conceptualization and Operationalization

The major concepts from which I comprehend and analyze my findings are kinship and belonging. The definitions of and the relationship between the two have been discussed by queer feminist scholars such as Judith Butler and Aimee Carrillo Rowe. The term “belonging,” is colloquially understood as an emotional state, of feeling comfortable or happy in a situation or within a community or group. However, this term has been redefined by Aimee Carrillo Rowe through a reverse interpellation, becomes not just a feeling but a verb, not passive but active.⁴ Belonging signifies the ways in which “we are always already being hailed by our various (be)longings from the moment of our birth, from those moments well before our births: moments of conquest and settlement, moments of miscegenation and anti-miscegenation, of mixing and blending and resistance.”⁵ Rowe’s concept of belonging explores the politics of relation “with whom we build our affective ties.”⁶ Thus narratives of belonging become not static, but multifaceted, malleable, even contradictory “in terms of the norms they produce, the politics that drive them, the conditions for loving they request, or demand.”⁷ Rowe’s process of belonging demands an examination “between self and community, between community and theory, between theory and justice,” it’s about “making the familiar strange, of revisiting home to unearth what is at stake in its making.”⁸ Thus there is an emphasis on interrogating one’s own identity and political ideology with where they find

⁴ Rowe, Aimee Carrillo. "Be Longing: Toward a Feminist Politics of Relation." *NWSA Journal* 17, no. 2 (2005): 15-46.

⁵ Ibid., 16

⁶ Ibid., 16

⁷ Ibid., 18

⁸ Ibid., 16

community. In the case of my thesis, I analyze my interviewees' identities, as transracial adoptees raised with religious affiliations, with their preferred communities to unearth and discuss those ideologies.

Belonging is an important indicator of relationships because it relates directly to the ways in which people find community in different spaces. Carrillo Rowe highlights the importance of not just with whom we find belonging, but also how the relationship of that belonging is established, nourished, and sustained. Transracial adoptees often find themselves in different kinds of communities, whether they are with their family, a religious community, friends at school, or other organizations. Often, each group fosters different types of relationships that reflect various iterations of an adoptee's identity. I interviewed my transracial adoptee participants with the hopes of understanding the ways in which they experience belonging. Furthermore, as adults, I seek to understand how those childhood experiences informed their community-building as adults. What is it about the religious communities that my participants were a part of during their childhood that encouraged them to continue that belonging or reject it? And how do those decisions reflect values, principles, and ethics?

The other major term, kinship, colloquially, is narrowly defined as signifying blood relations. Judith Butler redefines "kinship" as "a set of practices that institutes relationships of various kinds which negotiate the reproduction of life and the demands of death."⁹ Accordingly, Butler defines kinship practices as those that "emerge to address fundamental forms of human dependency, which may include birth, child-rearing,

⁹ Butler, Judith, "Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?" *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 13, no. 1 (2002): 14

relations of emotional dependency and support, generational ties, illness, dying, and death (to name a few).”¹⁰ Though stemming from theory challenging heterosexual kinship, the queerness of non-heteronormative family structures applies to transracial adoptee experiences of adoption and transracial identity. In this thesis, I consider transracial adoptees as experiencing queerness because they co-create non-biologically defined families. As adults, they continue this form of queering kinship as they embrace self-determinism and seek kinship among communities outside of their nuclear families.

Kinship, redefined, is relevant not only in contextualizing my study but also in the interpretation of data collected in my research. Though my interviewees rarely use the word, “kinship” in their story-telling, the roles of emotional support and dependency that Butler describes, very much reflect the roles that each of my interviewees’ communities occupy. In the same way that we discuss kinship as essential to the human experience, the underlying assertion that my thesis rests upon is that community, as a form of kinship, is also essential. Therefore Adoption Studies scholars and advocates should consider understanding the ways that transracial adoptees connect with and belong in communities just as is understanding the connection of transracial adoptees to their chosen families.

When biology no longer necessitates kinship, and belonging is both an affect and effect, the analysis of an individual’s belonging influences the way one relates to communities rather than merely how biology manifests in relationships. Kinship and belonging are both concepts experienced colloquially by transracial adoptees. Rowe’s and Butler’s redefinitions outline systems of analysis that recognize the subjectivity of

¹⁰ Ibid., 15

community-building and community-sustaining (kinship), as well as the subjectivity of relating to, connecting with, and living among others (belonging).

These integral concepts reinforce the theoretical framework through which I interpret, contrast, and explore the anecdotes and reflections gathered from my research. Concurrently, this framework also unveils some ways that transracial adoptees choose to occupy different spaces connect with different folks and what values they prioritize in doing so. The indicators of this concept are most accessible through qualitative anecdotes, particularly because the values and relationship dynamics that individuals prefer or desire in their connections are completely subjective.

In exploring and outlining what belonging might look like for an adoptee, I first turn to constructivist queer theorists who focus on the power and empowerment of reimagining or reasserting the scopes of kinship and belonging. These theorists allow for critical awareness and employ a more disruptive and inclusive approach to kinship and belonging that acknowledges and celebrates agency rather than victimhood. In her re-imagining of kinship, Elizabeth Freeman explores the historical policies that reinforced state-recognized family structures as natural formations and redefines kinship as the process that bodies both through physical and emotional attachment are “created, transformed, and sustained over time.”¹¹ Kinship, as a Western paradigm, is a sexualized concept that relies on the building of alliances among people through procreation, or the “primal need to propagate.”¹² When these repetitions of family are “governed by a norm,

¹¹ Freeman, Elizabeth. "Queer Belongings: Kinship Theory and Queer Theory." In *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies*, Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated. 298

¹² *Ibid.*, 297-300

other possibilities are literally unthinkable and impossible,” the reimagining of the hegemonic kinship narrative becomes a challenging practice.¹³ How do we represent the unthinkable? Freeman, following Judith Butler, argues that we must redefine kinship through “corporeal dependency,” through the ways that bodies can become vulnerable and dependent on one another, and think of it less as a way of “being” and more as a way of “doing.”¹⁴

Rowe continues the discussion on reimagining belonging through a critique of third world, anti-racist feminists, and cultural studies, and unveils the assumptions and conditions under which individuals are allowed to belong. Shifting away from a politics of location to politics of relation, Rowe suggests we focus on a belonging that encourages and enables us to “be accountable for who we are (becoming, as a function of belonging), and the collective conditions out of which our agency, experience, and consciousness emerge.”¹⁵ Emphasizing the interplay between location and belonging, Rowe traces whiteness and heterosexual coupling to argue that we must engage in “deep critical reflection” in order to make visible the “political conditions of belonging,” which are often closely connected with power.¹⁶

Instead of experiencing a belonging conditional to complacency within power structures, Rowe introduces differential belonging as an alternative.¹⁷ Differential belonging creates a space for one to experience belonging while resisting hegemonic

¹³ Ibid., 297

¹⁴ Ibid., 305

¹⁵ Rowe, *NSWA Journal*, 15

¹⁶ Rowe, *NWSA Journal*, 16

¹⁷ Ibid., 33

powers by allowing for the movement between different types of belonging dependent on the given situation.¹⁸ Rowe translates postcolonial feminism theorist Chela Sandoval's four modes of consciousness and outlines five ways of belonging: assimilationist (influenced by the desire to be recognized as equal or the same by those in power), revolutionary (recognition of differences between people as the "foundation of humanity"), supremacist (the uplifting of differences and consequential feeling of being better), separatist (acknowledgment of and respect for difference and preference to connect with those "like us"), and differential.¹⁹

It is through a dynamic belonging that one can move fluidly between multiple modes; containment to one single mode of belonging discourages awareness and critical thought.²⁰ It is through differential belonging that we can "reckon with the ways in which we are oppressed and privileged so that we may place ourselves where we can have an impact."²¹ While Rowe focuses on new possibilities for existence, Butler addresses the conundrum of achieving or experiencing kinship: either reject state legitimacy (marriage) and suffer disenfranchisement or pursue state recognition and carry the burden of complicity in systematic oppression.²² This "double-edged sword" articulates the challenge of feeling forced to choose between complacency or psychological trauma that those presented with conditional privilege such as Asian Americans adoptees may encounter.²³

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 33

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 33-34

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 34

²¹ *Ibid.*, 35

²² Butler, *Differences*, 25

²³ *Ibid.*, 28

Butler refuses to function within the legitimate-illegitimate binary and rejects the prescribed imaginative normalcy. Thus, the reimagining of kinship, which requires acknowledging how the adoptee has already been placed into a position of heteronormative complicity, is integral to the reimagining and reclamation of transnational adoptee belonging. Yet these theoretical solutions fail to offer emotional resolve to the psychological trauma of adoption; while they may hold relevance to techniques through which individuals navigate community and power systems in a meaningful and radical way, the examples and anecdotes provided do not align with adoptee-specific experiences. The privilege of self-awareness assumes identities and intersections of identities occupy within society with certainty. It is my hope that the experiences and narratives of transracial adoptees, in navigating their journeys, can contribute to this greater discourse, disrupting the insidious normalcy of hegemony and challenging society to be more inclusive and more critical.

Positionality

As a person who falls within the demographic of my research participants, and because my research originates from my personal reflections, I include a section of autocritique. This practice is an extension of positionality-exploration. In this section, I discuss my identity and perspective as they relate to my research analysis and accompanying bias. I also discuss why I include my narrative as a part of this knowledge production. The motivation and curiosity of my research originate from my own experiences of community and subjectivity.

The perspective of my research is both that of a subjective insider and also that of an outsider, because, to an extent, we will always be outsiders to the narratives of others. In education, people often ask, “do you want to be a window or a mirror?” I see myself as both a mirror and a window; the intended audience of my research is primarily other transracial adoptees. I view this research as an opportunity to dive into the experiences of other transracial adoptees as they navigate community, belonging, and adulthood. Yet, I also hope this research contributes to mainstream Adoption Studies, a discourse inundated with non-adoptee explorations.

Finally, the politics of my research is unapologetically situated in positionality rather than neutrality. Not only do I reject the idea of objectivity or neutrality, but I believe that any claims to apolitical research are dubious at best and often reflect a lack of critical awareness and transparency. Thus, as a politically-positioned researcher, I acknowledge the importance of being aware of my positionality as well as the limitations of my own perspectives. As discussed briefly in my introduction, the origin of my thesis stems from questioning and critiquing my own life decisions as I navigate a part of my life where the tension between my childhood religious community and adult, chosen, non-religious communities are particularly salient. Out of this curiosity is a particular interest in analyzing what personal values are reflected by individuals when they return to reject or maintain ties with specific communities and how those decisions inform expressions of and understandings of self.

Thus, while I do hope that my research can be used in collaboration with Adoption Studies focused on improving policy, services, and education that supports the

development and vitality of transracial adoptees, its primary function is to take a deeper dive into the coping strategies of people who have potentially found themselves in similar situations as myself. My analysis and critique of these narratives, then, very much reflect my own personal interest, as I grapple with my own identity, belonging, and community. While someone with a different perspective could have performed this research and analysis differently, the strength in my positionality is that my analysis incorporates the very critical self-awareness that I trace among my interviewees. And therein lies the power of autocritiques.

Literature Review Introduction

This literature review explores the different ways in which adoption and adoptee belonging have been researched and written about by non-adoptee scholars. Recently, adoptee scholars such as Jennifer Kwon Dobbs²⁴ and Jenny Heijun Wills²⁵ have begun to bridge the gap between subject and agent through autocritical scholarship on radical kinship. In this thesis, however, I focus on social work scholarship, which directly informs popular narratives of adoptee identity development, but essentializes the importance of the adoptee and parental relationship in the health and wellness of adoptees. I do this in order to emphasize the lack of focus, within this body of scholarship, on other relationships through which transracial adoptees are sustained. Many contemporary scholars problematize transnational adoption and the traditional narratives of rescue as the perpetuation of global systems of power and oppression. Some

²⁴ Dobbs, Jennifer Kwon. *Interrogation Room*. Buffalo, NY: White Pine Press, 2018.

²⁵ Wills, Jenny Heijun. "Asian Adoption in Crime Novels by Don LEE and Bharati Mukherjee: Country of Origin and Leave it to Me." *Adoption and Culture*, 5 (2017): 62-86

scholars argue that this global migration reinforces normative family structures through a legacy of conditional privileges, which include citizenship and racial triangulation.

Finally, others center their research on the transracial adoptee themselves and propose an indefinite emotional trauma or burden with which transracial adoptees inevitably must live.

These three approaches to critiquing transracial adoption, which I have listed under narrative of rescue, pressures of legitimacy, and legacy of self, reflect different units of analysis including country, family, and adoptee. These approaches, which correspond with the following subsections problematize transracial adoption. All three conversations fall short in their political contexts, as they employ the adoptee as an analytical tool rather than addressing the intersectionalities of adoptees as individuals.

Narrative of Rescue

Popular culture often depicts the decision of a family to adopt transnationally as an individual choice rather than a political strategy to obtain a nuclear family because doing so requires an acknowledgment that adoption occurs within a system of global migration. Critical scholarship, however, traces the political and cultural origins of transracial adoption and often explores the systems of power and privilege, such as U.S. militarism, that are perpetuated by transnational adoption.

Through cultural analysis, Christina Klein traces the relationship between U.S. foreign policy, expansion of power into Asia 1945-1961, and the reproduction of American representations of Asia in popular culture. This overview of the historical-political events that shaped U.S. depictions of Asians critiques transnational

adoption as a phenomenon that stems from U.S. military involvement overseas which began as a means of social control.²⁶ A different cultural analysis, by Laura Briggs explores the genealogy of the images of poverty popularised by photojournalism and their roles in “mobilizing ideologies of ‘rescue’ while pointing away from addressing cause.”²⁷ This imagery of children of color as victims with mothers who were too impoverished to care for their own, fueled a paradigm of rescue without unveiling the systemic inequities from which these images arose.

Focusing on China and the U.S., Klein politicizes a seemingly individual act (of adopting a child), within the movements of a greater hegemonic agenda. Transnational adoption from China first began during the Sino-Japanese War. Through this movement of children, the U.S. was able to leverage an alliance with China, encouraging the reproduction of a Christian, democratic industry that mirrored the U.S.²⁸ Furthermore, transnational adoptees were often given to the adoptive family in exchange for a monetary donation which reinforced economic dependency between the biological and adoptive countries.²⁹ Transnational adoption thus became a means for strengthened U.S. international powers; it established a continual relationship between the U.S. and China such that the white, privileged American parents/nation provided salvation for the infantilized racialized others.³⁰ The rhetoric of white parenthood coupled with non-white

²⁶ Klein, Christina. “The Social Practice and Meanings of Adoption.” *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961*. Berkeley: University of California Press, (2003) 133-141.

²⁷ Briggs, Laura. “Mother, Child, Race, Nation: The Visual Iconography of Rescue and the Politics of Transnational and Transracial Adoption.” *Gender & History* 15, no. 2 (2003): 180

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 138

²⁹ Eng, David L. “Transnational Adoption and Queer Diasporas.” *Social Text* 21, no. 3 (2003): 1-37.

³⁰ Klein, *Cold War*, 138

children evoked feelings of parental obligation and added momentum and popularity to this deceptively altruistic decision.³¹

Research and analysis performed by David Eng further contextualizes transnational adoption within “pre- and post-World War II histories of imperialism, immigration, racialized exploitation, and gendered commodification,” and draws on the histories of anti-Asian sentiments.³² Evident through the numerous acts barring Asians from naturalization and citizenship, Eng’s critique, in particular, considers the transnational adoption of an Asian baby girl as an ultimate form of privileged citizenship.³³ In exchange for this privilege, the transnational adoptee engages in an “ideological labor” through a triangulation of “the domestic landscape of black-white race relations.”³⁴ This ideology is founded on the racialized and gendered assumptions that mainstream society can more easily envision the incorporation of Asian girls into white, heteronormative families than black children.³⁵ The combination of “clean break” policies of transnational adoption also depict the transnational adoptee as more rescuable and more valuable than domestic, often black children.³⁶ The duality of both the racialization of gender and gendered organization of the race, therefore necessitates a political exploration of the privacy of family structures, as the Asian transnational adoptee daughter is positioned to uphold white nuclear family structures and values.³⁷

³¹ Klein, *Cold War*, 138; Briggs, *Gender & History*, 184

³² Eng, *Social Text*, 1-37

³³ *Ibid.*, 9-11

³⁴ Eng, *Social Text*, 11; Dorow, Sara. "Racialized Choices: Chinese Adoption and the 'White Noise' of Blackness." *Critical Sociology* 32, no. 2-3 (2006): 358

³⁵ Eng, *Social Text*, 12

³⁶ Dorow, *Critical Sociology*, 364

³⁷ Eng, *Social Text*, 11

Governments often offer transnational adoptees a streamlined journey toward “full and robust citizenship.”³⁸ The common narrative of the adoptee, as a child in need of rescue, has obscured more violent and traumatic domestic and global systems of power, specifically in the case of naturalization and “legitimate” versus “illegitimate” people. Thus, transnational adoptees are positioned as wedges and, as such, experience conditional privilege.

Pressures of Legitimacy

As mentioned previously, the privilege of robust citizenship, which transnational adoptees are granted upon their integration into their families does not come without its caveats. Exploring these vestiges, however, requires an examination of how the public sphere permeates into and is upheld by the private sphere. The family, though colloquially referred to as private, is both influenced by and reinforces status quo, or government politics.

Contemporary representations of transracial adoption now include homosexual couples smiling jubilantly with their child of color. Transnational, transracial adoption has become a form of social currency, allowing for more creative reproductions of normative family structures.³⁹ Queer scholars such as Judith Butler, David Eng, and Jasbir Puar analyze the relationship between the expansion of homonormativity, enabled by adoption and greater systems of inequity. The role that transnational adoptions play in straddling both public and private sphere invokes biopolitics and contextualizes

³⁸ Ibid., 5

³⁹ Eng, *Social Text*, 1-37; Puar, Jasbir K. “the sexuality of terrorism.” *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer times*. Next Wave (Duke University Press). Durham: Duke University Press, 2007. 1-78.; Butler, *Differences*, 14-29.

transnational adoption within a greater critique of the “manifold trajectories of racialization and un-nationalization of sexual others that foster the conditions of possibility for...violent relegation to death”.⁴⁰

The politicization of nuclear families, in particular, is explored by Butler in a response to a French critique of U.S. recognition of “nonheterosexual unions” as an “‘Americanization’ of kinship relations.”⁴¹ Butler responds to this claim not by defending “Americanization” but rather through problematizes the dichotomy of legitimate and illegitimate forms of kinship and argues that in U.S. culture, kinship is limited to very specific, recognizable family formations.⁴² Centering the political movement of gay marriage on obtaining state recognition, Butler argues, extends the rights of privilege via state recognition without disrupting power dynamics, and conflates family with kinship, rendering invisible the forms of kinship that fall outside of that dichotomy.⁴³ Homonormativity, as it is described by Eng, thus allows elite queers, through transnational adoption, to achieve social respectability through an “unexamined belief in traditional ideals of the nuclear family” and perpetuation of a new normativity.⁴⁴

Stemming from homonormativity is what Puar calls homonationalism, or the homonormative nationalism some elite queers espouse by upholding state agendas. Puar’s lens contextualizes this emergence within the context of 9/11 and draws from Chow’s concept of the “white liberal alibi” to demonstrate how queer elites function

⁴⁰ Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 10

⁴¹ Butler, *Differences*, 25

⁴² Butler, *Differences*, 14

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 18

⁴⁴ Eng, *Social Text*, 8

within the U.S. political landscape and allow for the “homophobic demonization of others”.⁴⁵ These elite, white, affluent, cis-, exceptional queer folks provide the state with an alibi of inclusiveness which then allows for a discourse villainizing terrorists based on failed sexuality; homonormativity permits the inclusion of some with the simultaneous exclusion of others.⁴⁶ The homonational community then refers to the group of queer white elites who partake in an economy driven by patriotic symbolism and performance that ensures state privileges.⁴⁷ Furthermore, Puar states, in agreement with Eng, that transnational adoption which has enabled “new modes of assembling homosexual kinship norms” has also contributed to the queer tourism industry and constructed an “emerging consumer niche”: white queers, most specifically, lesbians.⁴⁸

Puar acknowledges that transnational adoption grants elite queers access to homonormative families and the subsequent state privileges, enticing them into complicity in an oppressive system, which materializes as “the war on terror” or the dehumanization of “terrorists.”⁴⁹ By appealing to otherwise heteronormative standards, the white queer joins the white elite to defend U.S. exceptionalism. Puar’s work provides yet another lens through which the situating of the transnational adoptee strategically upholds the U.S. nation’s “the war of terror” and policing of race, gender, and sexuality. As transnational adoptees are placed within U.S. families, they immediately inherit expectations that they will fulfill the white nuclear family, allowing queer elites to gain

⁴⁵ Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 1-78.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 39

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 38

⁴⁸ Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 30

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 38

full state privileges and obscure the inhumane U.S. “war on terror” agenda. While this scholarship that explores the social, political, and economic landscapes of the U.S. is helpful for understanding the global politics of transnational adoption, it tends to refer to the roles that transnational adoptees play in state-based power dynamics, rather than addressing specifically the conditions of transnational adoptee belonging. These scholars use individuals as proxies for nations and situate adoption as a product of problematic cultural trends without exploring the adoptee as a stakeholder in the situation. The question that follows is how do transnational adoptees, as legacies and products of these systems, experience and grapple with these affective traumas?

Legacy of Self

Literature specific to the transnational adoptee and belonging generally focuses on the points of contradiction within the greater political and social contexts of transnational adoption. Through an exploration of Korean adoptee identity development, Hübinette draws on the concept of a “third space” first introduced by Homi Bhaba, “where culture has no unity, purity or fixity, and where primordial notions of race and nation have been replaced by a floating and hybrid existence.”⁵⁰ While the “third space” paradigm is often used to understand mixed-race individuals, it can also be applied to transnational adoptees, whose experiences differ as they are often monocultural rather than bicultural.⁵¹

Hübinette’s intervention challenges the humanitarian narrative referenced by Klein, wherein adoption is actualized through anti-racist, “colorblind” values,

⁵⁰ Hübinette, Tobias. "Adopted Koreans and the Development of Identity in the "Third Space"." *Adoption & Fostering: Quarterly Journal* 28, no. 1 (2004): 16-24.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 22

emphasizing instead that transnational adoptees, in fact, are different and experience trauma unique to them. The journey of identity exploration for transnational adoptees is characterized by their struggle navigating “third space,” which is most notably, the discordance between race and culture.⁵² Building off of the notion of the transnational diaspora which “located itself in the psycho-social space between the homeland and the host country to create room for identities and practice which transcend borders,” Hübinette ultimately illustrates how transnational adoptees, through grappling with their own identities, transgress and challenge identity and nation-based binaries.⁵³

Other scholars researching adoptee identity have also noted the internal conflict that transracial adoptees face as they straddle multiple identity groups.⁵⁴ In an analysis of the creation of a “gift child,” Yngvesson continues Klein’s economic analysis of transnational adoption markets and focuses on the exclusive belonging within transnational adoption that emerges from this global market economy, highlighting the tension between the adoptee as a product of both commodity thinking and humanitarian narratives.⁵⁵ The economic exchange or transaction between biological and adoptive families is narrated with humanistic values, as the adoptee is both given as “a gift of love, a ritual of altruism” and becomes “an economic resource that has been contractually alienated from one owner so it can be attached to another.”⁵⁶ Both Yngvesson and

⁵² Ibid., 22

⁵³ Ibid., 23

⁵⁴ Reynolds, Jason, Joseph Ponterotto, and Christina Lecker. "Displacement, Identity, and Belonging for Ibyangin: The Personal Journey of Transracial Korean-Born Adoptees." *The Qualitative Report* 21, no. 2 (2016): 240-241; Yngvesson, Barbara. "Placing the "Gift Child" in Transnational Adoption." *Law and Society Review* 36, no. 2 (2002): 228

⁵⁵ Yngvesson, *Law and Society*, 227

⁵⁶ Ibid., 235

Hübinette are careful to address the hierarchy reflected in these movements of children. Yngvesson reinforces this established dependency, however, by unpacking adoption policies and regulations, which emphasize the severing, or erasure, of bonds between adoptee and birth country, ensuring a complete transition from belonging of one country or family to another.⁵⁷

Directed by commodity thinking, this process orients belonging within the ownership of an individual by society, for fear of the creation of an “alienated subject.”⁵⁸ Thus adoption laws and narratives are constructed to protect and uphold the possibility of transferred state ownership, and so the paradoxical nature of the “gift child” as priceless to the adoptive family and a “throw away” for the biological comes to exist.⁵⁹ This condition of adoptees carrying value in their adoptive family so long as they remove all ties with their first family is also analyzed in Dorow’s previously referenced scholarship regarding transnational adoptees as a wedge. In this context, however, Yngvesson critiques the conditions of value as a product of the adoptee’s literal commodification.

Through this economic paradigm, Yngvesson also foregrounds the invisibilized inheritance of a humanitarian adoption narrative: the trauma of commodification, which further complicates transnational adoptee identity. Building off the ethnic and cultural discordance that Hübinette emphasizes, Yngvesson states that if identity either stems from an individual’s origin or is created through a donor/receiver exchange, then the adoptee, the exchanged, will forever be a reflection of both and occupy an identity rooted

⁵⁷ Ibid., 231

⁵⁸ Ibid., 232

⁵⁹ Ibid., 233

in “holding the tension between identity and difference,” inhabiting a space of “a perpetual in-betweener.”⁶⁰

While Hübinette largely focuses on transnationalism as a framework and Yngvesson on a global market economy, both contextualize their analysis within the historic connections between the biological and adoptive country. Hübinette traces transnational adoption as far back as the First World War, where the war-driven displacement created more opportunities for transnational adoption, instigated a “save the children” narrative which succeeded the War and continued the U.S. consumer demand for transnational adoption.⁶¹ Adoptees thus become physical residuals of the greater systems that allowed for their existence which, in the case of Hübinette’s study, is Korean patriarchy and U.S. imperialism; adoptees are thus imbued with a narrative “loaded with demands of loyalty, guilt and gratitude as the wealthiest of the rich in the receiving countries adopt the most shunned and unwanted in the ‘Third World.’”⁶² Furthermore, this relocation of children to more privileged countries is accompanied by a detrimental assumption that there are no psychological or emotional burdens when a non-white child integrates into a white family.⁶³

Eng argues that transnational adoptees upset this notion that families exist in an isolated private sphere. He continues to address the legacy of systems Hübinette and Yngvesson explore and asks “what cultural alibis about...otherness and gender abuse must be produced so as to efface the history of this transaction in the global

⁶⁰ Yngvesson, *Law and Society*, 247

⁶¹ Hübinette, *Adoption & Fostering*, 16

⁶² *Ibid.*, 20

⁶³ Hübinette, *Adoption & Fostering*, 20

marketplace?”⁶⁴ The transnational adoptee experiences both subjecthood and objecthood, and relies on Freudian logic to explore the subsequent “racial melancholia” or perpetual mourning stemming from the loss of a biological family that is replaced with pressure and expectations to assimilate.⁶⁵ It is through the negligence of this trauma that the fallacy of a private family sphere, where the history of abandonment, commodification, the history of the adoptee becoming a part of what Eng calls, the “New Global Family” that the privatized boundaries are maintained.⁶⁶ Through the erasure and distancing of origin and being, the transnational adoptee is left not only navigating their history alone but also carrying the burden of ingratitude or the feeling of indebtedness prescribed by the savior model.⁶⁷ This struggle for “self-realization, completion, and closure” is referred to as “an impossible task” that “creates fragmentation and further displacement rather than wholeness.”⁶⁸

In a later article published in 2006, Eng dives deeper into the emotional labor and exploitation of the transnational adoptee in an article critiquing moralism published in Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Global Woman*. Eng’s article invokes a gendered analysis of transnational adoptees, who are predominantly women, through a “politics of affect” framework.⁶⁹ Eng, as Yngvesson does, turns to global capitalism to explain both the commodification and colonization of literal objects but also subjects themselves.⁷⁰ Eng

⁶⁴ Eng, *Social Text*, 9

⁶⁵ Eng, *Social Text*, 16

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 16

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 21

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 29

⁶⁹ Eng, David L. "Political Economics of Passion: Transnational Adoption and Global Woman: Roundtable on Global Woman." *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 7, no. 1 (2006): 49

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 52

interprets the erasure of commodification that Yngvesson asserts, creates the conditions for concomitant subject and objecthood, as obscurity that prevents us from understanding transnational adoption as a contemporary form of gendered commodification.⁷¹

Eng precisely names the burden referenced by Yngvesson and Hübinette as strictly affective, as a form of emotional exploitation wherein the adoptee is positioned to actualize the nuclear family unit that increasingly has become a signifier of “self-worth and completion.”⁷² Eng poignantly asks, “what does it mean to ask or demand that the transnational adoptee labor as an “emotional guarantee” for her parents’ “access to full social rights and recognition” in the U.S. “public sphere and civil society?”⁷³ These scholars center their analysis in the points of contradiction, the constructed dichotomies experienced by transnational adoptees: intersections of identity-- race vs. culture, the existence of two families-- biological vs. adoptive, and economy of transnational adoption-- pricelessness vs. commodification, that create a limbo that must be continually negotiated.

While these scholars reveal the internal, emotional struggles adoptees encounter, they still situate transnational adoptees as victims of trauma and offer no alternative narratives or opportunities for self-reclamation or agency. These scholars center adoptee identity on their origin story through an essentialist lens that leaves little room for reimagining and belonging or existence that does not inherently require the adoptee to bear the burden of their privilege or perform society’s emotional labor. This race vs.

⁷¹ Ibid., 55

⁷² Ibid., 57

⁷³ Ibid., 57

culture dilemma is highlighted by a major theme in adoption scholarship which is adoptee's desire to return home or reconnect with their first family.⁷⁴ This affective trauma assumes that the discordance between family cultural and individual heritage, whether that is political heritage or ethnic heritage, as the two most determining factors of identity struggle. I challenge this linear narrative by introducing a third variable, religion, as an identity that, much like race or ethnicity, has the potential to unite people in traditions and values, and offer a grounding in one's identity.

Another study by Jayashree Mohanty explored the ethnic and racial socialization of transracial adoptees according to how their parents socialized them.⁷⁵ This research found that using a tool called the Ethnic and Racial Socialization of Transracial Adoptee Scale has the potential to provide social workers with more data on how to best support transracial adoptees.⁷⁶ This research introduces yet another theory or tool that offers potential benefits to transracial adoptees and their ethnic and racial development. While this may be important, it reinforces the narrative of the victim that mainstream Adoption Studies discourse perpetuates. Without acknowledging the ways in which transracial adoptees embark on their our journeys toward identity development, these studies continue to silence academically recognized moments of agency and self-awareness.

Methodology and Literature Review Conclusion

Part of what I hope to capture in this literature review is the ever-shifting perspectives through which scholars conceive of, utilize, and critique adoption and

⁷⁴ Reynolds, *The Qualitative Report*, 243

⁷⁵ Mohanty, Jayashree. "Ethnic and Racial Socialization and Self-Esteem of Asian Adoptees: The Mediating Role of Multiple Identities." *Journal of Adolescence* 36, no. 1 (2013): 161-70.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 2013

adoptees. The constantly shifting depiction of adoptees as a reflection of an industrial complex, as a wedge or as a victim of trauma may differ in their analysis and critique, however, they stand united in the shared lack of agency that scholars offer adoptees. With careful consideration of how I explore my topic, I hope to contribute to this scholarship both in content and point of entry. By focusing on autocritique and the reflections of other transracial adoptees, I hope to represent a kaleidoscope of narratives and celebrate what already exists, or rather, how transracial adoptees are already surviving, navigating, and thriving within these politically, systemically, and emotionally traumatic inheritances through whichever ways work best suit them.

Read together, the scholarship in this literature review captures the complexity and challenges of studying transracial and transnational adoptees. How can adoptees who carry the emotional and moral burden of these conditions, expectations, and privileges, experience agency, self-determinism, and empowerment? What alternatives exist? This research focuses on the existence and experience of transnational adoptees in the United States as individuals with the power and privilege to maneuver their intersectional social and political identities with thoughtfulness and intention. This perspective allows individuals, despite the traumas of displacement, relocation, and conditional privileges, to access narratives of self-determinism.

Chapter Two: Intersections of Cultural and Racial Discordance

The scholarship of Adoption Studies, historically, amplifies the voices, theories, and priorities of adoptive parents and social workers rather than adoptees themselves. Publications focused specifically on adoptee identity development often do so from an angle that reinforces a power dynamic among adoptees, the victims, and adoptive parents and policymakers, as “saviors” or agents of change. These studies measure the growth and successful integration of adoptees according to cultural, racial, and ethnic socialization, and often speculate variables that negatively or positively impact adoptee’s sense of self.

This research is inundated with research-backed, scholarship-driven advice geared toward an adoptive parent-based audience, providing strategies and suggestions to support transracial adoptee childhood development. One such example is a study published by Mohanty and Newhill arguing that the marginality that adoptees experience is a reflection of their additional task of figuring out who they are in relation to their birth family and adoptive family and what their adoption status means for them and for others important to them.⁷⁷ These scholars identify socialization strategies as the solution to improving transracial adoptee psychological health.⁷⁸ Another study published by Arnold et al. theorized that cultural socialization and preparation for bias, in particular,

⁷⁷ Mohanty, *Journal of Adolescence*, 161-170

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 161-170

ameliorated the impacts of marginalization.⁷⁹ In a study published by Langrehr, scholars propose that increased contact with people of color improves white parents' ability to better buffer colorblind attitudes they may hold. This, in turn, allows adoptive parents to better support their transnationally adopted child.⁸⁰ One other study found that parents who are more motivated in their ability to socialize their transracially adopted children are more likely to support their children through that cultural socialization and racial awareness.⁸¹ Another adoptions study, exploring the challenges of identity development among black transracial adoptees raised in white families, found that the incorporation of both ethnic identity and adoptive heritage influences how adoptees view themselves and their own pursuit of a positive self-image.⁸²

These publications frame adoptee cultural and racial socialization according to parental awareness and preparation with the purpose of offering recommendations for parenting approaches that better support adoptee navigation of their identities. As such, they also outline a roadmap for adoptive parents as they navigate their adoptive child's youth, rather than focusing on adoptees as agentive. This perspective reinforces the population depiction of adoptees as perpetual children. While understanding the relationship between childhood development and the adoptee's sense of self offers

⁷⁹ Arnold, Braje, Kawahara, Shuman, Mcleugh, Jill D., and Spaulding, William. "Ethnic Socialization, Perceived Discrimination, and Psychological Adjustment Among Transracially Adopted and Nonadopted Ethnic Minority Adults." *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 86, no. 5 (2016): 540-51.

⁸⁰ Killian, Caitlin, and Nikki Khanna. "Beyond Color-Blind and Color-Conscious: Approaches to Racial Socialization Among Parents of Transracially Adopted Children." *Family Relations* 68, no. 2 (2019): 260-74.

⁸¹ Lee, Vonk, Han, and Jung. "A Path Analysis of a Cultural and Racial Socialization Model in International Transracial Adoption: Racial Awareness, Self-efficacy, and Socialization Practices." *Children and Youth Services Review* 85 (2018): 333-40.

⁸² Patel, Tina. "Theorising the Racial Identity Development of Transracial Adoptees: A Symbolic Interactionist Perspective.(Report)." *Adoption & Fostering* 31, no. 2 (2007): 32.

adoptive parents and other stakeholders best practices for integrating adoptees into their life, it fails to center the adoptee as having their own agency.

In this chapter, I discuss identity development through the anecdotal reflections of transracial adoptees. I analyze and critique the experiences of each of my interviewees with a special focus on their self-perception. Adding to Adoption Studies, I explore identity development and self-awareness relative to two overlapping identities, which all transracial adoptees share. Drawing on Critical Race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, I analyze how the overlap of racial and cultural identity creates a distinct experience. Identity politics can be problematic because they can at times eclipse intragroup differences.⁸³ As people of color raised by white families, transracial adoptee positionality reflects the locations of what I call racial and cultural discordance: transnational adoptees are racially Chinese or Korean yet embody the cultural inheritance of their white parents. That is, they stand at the crossroads of two identities that are often treated by mainstream society as in conflict with one another.

This conflict becomes evident as they struggle to define themselves according to the interactions they have with those around them. Across different moments in their lives, the transracial adoptees whom I interviewed vacillated between the three stages of awareness and development that I have identified. The three types of reactions or embodiments of this discordance include assimilation and essentialization, third space, and radical acceptance. These different modalities, which are nonlinear, reflect an

⁸³ Crenshaw, *Stanford Law Review*, 1241

approach employed either, consciously or subconsciously, by the transracial adoptee as they live with or “rationalize” their intersectional identity

Assimilation & Essentialization

I argue that the interpersonal interactions that my interviewees have with their family members, friends and peers influence and in some cases inform their sense of racial and cultural discordance. In discussing these experiences, I move beyond exploring parent-child relationships in order to trace the emergences of self-awareness among five of my six interviewees. Through conversations with Chinese and Korean transracial adoptees, I learned more about the reflections that each of my interviewee had regarding their own identity formation process. I found their reflections of racial identity and cultural identity to be rooted in certainty.

One of the common responses to this cultural and racial discordance involved my interviewees essentializing one aspect of their identities, whether that was through efforts to assimilate, overshadow or obscure. One common connection that both Michael, a Korean adoptee raised in the Midwest, and Erica, a Chinese adoptee raised on the West Coast, shared was a strong feeling of disconnect with the cultures of their ethnic heritage. Michael, a current Master’s student living and studying in Seoul, grew up in a predominantly white Midwestern city and was almost exclusively surrounded by white peers. He was raised by two white, Christian parents and has two older white siblings. Michael reflected on his strong avoidance of any kind of communication that might acknowledge that he was Korean unless prompted by his mother to participate in a Korean cultural activity:

I guess I never talked about being Asian. I guess my actions were like non-actions and really I just did nothing to incorporate anything relating to being adopted or like being Asian into my life. Essentially all my friends were white, although my mom did have me do a few like, Korean cultural things. But like we didn't share that with anyone... Also, I think there were a few other adoptees in my hometown that I had never really knew, but I might have met once or twice. But when I was growing up, at the time, I had no interest in talking to them at all. I think I didn't want to acknowledge being different and being adopted/being Asian.

Michael neither spoke about nor explored his Korean identity during his childhood. This behavior reflected his strong desire to not stand out or attract attention much more than any kind of disdain or discomfort brought on by opportunities to connect with Korean culture. That discomfort may have also been impacted by his geographic location, growing up in a primarily white community in Midwest would have made accessing Korean culture more difficult. In practice, this solution is problematic because it isolated Michael from an inherent and unavoidable part of his reality: that he is Korean. It also emphasizes a misconception that it is not possible to be perceived as having non-normative racial and cultural identities. Michael's motivation to assimilate contrasts with the motivation of Erica, a current nursing student who is the older sibling of a Chinese adoptee, and the daughter of two Christian white parents. Erica reflected on her exposure to Chinese cultural education:

When I was actually in Chinese school I hated it because I felt like I was trying to be something I wasn't. Because like [I] don't talk Chinese at home, like, what am I

going to do with this? And so I actually really disliked going to Chinese school...And so even though, you know my parents did everything they could to keep my Asian aspect, my Asian ethnicity as prominent as possible, it was never like you know the real thing because even celebrating with my parents with them being white we still had a very Americanized Chinese New Year, you know.

Though Erica acknowledges the duality of her identities, of being ethnically Chinese and culturally white, she articulates that any claim or connection she might have to Chinese culture feels artificial because her family is culturally white. I use this example of essentialism because it contrasts with the anecdotes of my other interviewees; despite being raised in white culture, many do feel a claim to sustaining a connection with their ethnic culture. Although Erica did attend Chinese cultural events and school growing up, she makes clear the lack of personal investment she has in this part of her identity.

This experience challenges previously-reviewed Adoption scholarship that placed an overwhelming emphasis on the importance of ethnic exploration during childhood as a solution to maintaining and sustaining transracial adoptee ethnic heritage. In fact, both Erica, consciously, and Michael, subconsciously, prioritize the cultural or “white” parts of their identity despite their respective parents’ efforts to engage with their ethnic heritages. This feeling of disconnect among ethnically similar people echoes sentiments often associated with “imposter syndrome” and feeling “unqualified” to belong. In this sense, the conflict between Erica and Michael’s racial and cultural

discordance challenges even the construct of ethnicity and race itself: What does it mean to truly be Asian, American or Asian American?

A similar experience came up in an interview with another transracial adoptee, Frances, a Korean adoptee who was raised in the South by a Christian family and has a transracially adopted younger brother. Frances shared memories of childhood interactions she'd had with friends and family where, in contrast to Michael and Erica, she was not the one to essentialize herself; rather, it was the people around her who did. This came up when I asked Frances why she didn't talk much about being adopted, not even with her brother:

I definitely got that sense of, like, from even members of my family, my brother himself, the other one who is adopted and he was like, I remember us getting into a fight one time and he was like, 'We're white. Frances, we're white.' I had a friend, [who] told me that one time, she was like, 'I know you are white on the inside.' I think that my grandmother, one of my grandmothers, I kinda thought that and stuff too. Like, she had a lot of racial prejudice and, and was kind of racist and stuff. And so it was always very confusing to me that...she saw me as white and stuff.

This anecdote captures yet another dimension of essentialization which is the socialization that transracial adoptees receive from those around them. Though unlike Michael, Frances expressed no qualms with acknowledging her Korean identity. Rather, it was the pushback both passive and active, that she received from family members and friends growing up, telling her she was actually white. Whether by feelings of discomfort

or disconnect, or socialization from those around you, the messaging is still the same, that you are more one thing than the other, that you may look Chinese or Korean, but actually you are white, that one identity is more legitimate than the other.

Third Space

Whereas Michael, Erica, and Frances express situations where they have felt that one aspect of their identity must take precedence over another, there are other situations where transracial adoptees occupy what Homi Bhabha termed, “third space” which is described as “the space where culture has no unity, purity or fixity, and where primordial notions of race and nation have been replaced by a floating hybrid existence.”⁸⁴ This term, though often used to explore the identity development of mixed-race individuals, is also relevant for transracial adoptees who can relate to neither non-adopted Asian Americans nor recently immigrated white Americans. This inability to relate to either identity became apparent as my interviewees shared instances of feeling rejected by both their cultural-identity groups and racial-identity groups, leading to subsequent feelings of disconnect with both their cultural and racial identities.

Both Erica and another Chinese adoptee also raised on the West Coast, Tracey, at different points in their respective interviews, reflected on the emotional journey of processing their intersectional identities. They talked about anger, resentment, and feeling like they were either not enough or too much of one aspect of their identity to embrace the other aspect of their identity, ergo, belonging to neither. Tracey grew up attending a Chinese immersion school and had plenty of exposure to Chinese culture. Despite this

⁸⁴ Hübinette, *Adoption & Fostering*, 23

childhood connection, however, Tracey described feeling different from her peers who, though similar in appearance, were actually quite different:

I wasn't Chinese enough because my parents were white and I didn't have a *popo* or a *yeye* who could teach me Cantonese or help me with my Chinese homework or I didn't bring the same snacks to school...You know, I was [one of the] few kids who brought potato chips and chocolate pudding cup rather than Pocky Sticks and Hello Pandas and seaweed as a snack. So, you know feeling disconnected from that community in that way, not being Asian enough in terms of other more

colloquial things of like, 'I'm as good at academics,' or 'I don't have that family pressure that I can relate to that some of my other Asian friends have.'

The tension then that Tracey feels within this Chinese identity group stems from the influence of other aspects of her identity, such as her adoptive heritage, that distinguish her narrative from the dominant narrative of the Chinese identity group. Thus what may have seemed like benign community customs or practices are driven by a set of common values, in turn, informed by shared experiences that Tracey simply did not have. Though Chinese in appearance and birth, Tracey did not have the cultural fluency of having a Cantonese speaking grandparent to help guide her education or parents who bought traditional Chinese snacks. Another Chinese adoptee, Erica also reflected on her own intersectional identity as a transracial adoptee and the confusion and anger she sometimes felt during her youth:

...Almost feeling like an outcast. The feeling of anger I had towards other students and kids [who] told me they weren't my parents, feelings of anger at my birth parents, feelings of sadness, feelings of confusion with my adoptive parents. And just I guess finding an identity of where I belong because it's like you know I'm not white but... It's like I'm not white enough for the white group but I'm not Asian enough for the Asian group you know I'm literally in the middle.

The frustration that Tracey and Erica express connects with a study exploring the identity development of Korean adoptees who often struggle with identity development where they are “Korean by race but Western by culture.”⁸⁵ Instead of feeling a connection to both their racial and cultural identities, they felt rejected by both affiliations. The lack of belonging, as demonstrated by Tracey’s anecdote, stems from interactions she had with her Chinese peers. Superficially, Tracey identifies as Chinese, if only because of her appearance and country of birth. The other common cultural accompaniments of being Chinese, however, do not apply to her and then spark questions of legitimacy. This feeling of difference then leads to feeling incomplete, inauthentic, or an imposter. Erica, similarly, expresses feeling both disconnected from her Asian identity and her white culture.

Their inability to simply belong unquestionably to either group creates a fractured identity where feeling comfortable with one group is prevented by a simultaneous identification with another. This struggle to acknowledge or feel ownership over multiple seemingly conflicting identities is then internalized to permeate into their self-perception.

⁸⁵ Hübinette, *Adoption & Fostering*, 22

Across all interviewees, these negative perceptions of self were exclusive to childhood years and reflective of a challenging phase rather than a fixed state of being.

Michael, an example of self-motivated growth and understanding, reflected on why he mostly hung out with white peers growing up and recalled a pivotal interaction with other Asian peers during middle school:

The feeling overall was that I wasn't accepted by them because I was like the 'White Asian.' I think one kid even said that to me one time, like, 'Oh you have white parents' or something. So I think that might [have] kind of turned me off from like wanting to interact with any Asians.

At the beginning of this chapter, I noted how Michael avoided behaving any way that might "reveal" his Asian identity or distinguish him beyond the extent of his physical appearance. This anecdote serves to contextualize and further complicate his narrative. Much like Tracey and Erica, Michael's experience of feeling ostracized by others who share a similar racial, but not cultural, identity, reinforced an internalized sense of discomfort. Michael's essentialization must be read not only as a prioritizing of one identity over another but perhaps as a coping mechanism that responds to the verbal rejection, he felt from other Korean American peers.

This racial and cultural discordance that poses those early developmental challenges, can lead to an essentialization of an aspect of one's identity over another or rejection of both. Perhaps it is this speculation and insecurity that Adoption Scholars such as Arnold et. al and Lee et. al caution against in their research. However, instead of concentrating my discussion on solutions that uphold dynamics such as the "victim and

savior,” I highlight the agency that my interviewees embodied through their personal journeys of self-understanding and acceptance.

Radical Acceptance

At the heart of this chapter is an effect of racial and cultural discordance that leads transracial adoptees to question not only their cultural belonging but their belonging or comfort with their racial group as well. The inherent “queerness” of transracial adoptee identity is precisely why incorporating redefinitions of kinship and belonging such as Freeman’s and Rowe’s is essential. Doing so allows us to recognize and celebrate that even those who struggle to belong are able to navigate life through meaningful connections with communities. At various points during their development, Tracey, Michael, Erica, and two other of my interviewees, Dolores, a Chinese adoptee raised by her Christian white parents in the Midwest, and Sharon, a Chinese adoptee who, like me, was raised by two Jewish mothers, though in a major city on the East Coast, shared moments of embracing their intersectionality. Tracey described the first time she felt a connection with another transracial adoptee as powerfully validating. I quote her at length because her story illustrates a pivotal moment in the development of her critical self-awareness as an adoptee:

When I was 16...I had a teacher who was adopted and that was the first time I had interacted with an adult who had been adopted...That really resonated with me in terms of realizing that I was part of a community of adoptees. like I've always had friends who were adopted from a very young age. You know, I was adopted with

a group of other girls from China. Just out of coincidence I have befriended a lot of people who are adopted, that's pretty common in San Francisco. But the first time I really realized that I was part of this community of adoptees you know, even people who I didn't know, was when I had a creative writing teacher who was adopted. She is Black and I think both of her parents are white and she talked about her experience as being adopted and being a black queer woman and how that experience had affected her. And being really unapologetic about it. She had a blog...talking about her birth mother and I just thought that that was very... I don't know if I would say it was inspiring but what connected me was that I had never thought of myself as someone who was an orphan or someone who was trying to find their birth parents...But realizing that I was adopted and that had in some way, shape or form affected my experience...She talked a couple of times in the creative writing class you know about her anger about being adopted and it was just kind of this thing where I realized, huh, I am maybe harboring some resentment or some anger about being adopted. I don't think it's necessarily like, oh you left me, or oh this or that. But it is frustration toward the way people are treating me, the way that I have felt that's just been kind of subliminal.

The feelings of despair that stem from being transracially adopted are especially difficult to process because they are often not experiences that parents of transracial adoptees can consider or are capable of affirming. In Tracey's case, she was fortunate to encounter and connect with an adult adoptee who, as her role model, created the space

and gave “permission” for Tracey to process and legitimize her relationship to being adopted. That self-awareness is what distinguishes intersection internalizations of cultural and racial discordance from essentialization and double rejection. Through this perspective, Tracey becomes more privy to the hegemonic structures of her challenging interactions. Instead, she is able to perceive the ignorance of her peers as symptoms of a greater political issue. Earlier in the chapter, Tracey discussed an inability to feel connected to other Chinese peers because her behavior so obviously deviated from their norms. The difference now is how those feelings of disconnect inform her self-perception. Instead of understanding those feelings or experiences as a failure on her part to adhere to that Chinese identity group, she was able to redirect her anger or frustration in a way that created room to think and talk about the challenges of being adopted, moving beyond simply feeling disconnected.

Michael, who did not start talking or thinking deeply about his adoptee identity until leaving home for college, enrolled in a Psychology of Adoption class, joined an adoptee collective, and studied abroad in Korea. From these experiences, he began one of many long conversations he had with his parents about race and adoption:

[During] college it kind of became more of like, telling them, or letting them know that-- like I don't know, I guess maybe they had a little bit of color blindness-- But then after college it was kind of like talking to them like, yes I still do receive comments about being Asian and that's something you don't get because I'm Asian and you're white, kind-of-thing...at first they were pretty maybe hurt by it. Not hurt, but like, they weren't very like, I mean they were receptive

but they also weren't super supportive of it at first...I think it was also due, because, it was also, how do I say this. It was also because I was pretty volatile at that time. So in terms of like-- I wasn't gently, like calmly being like, 'Oh even though I'm adopted and like, even though I'm your son, these things still happen to me because I'm seen as an Asian person,' it was more like: 'These effing things still...~!' It was not, yeah I didn't exactly present them calmly. Yeah but since then, they've become more receptive more understanding.

It was not until Michael was physically in a different space, away from his hometown, that he was able to articulate and discuss openly with his family, his experiences as a transracial adoptee. In college, Michael removed himself from the space where he spent his childhood hiding from his intersectional identity, and from his parents, with whom he had not previously discussed his identity. Michael's change in self-perception reveals a growing critical self-awareness where, during our interview, he was both able to recount his reactions, and understand why he reacted the way he did. Dolores, another transracial adoptee who attended the same undergraduate college also credits going away to college with a growing sense of self.

Apart from moving through the world without the company of her parents, Dolores also took this time to study adoption academically. During our conversation, Dolores described her shift in thinking about adoption and her political identity as a person affected by this system:

It turns the conversation of adoption from [a] less personal experience like, 'This is how I'm feeling this' ...[to] like, 'did you know that 80 percent of the birth

mothers in the Marshall Islands didn't know that they were like giving up their children permanently to adoption?' Like, 'Did you know that like, you know, at the peak of Guatemalan adoption in the nineties one-tenth of Guatemalan babies [were] being adopted out to the US?' And like, if you think about children as the country's greatest resource, that's like detrimental.

Dolores's understanding of adoption, not just as an identity she occupied, but also as a political and global circuit changed. She began building a critical social consciousness, with the language and knowledge to discuss what Rowe considers, the political contexts of her belonging:⁸⁶

At first, I was just like really angry at the professor and at the content and I was like, 'None of this makes sense, like this horrible, like I don't believe any of this.' And then in the second period...I was just like, 'Really?' I had internalized all of the things that we had learned and the content and was just like, 'Oh my gosh, everything is horrible. What now?' And then the third part of the class was when I was like, 'Okay, well, like, you know, some of these thoughts that she has [are a] little extreme. Others of these things like, wow, this was really sad and messed up and we need to do something.'

Through this personal development, Dolores was able to maintain a strong relationship with her parents. Dolores describes calling her mother after class to relay what she had learned, noting that her mother both provided Dolores with emotional support and also experienced the growth of her own critical awareness. By shifting the

⁸⁶ Rowe, *NWSA Journal*, 15-46

conversation of adoption away from one of just personal experience, Dolores's experience in her Critical Adoption Studies class also informed and transformed her relationship with her family:

My Mom especially...I think the class hit her hard too. And I think because I would like...call home, really upset about it-- and of course my parents didn't want to see me upset-- I think it was really hard for her to accept that, like that they with good intentions had also entered this system with a lot of corruption and a lot of problematic history, whereas I had my class and my peers and a college community to discuss what I was learning...[I think it was really] a process. I don't think that my conversations about things necessarily changed with my parents except for the fact that I think I really took on the identity more of a person of color. I think in high school, I don't know, I just think that there's like a social-economic linkage with the term person of color and I always just like I'm Asian, I'm Chinese. I didn't necessarily describe myself as a person of color. Um, but after being in college and going to the [Multicultural Department] and like hearing people's stories, right and experience like, oh my god, I have to, like, we're like really speaking the same language here.

In this eloquent reflection of how taking a course of adoption transformed her awareness, Dolores reflects not only on the politicization of her adoptive identity, but also on the cultivation of her identity as a person of color, and her newfound connection to that community. Here is an example of an adoptee embracing the emotional burden of her positionality, which differs greatly from Eng's description of that journey because

Dolores does so without falling into the victim narrative. Dolores emerges from this challenging class not feeling disheartened or infantilized, but empowered and knowledgeable. Dolores also articulates experiences that both Tracey and Michael explore as well. Much like Tracey, finding and connecting with people who shared similar experiences, in this case, as people of color, were very much a source of grounding and validation just as the creative art class had been for Tracey. Dolores's class, on the other hand, provided her with the tools and resources to both understand her own identity within a broader political, historical framework, and discuss and process that shift in perspective with her parents. The contextualization of adoption for both Michael, Tracey, and Dolores encouraged them to begin to reflect more critically on their own identities as remnants of or related to a greater system and offered a form of self-awareness that redirected internalization of racial and cultural discordance to external processes and patterns.

The movement toward this growing sense of awareness was something that Sharon, an adoptee who grew up in New York City, also expressed, though in a much different way. Sharon considered her childhood to be relatively prejudice-free. Fairly consistently from childhood through college, Sharon notes the influence of her Jewish communities as sources of support and meaning. Her Jewish identity was something she clearly expressed as a point of pride. Toward the end of our conversation, she shared more recent contemplations she had regarding the Star of David she wears around her neck:

[I was thinking] that maybe I shouldn't wear it every day because, well I'm proud to be Jewish. I don't need to like flaunt it or make it obvious that I'm Jewish because it comes up in a conversation. I'll talk about it. But I just, I've been thinking lately that I don't need it to be that obvious. What's the point in making it so clear? It doesn't matter so much. I'm thinking maybe like changing my necklace because I mean, I love wearing it, but I feel like I'm at a realization where, like, I'm wearing it because I want people to know versus [wearing] it because I really believe in wearing a Jewish star.

By questioning her embodiment of Judaism and identity through this action, of wearing a Star of David, Sharon is also questioning the way in which she performs Judaism. Connecting back to questions of authenticity and comfort, these insights reflect a shift toward thinking critically about self-representation and intersectionality in a manner that differs from my other interviewees. Sharon's movement toward awareness does not reflect a loss in sense of self; it reflects a choice Sharon must make about how she expresses herself. While both Sharon and Erica think critically about how they are perceived by others, unlike Tracey, Dolores, and Michael, they do not see an inherent conflict in need of resolution.

Erica's embrace of her adoptee identity differs from Michael, Tracey, and Dolores in that her shift occurred at a young age and with the direct support of her parents. Erica explained how she first became aware that other families were not all like hers when she entered middle school she recalled that her friends questioned why her mother did not look like her. In response to this bullying, her mother began visiting Erica's class, starting

in second grade, to read stories such as *Happy Adoption Day* to Erica's peers. She also led activities and answered any questions students had regarding adoption during that time:

And I was really scared at first because I was like I don't know what people are going to think. I didn't know how people were going to act. But I think my mom...I just think like the way she can carry herself and explain stuff, I think that really helped. She did a really good job and it did stop some of the like 'they're not your real parents' kind of thing. And it also made me feel special because...I would go home and tell my mom what was happening. Then they made me feel like you know, like, they, they really were my family because here's my mom and I'm going and telling her this and she's doing everything she can to make me feel comfortable in this school situation. And my teacher understood and then let my mom do that. So it just felt like I had you know like two people in my corner, that when there's times where I feel like no one was, I had my mom and my teacher my corner, and that I was really nice.

One quote that Erica shared with me, that she and her family grew up saying was that they were, "family is born from the heart and not the belly." Unlike the other five transracial adoptees whom I interviewed, Erica's mother actively engaged in normalizing adoption not just for Erica, but for Erica's primary community, as well. This, in turn, created a supportive foundation off which Erica could continue to grow and develop, and set a precedent where Erica's identity as an adoptee became an inherent and unquestionable part of her identity. Demonstrations of her intersectionality as a

transracial adoptee appeared less in situations of internal conflict but rather in how she and her family as a unit interacted with the outside world:

I think one of the things [that was] hard [was] when [in] college...my dad came to visit for a week and even when we were hanging out just you know him being an older white male and me being a young Asian it was. I definitely felt like there [were] times [where] people [were] kind of judging like you know, is [this] my sugar daddy? Like, am I just like you know-- trying to figure out what our relationship was. No one would ever guess that he was my father. And so I found myself a lot of times when my dad was here to visit and my mom too, I would just call mom or dad a lot out loud when I felt like people would just kind of like looking at us and trying to figure out what our relationship was. Or I [would] just be like, 'Oh yeah like you know I transferred here to Arizona my dad's coming to visit and I'm so excited that he's here!' Or, my dad would be like, 'Oh yeah... my daughter, she transferred to ASU for nursing. I'm here visiting her.'

Erica casually articulates her family's cautious awareness of how people in public may misinterpret her relationship with her family and, in particular, with her father. The fear of being perceived by mainstream society as the sexual companion of her white, older father, connects to the exoticization of Asian women in the U.S. as sexual objects. Furthermore, it harkens back to the militarized framework of the "Asian war bride" or "mail order bride" where the Asian woman is positioned as a racialized and sexualized trope. Though my employment of Crenshaw's intersectionality focuses primarily on the intersections of race and culture, this anecdote, in particular, does suggest a need for

further research into the intersections of race and gender among transracial adoptees particularly within the histories of US militarism and the subsequent racialization and sexualization of Asian women. This anecdote depicts a connection where, as a unit, Erica and her family embrace the challenges of living in a society that has not normalized non-biological kinship. With the added element of inheriting a legacy of gendered and racialized Asian women, they demonstrate a careful consideration and navigation of being a family of white parents and an Asian daughter.

Erica's approach to accepting her intersectionality, however, differs from Dolores's, Michael's, and Tracey's because instead of problematizing or politicizing adoption, Erica takes initiative to continue to normalize it. By adapting their public behavior to emphasize the normalcy of their family relationship, she performs normalcy and conforms to the heteronormative nuclear family.

Though each of my interviewees embodies a sample of the infinite experiences that have the potential to influence and transform transracial adoptees sense of self, one factor that applies to all these adoptees is higher education. Regardless of the specific journeys of each interviewee, all six of them attended college. Of the six, three took college courses about adoption and three did not. It appears that the relationships that interviewees, who did not take transracial adoption courses, have with their intersectional identities draw more from a framework of complicity rather than transgression, as they reach a point of resolution where their racial and cultural discordance is not internalized as intersectional but, rather, less relevant to who they are. This sentiment, expressed by Tracey, Sharon, and Erica, is one of the two strategic coping mechanisms discussed in

this chapter. This approach has allowed each of these adoptees to move past the political paralysis or conflict with internal fragmentation and find communities and passions outside their identities as adoptees.

Reflections from Michael, Dolores, and Frances, however, suggest another approach to identity development and resolution through the participation of Adoption Studies courses during college. The potential for more critical self-awareness that Dolores, for example, explicitly articulated may stem from the opportunity to contextualize her transnational adoptee identity within a greater political and global system. By moving beyond simply her own experience as an individual, she was able to critique the system within which she existed without bearing the sole burden of guilt, responsibility, or victimhood. There may also be a correlation between content and stage of development; beginning a critical conversation about adoption may be better suited for the developmental stage of transracial adoptees during those college years, as they often move away from their families and become more aware of their individual experiences outside of the comforts of home.

Though this thesis is most focused on the ways that the presence or absence of religious communities support or hinder the identity development of transracial adoptees, is it important to note the potential importance, value, and sustainability in both of the abovementioned coping strategies: “colorblind” approach and critical self-awareness approach. While Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies discourses are quick to celebrate critical self-awareness and strongly critical of assimilation as a form of

complacency within hegemony, we might also consider that in the case of transracial adoptees, the application of different analytical tools or points of entry may be more relevant and helpful. Especially with regards to the potential value of Adoption Studies courses during college years, the assimilationist approach, in particular, should be analyzed as a strategic form of survival that is most readily available to all transracial adoptees, regardless of their access to academic institutions or other resources.

Chapter Three: Continuance of Religion Affiliation

Aside from being transnational, transracial adoptees, my participants are also united by their exposure to religion. Of my six interviewees, four were raised in Christian communities, while two of them were raised in Jewish communities. In this chapter, I dive into the positive experiences that adoptees have had with religious communities to better understand why certain transracial adoptees at one point in their childhood and young adulthood maintained positive relationships with religious communities. Religious affiliation, in this case, is an expression of individual identification and emotional attachment, a way of belonging in which people tell stories about who they are and who they are not.⁸⁷ These narratives, whether they reflect a collective or individual experience relate “directly or indirectly, to self and/or others’ perceptions of what being a member in such a grouping or collectivity might mean.”⁸⁸ In this chapter, I define the anecdotes of interviewees who felt a sense of belonging in their religious communities into three categories: supportive, familiar, and unconditional. Each of these sections reflects an emphasized quality that contributes to each interviewee’s level of comfort within their religious community.

Value of Community Support

⁸⁷ Yuval-Davis, Nira. "Belonging and the Politics of Belonging." *Patterns of Prejudice* 40, no. 3 (2006): 197-214.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 202

People have long sought out social communities, including those organized around religion, as a way of receiving emotional and resource-based support. These communities, as discussed in Chapter One, provide support sustenance to their members just as the radical kinship described by Butler does. My interviewees, all of whom are Chinese or Korean adopted young adults, raised in white, religious families across the United States, reflected on the value of having that support as a positive quality of their religious communities. One quality that specifically resonated with both Dolores and Frances, was the length of time each of them had been a part of their respective communities. Dolores, who, as a toddler, had actually been given the opportunity by her parents to choose which church she wanted to join, reflected on her journey toward becoming a part of her church community:

So like I went to the religious preschool at my church because [my parents] had heard really good things about the preschool. And then when I was like five, they thought it was maybe, 'Yeah, let's go to church.' And they let me pick out the church that we went to, which is like, really nice that they gave me that choice but also like don't ask a five-year-old because they're just going to pick what they're comfortable with. And so I chose our church because I already knew people there because they went to preschool there and I had friends there. But I remember going to different churches with my mom and like there's a more conservative United Methodist Church and I really did not like that one because all of the kids in my class would have been boys and they were throwing like green playdough at each other's faces... My mom was really glad that I didn't like that church

because in the adult sermon they were talking about the man as like the patriarch of the family, and they were like, 'Phew glad she doesn't like that one.' But they chose the United Methodist churches in particular because my dad had been raised United Methodist.

In discussing the qualities that contributed to her strong connection as an adult with this community, Dolores noted the importance of being known by her community members from toddler age up to her current age of twenty-four. In this particular reflection, Dolores is actively choosing a community that best reflects her values. This anecdote reflected an early opportunity that Dolores had, as a toddler, to invoke some values-based decision-making that other interviewees discussed only doing in their adulthood. By providing their daughter with the opportunity to visit multiple communities, Dolores's parents involve and center their family's choice of community, and subsequent way of belonging, on the comfort of their daughter. Not unlike Erica's family, this approach reflects an approach to family dynamics that showcases their unity. From that point on, Dolores continues to incorporate her own values and her church's values as she continues her membership through childhood and as an adult:

I think also something that made me feel like my church is doing great things and important things... We would always be involved in like the Pride Parade. We're an overflow shelter for the homeless population in the winter and... we have a food pantry and we have community meals for people who ... won't have necessarily

otherwise had Thanksgiving or a Christmas meal and fair trade vendors and like people who lead congregation would lead our church in like tours of Israel and Palestine to look at the conflict there...

Dolores's positive relationship with her church community is a reflection of a lifetime commitment sustained by a deeply rooted faith in the ideology of her community. She recognizes her church community's effort to make the world a more just place by their support of Gay Rights and involvement in political alliances with important global issues such as homelessness or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This differs from the type of support and length of investment that Frances experienced with her church.

Though she later departed from Christian communities, Frances participated frequently in her local church as a youth. Frances noted that she had grown up in the same church community that her parents and grandparents had grown up attending. The intergenerational, inherited quality of religious commitment also harkens back to the concept of "clean break" preferences of adoptive parents that Dorow discussed.⁸⁹ A wholehearted embrace of a shared religious inheritance may potentially overshadow the lack of biological inheritance and through an emphasis on shared culture.

Nevertheless, Frances and Dolores's respective relationship with the religious communities reflects commitments and connections honored across decades. For Dolores, her connection to United Methodist church began with her preschool, was validated by her comfort and her family's decision, and reaffirmed by her positive experiences with her church community giving back and engaging in progressive,

⁸⁹ Dorow, *Critical Sociology*, 356-358

justice-driven initiatives. Frances' connection with the church was emphasized by her family's multi-generational participation with their community church as well as a strong faith in the role that her community had played through adversity that she and her family experienced:

Well, this is more hearsay than, like my particular experience that I can remember... So when I was a baby I was diagnosed with cancer and you know, there were members from church who were very supportive and stuff for my parents. There was a minister there who was very, very supportive of my parents. Um, my mother passed away two years ago and...you know, the church was very supportive of like particularly my dad and everything...So just kind of like those periods of grief and just sort of difficulty, the church, there are definitely like members from the church who reached out.

Her family's strong relationship with this network of people helped them get through death and illness in a way that would have been much more difficult to do alone. The connection and gratitude perhaps, that Frances had for her church community not just in supporting her but her family as well, proved invaluable during trying times. Whether that specific connection or gratitude was one of obligation is unclear, and despite later turning away from this religious community as an adult, Frances reflects a constant appreciation Frances had for the presence of that community throughout those trying periods in her life.

This feeling of support through adversity and growth was a sentiment that Dolores also expressed. Dolores's connection to her church rested deeply in its kindness and

morality, rather than god-related qualities. Dolores explained that her church community supported her even as she struggled with her own faith:

...My church isn't like a very like proselytize-y, like 'you have to believe the book as it's written' type. And so in high school and parts of my life where I questioned faith and maybe not everyone in the church, but a lot of people were like, let's explore that question.

Though Dolores's and Frances' struggle differ from one another, both were able to turn to their religious communities for support during their respective moments of struggle or questioning. In Dolores's case, she was able to find people in her church community to process her reflections with even when those reflections questioned or challenged ideologies of her church's religion. In this way, for both Frances and Dolores, their church communities were far more than religious institutions, but sources of nourishing and sustaining relationships that they were able to rely on during difficult life moments. Through these deeply rooted relationships, Dolores and Frances created and sustained relationships with their church communities in ways that allowed for a connection beyond their transracial identity. The nature of their relationship was such that feelings of compassion and support were more salient than feelings of being an outsider, or not belonging because of their cultural or racial discordance.

Familiarity of Religion

The inherent culture of familiarity that religious communities of the same denomination share is a quality that encourages membership and belonging. This is reinforced specifically through traditions and culture that make religious communities

more easily accessible. Two of my interviewees, Sharon and Dolores, shared experiences where they were able to quickly find community in religious spaces due to a familiarity with religious practices. Sharon, who was raised Jewish and participated in different Jewish communities as a child and in college, recently moved to the West Coast:

I don't belong to any synagogue here yet or any Jewish organizations. I kind of would like to just because ...it's another point of familiarity and I actually really enjoy going to services because the tunes are familiar and, also, I love singing, so it's, it's nice... I also really find it depends on the sermon, but a lot of the times I find inspiration and good lessons from whatever the Rabbi has to say. So I think... Judaism has always been more of a community thing for me...like growing up I went to my aunt's house for Rosh Hashana and Hanukkah and Passover and that's just like community and enjoying good food with family and friends. Uh, but I do like to go to services. I would like to maybe more than just the high holidays out here. I did go on Yom Kippur.

Song and prayer during the celebration of High Holidays and Shabbat sermons are traditions of the Jewish community that transcends one specific Jewish location and actually unifies many communities across geographic separation. This familiarity and emotional and psychological comfort of knowing the rituals and melodies allow Sharon to easily integrate into different Jewish communities and feel a sense of belonging. Furthermore, those specific rituals, such as the Rabbi's sermon, are familiar components of Jewish services that Sharon associates with inspiration and personal growth. Thus, her Jewish communities provide her with a way of connecting and celebrating with others, as

well as contributions to her personal growth. Despite moving across the country and having the opportunity to start anew, Sharon chooses to maintain her connection to Jewish communities as she explores this new stage of her life. Acknowledging the value of familiarity in helping her traverse new terrain, Sharon honors, and remains connected to her Jewish community.

Dolores also talks about the benefits of the familiarity of her church as an avenue for building relationships with other members of her religious community:

I think growing up in a church does have its own, community and traditions. I can talk about going to church camp with other religious people when I was younger or I can talk about, you know, I think the story of the Immaculate Birth where like Mary is a virgin and gives birth to Jesus. I think that like literally scares every teenage girl who when she had a late period like, 'Oh my god, I'm the next Mary!' Like I think that's like a very Christian girl experience. So I think like culturally it's about that cultural fluency thing, right? Like I have cultural fluency with like a lot of Christian communities, but I don't necessarily believe everything.

Dolores acknowledges that her distinct socialization through common Christian parables enabled a cultural understanding or perspective that connects her other Christian girls. Interestingly, this is the second of Dolores's memories of her religious affiliation that specifically related to gender. The first was her avoidance of a community with rowdy boys, and this second is of her relation to other Christian girls. Dolores' discomfort in the first community and her connection to other Christian girls contrasts the patriarchal foundations of traditional Christianity and creates the possibility for spaces of

the transgression of status quo, as described by Rowe via differential belonging, within the religious communities. One question to consider then is how women within Christian communities have and continue to express agency, power, and solidarity with one another.

Both Sharon and Dolores highlight the ritualistic and personal components that add to community familiarity and ultimately help them maintain their affiliation and connection to those groups as adults. These qualities are not exclusive to religious communities but are often more accessible in communities brought together and sustained by religion. Yuval-Davis discusses these rituals/traditions and their role in linking “individual and collective behavior” as “crucial for the construction and reproduction of identity narratives and constructions of attachment.”⁹⁰ Thus, Dolores’s and Sharon’s ability and willingness to perform, reaffirms their identity-based attachments to those communities and allows for smooth integration and subsequent belonging in those communities. Through their religious identity, my interviewees are able to feel a connection and demonstrate belonging without directly confronting other aspects of their identity that may distinguish them, such as their racial identities.

Unconditional Connection to Community

Several of my interviewees explicitly described their religious communities as being places of unconditional support and belonging, moving beyond simply acknowledging the length of their relationship with the religious community or the

⁹⁰ Yuval-Davis, *Patterns of Prejudice*, 203

familiarity of the customs. Erica, who grew up going to church and church camps in the summer reflected fondly on her community:

I think what was specific about my church community that made it so open is that you know, from a young age just knowing that I was accepted for who I was and anybody else was accepted for who they were. It didn't matter what race they were. It didn't matter their sexuality, what they identified as. Like, we welcomed everyone with open arms. And I think that was something I really liked about my church community, that we were a judgment-free zone and we would not judge each other, where we came from, our past...mistakes we've made or anything...you

come to church and everyone would pretty much just like you know be civil or get along. And that was nice.

Erica's description of her church community is an equally powerful reflection of her community as it is of her sense of self. As she describes her community as a place where everyone is accepted no matter who they are or where they come from, she amplifies her positive experiences and projects it across her Church community as a singular narrative of essentially a utopian community. The articulation of her church furthermore lacks any recognition of how her specific identity and experience informs her opinion of her church. Her family's deep commitment, contribution, and collaboration with the church are likely qualities that are not shared across all members. The intensity of Erica's confident pronouncement of her church's inclusivity contrasts starkly with the negative experiences of other interviewees affiliated with religious groups.

Erica, however, was not the only interviewee who celebrated the altruistic qualities of her religious community. Sharon also expressed similar sentiments as she reflected on her college synagogue which she considered to be fairly prejudice-free:

I think as a non-stereotypical Jew just like Asian, not looking stereotypically Jewish, they really embrace everyone at [my college]. Like I was the Co-chair of J-Quest which is Jewish queer students at [my college]. So like every race, every sexual orientation, everything. I think that they're very supportive of everyone. It was a good support network for me because based, mostly I think I joined Hillel Board because it was quite a familiarity for me because going up, going to synagogue and knowing the tunes and the stories of the holidays, like the community feel was really what I missed.

Sharon prefaces her praise for her synagogue by tokenizing her own experience. She conflates her success and position of leadership within that group as evidence of their inclusivity and progressive nature. Unlike Erica, Sharon does acknowledge explicitly that her Asian identity is an aspect of herself that creates the potential for ostracization or othering. Sharon again acknowledges the importance of familiarity with Jewish customs that she mentions earlier in this chapter. She builds off of this point, however, to amplify her positive experience within her Jewish community; Sharon advocates a similar point as Erica, that her community is distinguished by its almost “blind” inclusivity of all people. Interestingly, the unconditional inclusion that they both describe does in fact depend on their religious identity. Both adoptees qualify this inclusivity by emphasizing their communities’ openness to people of different sexualities.

This pattern of relying on homonormativity as an alibi for inclusivity relates back to Jasbir Puar's caution against conflating the acceptance of homosexuality with progressive politics.⁹¹ Neither Sharon nor Erica discuss or mention their community's role in advocating for undocumented folks, non-cisgendered folks, or non-Asian people of color. This exclusion itself could perhaps be a part of a greater conversation regarding the distinct experiences of being an East Asian person, a group that is often categorized by status quo as the "model minority" or used as a wedge in race-relations.

Though neither Sharon nor Erica employ homonormativity explicitly, their casual allusion to the progressive or radical nature of their communities through mention of inclusivity toward people of "every sexual orientation" reflects similar applications of logic. Both testimonies demonstrate that the combination of their experiences, which are directly influenced by their identities, create a foundation for them to have an incredibly positive connection to their religious community. This subjective experience is much more reasonable of an explanation than the existence of a religious community that wholeheartedly lacks prejudice and exists to support any and all patrons. These qualities that Sharon and Erica prescribe onto their religious communities reinforce an image of belonging that they see in their membership.

While this quality of open-mindedness to people of all and any backgrounds, on the one hand, expresses itself as unconditional support, it also echoes notes of colorblindness, or the idea that regardless of individual differences, all people are and

⁹¹ Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 1-78

should be treated the same. Erica again echoed the lack of prejudice that exists within her community:

I feel the most comfortable...when I can be myself and I don't have that sense of being judged or looked down upon or anything. And it's just you know we mesh. I just I can be myself and they're themselves and we just all kind of like get along and none of that outside stuff matters of like what race you are, what you're our economic background is like none of that matters. We just kind of all come together and have a great time. And I think that's when I feel belonging because I feel like I can be who I am and they're accepting me for who I am and not I don't have to pretend to be someone else.

While the presence of comfort and safety are indeed crucial to belonging, the notion that belonging most exists in spaces where who you are and where you came from doesn't matter comes off as an uncritical approach to identity and community. The most important reflection, of course, is that Erica has been able to find serenity with her cultural and racial discordance. Yet, her articulation of such achievement suggests a lack of critical self-awareness, preventing her from considering what it means for her to be adopted. Rather, her strategy for living as a transracial adoptee has been to overlook identity and its importance. Her experience of comfort within her religious community, then, stems not from feelings of unconditional support that might lead to asking critical questions, as Dolores recalled; it stems from not acknowledging differences in experiences and ideologies. One limitation with this strategy, as with colorblindness, is the lack of awareness about prejudice or oppression. This denial of difference encourages

communities to be very ill-prepared for situations wherein differences between members of their community become more salient than the similarities that unite them.

This particular embodiment of unconditional support reflected in Erica's and Sharon's accounts is contrasted by Dolores's description. Instead of emphasizing the open-mindedness by assuming projecting her own positive experience onto the other community members, Dolores reflected on her church's enthusiasm to support her as she grew and changed. In doing so, Dolores demonstrated her self-awareness by acknowledging her subjectivity in a way that Sharon and Erica did not.

Dolores, who returned to her church community after graduating from college, reflected on a conversation she had in passing with an adoptive parent at her church. This discussion followed a request from an assistant minister to preach on Orphan Sunday⁹² to help other adoptive parents in their community to think critically about adoption:

I really liked this one church dad. And he came up to me and he asked me, "Oh, you know, I've been thinking. I was thinking about like, adopting a highway or the adopting student programs. What do you think about the use of the word 'adoption' in those senses? Like it's kind of messed up. Right?" So that was really validating. Even though I could go through this massive growth as a person and step into these identities more my church still supported me.

Through this anecdote, Dolores expresses pride in being able to pursue her own journey of self-awareness, and then return to a church community that not only welcomes

⁹² A Christian holiday standing in support for orphans around the world.

her back but also recognizes and appreciates the nuanced perspective she brings with her. Her church community's support of individual growth, which Dolores has personally experienced, coupled with their overall unifying values, has enabled Dolores to maintain and sustain her relationship with her church from childhood and into adulthood.

Honestly, I think my church is similar to like a lot of UU churches in that like you can believe what you believe about God, Jesus, Holy Ghost, Father, and son, all that kind of stuff, [as long as you] basically try to be a good person. The people at my church I think really want to do good for the community that we are a part of whether that's like on a small microscale or international scale. John Wesley who's the founder of Methodism... has a quote...it's basically like, 'Do all the good you can in all the places you can at all the time you can to other people you can for as long as you ever can.' And I think that's what my church really emphasizes more than like, like you must believe what we believe, just like try to do as much good as you can in the world.

Frances, Dolores, Sharon, and Erica describe their connections to religious communities by emphasizing qualities such as familiarity, unconditional support, and compatible ethical ideologies. These qualities are some of the most important for creating a sense of community and for exploring one's own identity. Notably, these adoptees found belonging in spaces that are not ethnic-specific, which counters social work scholarship that has encouraged parents of adoptees to seek community for their children through ethnic programs.

Chapter Four: Pivots Away from Religious Affiliation

While some of my interviewees expressed positive experiences and connections to their religious communities, others did not. In their articulations of negative experiences, Michael, Frances, and Tracey described situations where they felt disconnected ideologically or limited in their ability to self-express while in these spaces. The identity-based and political undertones of their reactions relate to what scholar Ameer Carrillo Rowe terms the “politics of belonging.” Rowe interrogates communities through the notion that each “site of belonging [is] political as they operate in relation to power,” thus the type of community or “location” is “seen as representing a particular set of modes of belonging.”⁹³ While these three interviewees share a similar preference for seeking that location or community outside of religion, their respective journeys toward that preference differ. In the first half of this chapter, I explore the origins of their discomfort with religious communities. I conclude the chapter by turning, instead, to the alternative methods of being in a community that each of them embodies.

Origins of Rejection

One of the more salient experiences that came up in discussions with Michael, Frances, and Tracey was their explicit feeling of being out of place in their religious communities. Tracey’s resistance to her Jewish community developed during her childhood. It was in response to negative experiences she had with her community that

⁹³ Rowe, *NWSA Journal*, 18

she chose to disassociate permanently from religion. This feeling of being too different to participate fully in her religious community was very much a continuation of her reflections from *Intersections* as she struggled to make sense of her racial and cultural discordance:

The communities that I was in as a child, I felt extremely, extremely disconnected from. As much as I wanted to be a member of that community and lived in those social spheres and interacted with people who did have similar experiences as me. There was always some kind of caveat or some kind of line that was draw. When I went to Hebrew school or Sunday school or you know a Jewish summer camp, or anything of that nature, I was one of you know maybe a couple of other kids that weren't white. So just on the surface people don't think that I'm Jewish off the bat. Or they don't want to consider me as on the same page as them as being Jewish.

Tracey's development of her critical self-awareness, very much sprouted from challenging interactions she had with peers. In her reflection, Tracey recognizes that she did, in fact, want to belong to the communities she participated in as a youth, yet for very unmalleable reasons, she could not. Among those, her Jewish community became a place where she felt critically aware of the impacts of being different. She mentions feeling as if there were always some "caveat" or condition upon which her membership rested. Thus, Tracey's problem with her Jewish community was both that she had to compromise her self-expression to fit in, and that there were inherent parts of who she was that

prevented her from participating and belonging, fully. This critique of her Jewish community is one she later articulated in the context not just of her religious community, but of organized communities in general:

I don't like organized communities at all actually, I think there's something, what's the word, inauthentic... contrived, something contrived about organized communities. I think understanding the culture and having cultural communities are important in that way but I also don't like the idea of siloing yourselves off to have or self-segregating.

Tracey critiques the performative aspect of an organized community that interviewees of the previous Chapter Four celebrated. Tracey felt neither the familiarity or comfort that Dolores and Sharon shared earlier when they discussed their preference for the traditions and rituals of their community. Tracey highlights that instead of creating a feeling of connection, or shared experience with other community members, she feels limited and restricted by whatever salient identity has drawn these people to the group:

Like if you think of a group of people who like books, you're going to have all of these other assumptions about them and I think that going to a community where you are going not just because you like books but because you assume everyone in that group likes books and is also educated or also comes from a certain class level because they can enjoy this certain kind of book, or that they are a woman because they are joining a book club. You just have all these preconceptions and

these notions so the people that join these groups in my experience, often fall into these archetypes or these tropes and so there's rarely, there's I don't want to say rarely. There's not many communities that are very diverse in nature because many communities are based around one idea and the schema of ideas that surround it. So, there's usually a particular type of person that thinks, 'Oh, you're probably also interested in these things so I'm going to go and become part of that community.' And usually, if that doesn't align then they won't join that community. And so it's kind of a self-fulfilling community.

The salience of either the explicitly shared identity or the peripherally shared qualities of the organized community encourages behavior or a way of thinking wherein members essentialize themselves according to those aspects and do not acknowledge or embrace their individual differences. Tracey problematizes her religious community and organized communities on the whole, according to what she describes as a fundamental restriction of individual diversity and a compulsion to conform to spoken or unspoken conditions. In her critique, Tracey engages thoughtfully and critically, reflecting a need to both recognize, understand, and learn from her past experiences. This rationalization is what I describe as one of the more extreme reflections because Tracey internalizes her negative experiences with childhood communities and structures her coping strategy by rejecting and problematizing all organized communities.

Michael, who also expressed similar disillusionment with his religious community, recognizes and internalizes his childhood discomfort in a very different way.

In Chapter Two, I explored Michael's journey toward critical self-awareness as one that really began when he left his hometown and went to college. His childhood experiences with his Christian community, much like Tracey's, reflected strongly his conflicting feelings regarding his own intersectional identity, which were made more salient by his religious community:

So actually, part of why I felt so awkward about going to church all the time is because it was very clearly only, like older white people or like just white people in general, and I was very clearly not a white person. So I felt like I was sticking out quite a lot. And I think even for a little bit, even going out with my parents, for like shopping or for groceries or something, made me feel uncomfortable. Or maybe I just picked up on that unconsciously and kind of internalized it. And I'm not sure if that's maybe just due to my hometown being majority white. But yeah... Growing up I did not feel super belonging. And I also, yeah I also didn't open up about anything. I think one I felt, they wouldn't understand so I didn't want to bother bringing it up.

Through this articulation of non-belonging, Michael reveals his awareness of self. Michael acknowledges and pinpoints his distinct identity as the only non-White person in his religious community mirroring the discomfort he felt within his own family as the only non-White person. Epitomized by his racial identity, Michael explains that he felt unable to reach out verbally to his family or community members to talk about his feelings for fear of not being understood. Michael briefly reflected on Bible Camp,

something that other peers anticipated and celebrated as one of the most fun church events:

I'll just say bible camp and that was...I haaated it. And part of that might have just been my own personality, cause there's like a lot of, I don't know if it's every night but maybe a few nights there's like this dance prayer... I don't even remember. I think I tried to block it out.

Interestingly, instead of problematizing his church community to rationalize his discomfort as a youth church member, Michael instead turned inward and references multiple times that development of his relationship with his church may have also been a product of his personality as well. This is not to say that personality and identity are not connected, but rather to highlight this form of self-awareness that Michael in his interviews, reflects. He focuses his reflections on recognizing both the influence of his distinct racial identity as well as his subjective experience with his specific church community rather than problematizing or critiquing it in a way that differs from Tracey's interview. While Tracey's expressions of frustration and disconnect very much create a parabolic effect, as her lifelong changes are in response to her trauma, Michael appears to be able to acknowledge and reflect on his time with his church without rejecting all forms of organized religion. These different reactions are a reminder that there is no universal narrative of how transracial adoptees experience or are impacted by feelings of ostracization within religious communities.

Regardless of their differing reactions, both Tracey's and Michael's experiences demonstrate how feeling different or looking different, can act as a barrier between an

individual and a community of which they are apart. Frances, an interviewee who actually expressed a personal connection to her religious community that was rooted in church community support, also felt a disconnect from her church community. Her disconnect was one she noted as based on ideological and political differences. She reflects on hints of these differences that appeared throughout her childhood:

I found myself, you know, let's see the particular sort of, 'because it's in the Bible, therefore it must be true' sort of thing...I remember really kind of pushing back on that because there were people there that I was with who were like, 'No, if it's in the Bible, it must be true.' Um, you know, things like homosexuality, like, you know, one of my brothers is gay and I knew that from an early age, kind of figured that out. We don't talk about it... And so things like that, things around like politics--you know, around like 9/11 and... presidential elections-- I was always sort of more like a Democrat and stuff where most of the people were very Republican.

Frances' ideological differences with her church community appeared in response to both personal and political contexts. These differences eclipsed any previous sense of commitment that she might have had toward her church community. Frances' narrative contributes to the reflections of Tracey and Michael by moving beyond awareness of merely her own experience with church. Frances recognizes political issues that transcend her own individual experience in the way that Sharon and Erica do not. Through highlighting her memories of feeling disconnect during politically divisive moments, such as 9/11 or presidential elections or recognizing her brother's sexuality, Frances chose

to separate herself from this community based on their treatment of other marginalized people as well.

Chosen Communities

Tracey, Michael, and Frances each discontinued their involvement with religious communities and instead sought out groups of people that more accurately reflected the qualities they most valued. Though their respective experiences and critiques of religious communities differed, all three later distinguished their chosen communities as more aligned with their personal values. Both Frances' and Michael's movement away from their church communities were distinct from Tracey's because they coincide with their departure for college. This pattern is one I discussed in the *Intersections* chapter as well, where I postulate a distinguished significance of self-awareness alongside the transition away from home and into college.

Frances, who is currently in a graduate studies program and researching Adoption Studies, described her college self as very much aligned with those values that became more salient in contrast to the “conservative” nature of her church community:

I was an art major myself and stuff, so... counterculture or something. I don't know, I just remember having a lot of very diverse in terms of having friends who were not like, you couldn't just like group them together and stuff. Like they were very different in the way they thought.... [I was] always in sort of these conflicting, what I saw as being conflicting, spaces.

In her description of her college art community, Frances described them as occupying “conflicting spaces,” which very much reinforces what Rowe describes when

she writes, “[when] we become accountable to power can produce a space of alterity, a space of resistance, and spaces that disrupt these hegemonic forms of belonging.”⁹⁴ While Frances' church community growing up was united by their connection and faith in God, Frances' community as an adult instead unites through a shared desire and interest in challenging status quo. This ideology is one she later regards as allowing her to feel safer both physically and emotionally:

I want that sort of edge that I have always felt being in certain spaces not to be there. I want to feel safe, safe in terms of like I mean I do want to feel safe physically too, but I'm talking more sort of like emotional and mentally like wanting people to understand already, like how certain things work, how things like racism work, how things like, you know, like race, gender, all that stuff. I want them to just get it already. I want them to know and stuff. So I don't have to like, yeah, constantly be thinking about that.

The political alliance distinct in communities that Frances emphasizes as safe contrast and the lack of safety she felt growing up in communities such as her church. Frances described wanting the people she builds community with to already understand how systems of oppression work. This priority reinforces the importance of positionality and the relationship between community and politics.⁹⁵ This emphasis, then, that Frances places on a shared awareness between community members reject the notion that, as a person who occupies the cross-sections of two uncommon racial and cultural identities, she has an obligation to educate her community members. This rejection of

⁹⁴ Rowe, *NWSA Journal*, 30

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 28

emotional labor contrasts a suggestion that scholar David Eng offers in the conclusion of his critique of transracial adoptees when he ponders that, despite the emotional trauma that transracial adoptees inevitably experience, “the practice of transnational adoption presents an exemplary—perhaps radical—opportunity for white, middle-class subjects to confront and to negotiate difference ethically within the social configurations of the new global family.”⁹⁶

Michael rejects Eng’s conclusion, however, that adoptees are presented with opportunities to educate their white communities. This rejection, as articulated by Audra Simpson’s politics of refusal, becomes a form of justice-seeking or empowerment. By refusing to play into this role within mainstream society, Michael rejects a tool that Simpson argues, “operates as a technique of recognition and simultaneous dispossession.”⁹⁷ As reflected previously in this chapter, Michael’s refusal to discuss his racial identity, or even acknowledge his obvious distinction from family and church members, is one he articulates as a part of who he is. This personal characteristic, however, manifests as a community building strategy as Frances. Much like Frances, Michael describes finally opening up and feeling connected to others during college. Though the primary community that Michael acknowledges is his art community, he also reflects on the significance of finding other transracial adoptees to connect with while in college. Specifically, Michael mentions joining an adoptee collective, a student-run group structured around a shared adoptee identity:

⁹⁶ Eng, *Social Text*, 33

⁹⁷ Simpson, Audra. "The Ruse of Consent and the Anatomy of 'refusal': Cases from Indigenous North America and Australia." *Postcolonial Studies* 20, no. 1 (2017): 18.

I would almost say that the friendships in college felt less forced than the friendships growing up. With the adoptee collective, it was kind of any time we had a meeting or anytime we met outside of it with like other adoptee friends. Just because for me I was finally able to share experiences of being adoptee specific experiences and someone else was able to understand them without me having to go into detail or without me having to explain everything. Just kind of like the camaraderie in sharing those experiences, just kind of felt supported.

Finally surrounded by people who had also experienced the nuances of being a transracial adoptee, Michael was able to discuss and process some of the experiences he had shut away during his childhood. Michael later explored his art community, another community with which he found belonging, finding a group of people who could validate, empathize, and just authentically understand his experiences offered a type of emotional support and validation that he had never had growing up.

The other major network of support that Michael noted was his art community. Similar to Frances' description of her art community as occupying “conflicting spaces,” Michael also highlighted his art community as a place where he felt he could connect through shared political ideologies. More specifically, Michael, who continued his art studies after college and moved to Korea to pursue a Master’s degree in Art, described why he has been so drawn to art as a platform and the art community:

I guess the issue of art is that each historical movement of art has always come from, how do I say this, like each historical art movement has always come about because it's in response to the previous art movement. It doesn't just come out of

nowhere. So it's always kind of self-critiquing, self-aware in a sense...It's kind of used as a platform to speak out or speak about issues or to raise awareness about issues or just to always challenge the status quo.

Michael's connection to art and the art community is both about the desire for political expression that he shares with other artists as well as the potential for what he considers art to be: a medium that provides artists with an influential and powerful political expression. Much like Frances' articulation, this expression contributes to, challenges, and critiques David Eng's assertion that transracial adoptees have the potential to foster more political self-awareness within their multicultural families.

Rather than embracing their voice through personal relationships, however, Michael--for whom family was not a safe space to begin unpacking his identities and experiences--instead found art. Building off of Eng's conclusion, then, is a more general concept that acknowledges the potential that individuals with different experiences carry in sharing and raising the awareness of more privileged folks, while also recognizing the fundamental importance of a community that offers emotional and political haven. It is with the support of these spaces, that individuals such as Michael can sustainably leverage their experiences and share their narrative with the world. Through his conceptualization of art as both a way of communicating, critiquing, and connecting with past and contemporary generations, Michael reflected on the importance of his own art production:

I want to share [my] experiences with people who don't possess those identities [and] then also for people that have those identities but don't necessarily have the means of expressing it, maybe if art can be a point of like, sharing that...I guess it's the same things that drew me to the people in the art department [in college] and some of the other adoptees and I think even just right now amongst the friends I've chosen and the friends I still keep in contact with. It's kind of just like taking accountability, responsibility, honesty, but then also, like, how do I say, like a certain sensitivity to other people and other people's situations.

While this sentiment of wanting to connect with people from a variety of different backgrounds is shared across Frances, Michael, and Tracey, Frances and Michael are more similar in the qualities they look for in their chosen communities that allow them to feel safe and comfortable. Tracey, on the other hand, responds to feeling restricted in both her Jewish and other communities growing up to the extent that she rejects all organized communities outright. In describing the spaces in which she seeks out membership, Tracey outlines the inherent downfalls of the organized community from her experiences:

There's not many communities that are very diverse in its nature because many communities are based around one idea and the schema of ideas that surround it. So, there's usually a particular type of person that thinks, oh, you're probably also interested in these things so I'm going to go and become part of that community. And usually if that doesn't align then they won't join that community. And so it's kind of a community.

Whereas Frances and Michael equate their disconnection from their religious communities as grounded in ideological or political differences, Tracey processes her alienation from the Jewish community she grew up with alongside the disconnect she felt in other communities, such as her Chinese school, as well. From this analysis, that the inherent drawback is not religion itself, but rather the fundamental structure that is required for organized communities to exist, that is, identity. Tracey critiques identity-based communities and argues that any form of organized communities, religious or not, is problematic. Complicating this notion of identity and belonging, Tracey reflects on her own relationship to the community as an individual:

If I belong, it's because of who I am as an individual and it's among other individuals, so sometimes I feel like, 'Oh I belong everywhere because everyone is an individual and there's always a place for me because there's always a place for everyone.' But you know, that's when I'm feeling optimistic and it easily switches too, 'I don't belong anywhere, there's no community for me, everyone else has a support system through this and that but because of my identity, there's nowhere that understands all of my needs.' ...I think there's something contrived about organized communities...I don't like the idea of siloing yourselves off or self-segregating... I think that there are a lot of people who have decided this is what it means to be this or that or the other thing and there's sometimes one type of person who goes to those kinds of groups and I don't ever like hanging out with a group of one type of person.

Tracey highlights the challenges of the politics of location that Rowe critiques and very much emphasize the cultural and racial discordance that is unique to transracial adoptees. The universal weight that Tracey places on her observations and experiences with organized community serves as a coping mechanism for rationalizing and coming to terms with the intersections of her identity. Tracey's nuanced analysis of communities centers around shared identity and its tendency to limit and obscure any other differences that define individuals very much relates to the "challenging of status quo" that both Michael and Frances also mention. Her fixation on shared identity and community, however, have led her down a different path, away from seeking recognition or catharsis among other adoptees as Michael, and more similarly, toward counterculture spaces as Frances described, though for a different rationale:

I think what connects us is the feeling of making our own identity and having friends that have a similar perspective on life but have had different ways of getting there. I like hanging out with a mish-mosh [sic] of people and that's where I find community...I've always sought out befriending people who are different from myself and usually who also feel different from other people too. I think a lot of the people, my closest friends don't have the same story as me and also have felt kind of disconnected from their communities in other ways as well. I would say I belong to a group of misfits.

Though Tracey may not herself relate to the kinds of communities both Frances and Michael gravitate toward, there is a clear connection across all three, in terms preference for existing within marginalized groups or communities that challenge the

status quo. While Frances and Michael describe this space as “counterculture” and political in terms of ideology and expression through art, Tracey associates individual’s identities with their ideology and perspective, and places less emphasis on the media through which they each express that ideology and perspective.

Read in conversation with the previous chapter, these narratives challenge Adoption Studies scholars to recognize the queerness with which some transracial adoptees are defining and pursuing their own communities. In this chapter, I explore the experiences that Frances, Michael, and Tracey have had in their respective religious communities that have redirected them toward alternative sources of community. Contrasting scholarship that is hyper-focused on the influence that childhood relationships have on transracial adoptee, these narratives suggest the importance of college and adolescence, both because of the opportunity for academia-instigated growth of self-awareness and the potential perspective that relocating to a new community and city may have on a transracial adoptee.

Conclusion

Through conversations with six other transracially adopted young adults who were raised in the United States by white, religiously-affiliated families, I decenter the commonplace narrative of adoptees as victims and in need of saving. I refocus my adoption conversation to focus on moments that highlight the agency within and variation across transracial adoptee narratives. In conversation with other Adoption Studies that focus on informing policy, or supporting adoptive parents, this thesis is not only a collaboration of my analysis and growth as a transracial adoptee, it also celebrates the insights, self-awareness, and survival of other transracial adoptees who experience racial and cultural discordance, or the straddling of cultural and racial identities that are often viewed by mainstream society as at odds or in conflict.

I employ an intersectional framework to explore some of the experiences of my interviewees that informed and influenced their self-perceptions. To do this, I argue both that queer belonging, a term prevalent in Queer Studies, is applicable to adoptee kinship, and that religion has the potential to be a space of identity exploration and development for adoptees, as well. I highlight two coping mechanisms for internalizing the above-mentioned racial and cultural discordance. Both strategies, the first being the more controversial assimilationist or colorblind model, where transracial adoptees choose to look past the elements of their identity that differentiate them to better connect with others, and the second, critical self-awareness offer insights into future Transracial Adoption Studies. Due to the size and time limitations of this research, is important to

consider these as two of many potential strategies and narratives that capture the techniques that transracial adoptees have relied on to survive and thrive within society.

The anecdotes that these narratives share also rely on a broad range of life experiences and relationships, where most interviewees emphasized interactions not just with family, but also with community members and college classes as largely influential. This reference challenges the overemphasis that Adoption Studies often places on childhood development. As explored in previous chapters, adoption research by non-adoptee scholars that focuses on identity development or psychological well-being of adoptees is almost exclusively directed toward the way in which adoptive parents raise their children. Evident through Dolores and Michael's narratives is the value that exploring their identities in college, with other adoptees, and physically away from their parents, played in the development of their critical self-awareness. There is potential for further research into the value that critical adoption related courses in academia or higher education play in the lives of transracial adoptees.

Further research into this topic might explore the intersections of race, gender, and religious affiliation among transracial adoptees, or the intersections of race and culture among transnational adoptees who were raised with religious affiliations, though not by white families. The iterations of intersectionality among transracial adoptees, who straddle multiple identities, may prove helpful in both supporting and celebrating the agency of transracial adoptees. Furthermore, as marginalized and underrepresented individuals, the voices of transracial adoptees themselves, have much to add in the movement toward radical social justice and equity. I encourage my fellow transracial

adoptees to continue to challenge the constructs of homogeneity, find power and empowerment in the uncertain and seek out opportunities to challenge, educate, and uplift those around us.

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Appendix A: Informed Consent to Participate in Research Study

San Francisco State University
Informed Consent to Participate in Research
Impacts of Religious Affiliation on Transracial Adoptee Identity

A. PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

The purpose of this research is to uplift the reflections of other transracial adoptees in their navigation of belonging as adults, with a keen focus on how religious and secular variables are influential.

The researcher, Sophie Navarro, is a graduate student at San Francisco State University conducting research for a master's degree with the Asian American Studies Department. You are being asked to participate in this study because you identify as a transracial adoptee raised in either a religious or secular background, and are an adult.

B. PROCEDURES

If you agree to participate in this research, the following will occur:

- you will be interviewed for approximately forty-five minutes about your upbringing and communities you were and are currently a part of, as well as your experience with adoption.
- the interview will be audio recorded to ensure accuracy in reporting your statements.
- the interview will take place at a time and location convenient to you.).
- the researcher may contact you later to clarify your interview answers for approximately fifteen within two months of the interview.
- total time commitment will be an hour.

C. RISKS

There is a risk of loss of privacy. However, no names or identities will be used in any published reports of the research. Only the researcher will have access to the research data. There is a risk of discomfort or anxiety due to the nature of questions asked; however, the participant can answer only those questions you choose to answer and can stop participation in the research at any time.

D. CONFIDENTIALITY

The research data will be kept in a secure location and only the researcher will have access to the data. All research data will be stored in an encrypted document on a password protected computer. Audio or video recordings will be destroyed at the end of the study. Transcripts will be kept and only used in the case of future

research and will be stored on a password protected computer. Data will be kept Professor Sudhakar's office at San Francisco State University in the AAS Department Office. Only the researcher and their faculty advisor will have access to the data.

E. DIRECT BENEFITS

There will be no direct benefits to the participant.

F. COSTS

The only cost to participants will be transportation to the research site.

G. COMPENSATION

There will be no compensation for participating in this research.

H. ALTERNATIVES

The alternative is not to participate in the research.

I. QUESTIONS

You have spoken with Sophie Navarro about this study and have had your questions answered. If you have any further questions about the study, you may contact the researcher by email at snavarro@mail.sfsu.edu or you may contact the researcher's advisor, Professor Sudhakar at sudhakar@sfsu.edu.

Questions about your rights as a study participant, or comments or complaints about the study, may also be addressed to the Human and Animal Protections at 415: 338-1093 or protocol@sfsu.edu.

J. CONSENT

You have been given a copy of this consent form to keep.

PARTICIPATION IN THIS RESEARCH IS VOLUNTARY. You are free to decline to participate in this research or to withdraw your participation at any point, without penalty. Your decision whether or not to participate in this research will have no influence on your present or future status at San Francisco State University.

Signature _____
Research Participant

Date: _____

Signature _____
Researcher

Date: _____

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Community:

- What kinds of communities were you a part of growing up? Can you describe them for me, please?
- What kinds of communities are you currently a part of? Can you describe them for me, please?
- Can you tell me about a time you felt strongly connected to a community? Why?
- Can you tell me about a time where you felt strongly disconnected from a community? Why?
- How does being a part of each of these communities make you feel?
- What kinds of things do you do/talk about with/in these communities? What kinds of things don't you do? Why?
- Are there communities that you are currently not a part of but want to be?
- Can you tell me about a time when you felt supported by a community?
- Can you tell me about a time when you didn't feel supported by that community?
- When do you feel like you most belong to a group?
- What does community look like to you?

Conditions:

- Commonalities, boundary making, ritual-making, symbols
- What do you do together?
- What represents you guys? What things hold you together?
- How do you build a sustainable, long-term community?
- How did others invite them into the community? What did others do to do this?
- How does the group make them feel belonging?

Religion/faith:

- Do you believe in God? Do you believe in faith? Or would you consider yourself a spiritual person?
- If you are part of a religious community, how do you participate?
- Do your parents believe in God? Are they people of faith?
- How did god or faith play a role in your childhood? How does it play a role in your life now?
- Did faith or god influence how your family talked about adoption? Does it currently influence how your family talks about adoption?
- What was it about your Hebrew school that made you hate it?

- How you belong to a community that's religious vs. how you belong to a community that is not religious?

Adoption and family:

- How did you talk about adoption with your parents growing up? With your friends? In school? Or with people you didn't know?
- How do you talk about being adopted now? Who do you talk about being adopted with?
- Do you have friends or in community with other transracial adoptees? Please describe them.
- What stories did your parents tell you about your adoption growing up? How you respond to them as a child?
- Do you still respond in that way? Why or why not? (How do you feel?)
- How did your parents talk to you about race during your childhood? How do you talk about it when them now?
- Who do you go to or where do you go to talk about: political, religious, spiritual, social, economic, emotional/psychological/identity or career issues? Can you tell me about a time when you were struggling with...?
- Are there certain people or spaces you do not seek out for specific issues? Why?