Letters from an interdisciplinary artist: Illuminating Korean adoptee identity through mentors and metal

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LETTERS FROM AN INTERDISCIPLINARY ARTIST:
ILLUMINATING KOREAN ADOPTEE IDENTITY
THROUGH MENTORS AND METAL

A Thesis Presented

by

Tonya Ferraro

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Education
Specializing in Interdisciplinary Studies

May, 2014
Accepted by the Faculty of the Graduate College, The University of Vermont, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education, specializing in Interdisciplinary Studies.

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ABSTRACT

Interdisciplinary integration and practice through meaning making and context can contribute to the reconsideration and revolution of research by supporting narratives and creating space for public discourse. In researching my heritage as a Korean adoptee, I found that the literature has been predominantly from adoptive parents’ perspective, focusing primarily on child and adolescent development. Lacking in the literature is the adult adoptee perspective, and specifically their experiential voices.

This interdisciplinary thesis has three major purposes (1) to explore how transracial transnational Korean adoption affects identity formation, (2) to illustrate how mentoring relationships can be a means to address and reframe the theme of loss as experienced by an adoptee, and (3) to use interdisciplinary inquiry as a means of expression to make meaning and illuminate adoptee identity formation. Drawing from my personal experience as an adoptee, an artist, a researcher, and as an educational mentee I integrate past research findings, Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN: storytelling), epistolary Scholarly Personal Narrative (eSPN: epistolary storytelling), and visual artistic research through jewelry/sculpture to describe constructing my adoptee identity. Images of the jewelry/sculpture are provided, while a public art opening displayed the series of work.
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While this thesis project was a personal adventure, I could not have ventured into it without the support and generosity of others.

Dr. Gail Rose. Thank you for always encouraging me inside and outside our research office. Inside, the opportunity of being part of a research team that values all its members has been invaluable. Outside, your showing up for each and every art event has been more than appreciated. Your patience, kindness, understanding, and leading by example encourage me to grow professionally and personally.

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Dr. Irle Goldman. Your sense of adventure is what I aspire to. Creativity and courage in teaching has become a necessity in my mind. Thank you for inviting me to be an apprentice to your art.

Dr. Robert Nash. Thank you for reminding me my story is important, that meaning making can come in different forms, and that there are many types of artists. Our love for Boston and Northeastern has reminded me of what “home” means.

My Comps Committee. Windy, thank you for asking me “Where is the love?” and Vanessa, I’m grateful for all the tea and talks. Your friendships have been an integral part of this experience.

My friends. You are now near and far. You are family and the listening and laughter span our space. Jon Sneden and Sasha Grigorovich-Barsky, you are irreplaceable.
My family. Your encouragement that I will “land on my feet” (especially when it feels like I won’t) has been a source of courage. Also, a very special thank you goes to my Burlington family, the Kuranis.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge the outlaws (artistic, philosophical, and educational). Thank you for setting precedents of bravery by bending, bypassing, and breaking the rules.
DEDICATION

This is for all the adoptees, and specifically my nieces Jada and Ellie.

While building your identity, I hope you find strength in your voice and vision. Your stories are your own…
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PART I: INTRODUCTION(S)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PART II: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW:</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A NEW FACE TO THE AMERICAN FAMILY</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1. A (small) Severed Country: A Contextual Backdrop</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2. Symbiosis: South Korea &amp; the United States</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3. Initial Korean Adoption Research</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4. Current Korean Adoption Research</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PART III: LIVED EXPERIENCES</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1. Two Beginnings</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entrance Narratives and Birth Stories</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2.1. Intention and Identity</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2.2. Documentation</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.11.5. Mentor V: The Interdisciplinarian</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.11.6. Mentor Modeling: A “Better” End</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.11.7. Mentor as Me</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PART IV: VISUAL ARTISTIC RESEARCH</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Art Opening: mis(fit)s: identity &amp; adornment</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artist Statement</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Installation: Representing the Process</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mis(fit)s: Images and Descriptions</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A mis(fit): …deconstructed</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PART V: METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1. Introduction: Scholarly Personal Narrative, epistolary Scholarly</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1.1. Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN)</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1.2. epistolary Scholarly Personal Narrative (eSPN)</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1.3. Visual Artistic Research</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2. Integration of SPN, eSPN, and Artistic Research</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3. Approach</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.1. How It Was Conducted</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.2. Why SPN, eSPN, and Visual Artistic Research</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.3. Limitations</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Gallery Announcement: mis(fit)s: identity & adornment ........................................ 68
Figure 2: Gallery Opening: Willionaire (Will Andrews).......................................................... 69
Figure 3: Gallery Opening: Artist Talk..................................................................................... 70
Figure 4: mis(fit)s: installation 1............................................................................................. 72
Figure 5: mis(fit)s: installation 2............................................................................................. 73
Figure 6: what is still undone.................................................................................................... 74
Figure 7: i dream light years .................................................................................................... 75
Figure 8: and the boths, and the neithers ................................................................................. 76
Figure 9: all of it is yours & mine............................................................................................. 77
Figure 10: a temporary container............................................................................................. 78
Figure 11: approximate answers............................................................................................... 79
Figure 12: …this is water.......................................................................................................... 80
Figure 13: 51%........................................................................................................................ 81
Figure 14: show your shadows................................................................................................. 82
Figure 15: empty spaces......................................................................................................... 83
Figure 16: my skin keeps the storm inside............................................................................... 84
Figure 17: …this is water......................................................................................................... 85
“No one is born fully-formed: it is through self-experience in the world that we become what we are.”¹ Paulo Freire, Educational Theorist

In 2007, 47% of United States adults reported they were “touched by adoption.”
In 2013, the percentage increased to 67%.²

PART I: INTRODUCTION(S)

Dear you,

This is a letter to you. First, I would like to define what I mean when I write “you.” I am writing you as a fellow adoptee, an adoptive parent and/or bio-parent, those of you that know an adoptee, and/or are curious about adoption. Now that we have established who you are, I would like to introduce myself.

I am an adoptee. Specifically, I am a transnational and transracial Korean adoptee. This is one way I identify myself. In terms of this project, it is equally important for me to present myself as an educational interdisciplinarian. I am a Study Coordinator within the University of Vermont’s psychiatry department and visual artist/metalsmith.

As an interdisciplinarian, I believe that approaching education through interdisciplinary integration and practice can contribute to the reconsideration and revolution of research. Through interdisciplinary research one can make meaning, create context, support narratives, and thus create space for public discourse.

In researching my heritage as a Korean adoptee, I found that the literature has been predominantly from the adoptive parents’ perspective, while focusing primarily on

¹ Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed.
² 2013 National Foster Care Adoption Attitudes Survey.
child and adolescent development. Lacking is the adult adoptee perspective, and specifically their experiential voices.

This interdisciplinary thesis project has three major purposes (1) to explore how transracial transnational Korean adoption affects identity formation, (2) to illustrate how mentoring relationships can be a means to address and reframe the theme of loss as experienced by an adoptee, and (3) to use interdisciplinary inquiry as a means of expression to make meaning and illuminate adoptee identity formation. Drawing from my personal experience as an adoptee, an artist, a researcher, and an educational mentee I integrate past research findings, Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN: storytelling), epistolary Scholarly Personal Narrative (eSPN: epistolary storytelling), and visual artistic research through jewelry/sculpture to describe constructing my adoptee identity. Images of the jewelry/sculpture are provided, while a public art opening displayed the series of work.

Part II focuses on the history of Korean adoption and the research that followed. Acknowledging the history of intercountry adoption, specifically Korean international adoption and the relationship to the United States and the institutionalization thereof provides a contextual foundation. I then shift into the history of Korean adoption research.

Part III provides lived experiences around my adoptee identity and how I negotiated and navigated the transracial and transnational experience. The Korean adoptee population comprises one of the largest cohorts of adoptees in the world. As a
member of this cohort, I share stories spanning from the entrance into my adoptive family through the present.

Part IV reflects on how visual artistic research was a means for me to approach and synthesize the multidimensional complexities of being an adoptee.

Part V focuses on the mixed-methodology of this thesis project. In this section I explain why I chose Scholarly Personal Narrative and its counterpart epistolary Scholarly Personal Narrative. I then describe the integration of visual artistic research throughout the process of this project.

Part VI concludes with my development, findings, and the implications it has for the field.

This interdisciplinary research project hopes to acknowledge, illuminate, and honor the complex and multifaceted experience of adoption, while providing insight on the transracial and transnational experience. Recognizing personal narratives as separate and unique, the sharing of such experiences can result in emerging themes, connections, and stimulation for further research. Contributing to adoptee research can offer support, guidance, and a sense of belonging to the adoptee community.
PART II: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW:

A NEW FACE TO THE AMERICAN FAMILY

2.1. A (small) Severed Country: A Contextual Backdrop

Established in the 1950s, international adoption is a phenomenon that has occurred predominately in the last half century. Throughout this time there has been approximately 300,000 international adoptions. Among these adoptions approximately 160,000 were from South Korea.³

In Far East Asia you can find the 85,228 square mile, 71 million inhabited peninsula of Korea. Dating back to 2,333 BC, Korea has a rich cultural heritage based on a traditional agro-feudal society with roots in Confucianism. As such, a deep patriarchal vein runs through the sociocultural dynamic.⁴ Korea’s history is filled with neighboring invasions from bordering countries including China, Japan, and Russia. In 1910, Japan invaded and annexed Korea. Upon colonization Japanese culture was imposed.

In 1945, the United States dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima. This would result in the surrender of Japan and the close of World War II. Post-WWII, the small peninsula of Korea was severed in two. Korea was a symbolic and literal ideological geopolitical divide. The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea or North Korea was a Stalin communist controlled state occupied by the former USSR. South Korea or the Republic of Korea was occupied by the United States. It existed as an American influenced democratized capitalist system.

³ Ministry of Health and Welfare.
⁴ “History of Korea.”
The tension of this divided country came to a head in the summer of 1950 with the start of the Korean War. North Korea was supported by Communist China while South Korea would call the United States and sixteen other countries through the United Nations allies. The war would take with it a reported unknown “large number” of civilian deaths in North Korea, while South Korea would report an approximate 373,599 civilian and 137,899 military deaths. An estimated 200,000 widows and 100,000 orphaned children were a result of the war. Saturated shelters spilled out onto the streets. The war torn county was broken, and an overabundance of abandoned, neglected, and parentless children sought assistance. Casualties, poverty, and devastation weakened and shifted the infrastructure of the country’s traditional family system.

In response to the destruction, deterioration, and destitution of the state, South Korea would receive support from the US and other members of the international community. The focus of aid was directed towards the excess of orphans that resulted from the war. Thus, the Korean War ignited South Korean international adoption.

2.2. Symbiosis: South Korea & the United States

The first wave of orphans to be adopted by United States’ families was that of biracial children born from South Korean mothers and Western military fathers. South Korea’s family system held a history of valuing blood-related parenthood, while relational adoption was limited and traditionally supported for continuity of the bloodline. The Korean state acknowledged the social stigmatization these war orphans would experience. They recognized that given the history of the sociocultural climate, it would

5 “Korean War.”
be nearly impossible for mixed-blood children to find adoptive homes in their
motherland. In 1961, the Korean government responded by enacting the Extraordinary
Law of Adoption for the Orphan Child.6 This law encouraged international adoption and
created a means to support South Korean post-war development.

Prior to World War II international adoption was virtually nonexistent. In
response to the war orphans of WWII, the U.S. Government enacted the Displaced
Persons Act that allowed 3,000 children to be received in the United States regardless of
adoption status.7 Five hundred Korean children (of the aforementioned 3,000) would be
allowed to enter the US each year for adoption. Post-Korean War, the US recognized the
need and support the Korean state provided towards international adoption. In 1956, the
US responded by increasing the number of adoptions to 4,000 with the Refugee Relief
Act. One year later in 1957, the US Congress removed the set quota on orphan visas.
Four years later in 1961, adoption was “normalized” through the Immigration and
Nationality Act.

South Korea’s need for assistance and state supported exportation of children was
met by the United States’ sociocultural nationalism. Post-war, images of the “Korean
waif” appeared in newspapers. Images objectified Korean war-orphans and supported the
mentality and sentiment of GI’s “rescuing” orphaned children. These “mascots” were the
prototype adoptees.8 Also supporting the rescue sentiment were Harry and Bertha Holt. In
her book The Seed from the East published in 1956, Bertha wrote,

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6 Bergquist et al., International Korean Adoption, 6.
7 Ibid.
8 Raleigh, “Adopted Territory,” 52.
Korea…1954…Thousands of children suffered in crowded, understaffed, and poorly supplied orphanages—children, it seemed that no one wanted. But God gave one couple a heart to love these children. This most ordinary family…changed the world when they adopted eight Korean-Amerasian children. Intercountry adoption flourishes today, largely because God used the faith and determination of the Holts to adopt homeless children into families of their own.⁹

The Holts exemplified the Christian charity humanistic missionary position response to the status of Korea’s children. The Holts went on to adopt eight Korean children. Holt International continues to be a force within the international adoption community today with connections to eleven countries, including South Korea.

South Korea found international adoption as both an economic and social solution that helped ease and rebuild the war-torn country. The original issue of addressing the stigmatization and social welfare of the child was met by an international exportation solution. This government-supported social solution provided South Korea an economic means and deferral, if not avoidance of in-country domestic alternatives. The rescue war-orphan mission evolved into a societal cyclical “solution” that is currently being reviewed, criticized, and in a state of controversy.

From 1953 to 2008 there has been approximately 163,898 Korean international adoptions. Of those, 109,242 were received by the United States.¹⁰ South Korean adoptees have been the largest adoptee cohort within the United States, only surpassed by China in 1990. Throughout the years, political and sociocultural factors have contributed to changing numbers and patterns in overall international adoption trends. However, due

⁹ Holt and Wisner, *The Seed from the East.*
¹⁰ Ministry of Health and Welfare.
to its size and longevity Korean international adoption can be viewed as the founding international adoption model.

2.3. Initial Korean Adoption Research

As the numbers of Korean international adoption increased so did the sociocultural questions surrounding adoption. Initial research focused on abandonment and both physical and psychological adjustment. As these adopted children aged, research expanded to relationships, self-esteem, socialization, and mating. This led to examining adaptation and the connection to ethnic identity development. Throughout the body of research adoptive parents’ experiences and accounts were used as the major source of knowledge, providing observed adoptee behavior.

In 1988, the developmental psychologist Lois Lyden published a study that investigated 101 Korean children adopted by white American families. Lyden discussed her findings and brought criticism to past research. She stated,

Furthermore, many of the studies on transracial adoption have serious theoretical and methodological shortcomings. The concept of adjustment has been used as a measure of successful adoptive placement in many studies, yet the definition of adjustment varies widely and is largely measured subjectively. In some cases, parents make the determination of “successful adjustment.” In these instances parents may perceive successful adjustment as their own feelings of satisfaction with the placement rather than the assessment of the adoptee’s positive psychological development. The child who is experiencing the adjustment is seen from the parent’s perspective.

12 Huh and Reid, “Intercountry, Transracial Adoption and Ethnic Identity.”
13 Lydens, *A Longitudinal Study of Crosscultural Adoption.*
Lyden explains that past research shows the adoptive parents as the observed population. Parenting and parents’ perceptions of the adopted child were focused upon. Analysis of previous research not only questions the reliability and accuracy of the measurements, but overshadows the obvious resource, the adoptee.

2.4. Current Korean Adoption Research

Korean adoptee research has shifted to acknowledging the adoptee experiential voice as an integral resource that could illuminate the complexities of transracial and transnational adoption. In 2000, the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute published their report on “The Gathering of the First Generation of Adult Korean Adoptees: Adoptees’ Perceptions of International Adoption.” Three hundred and fifty adoptees registered for the conference. One hundred and sixty-seven adoptees responded to a survey questionnaire. Highlighted findings of this survey include: 71% grew up in small towns, 95% of respondents were adopted by American families, and 98% were raised by Caucasian parents. The mean age of respondents was 31, making this a pioneer study in Korean adoption.

This study investigated perceived ethnic identity through adolescence compared to current adult perceptions. The survey also served as a foundation for small group discussions at the conference. Several topics were addressed including but not limited to early life experiences, identity, discrimination, and perceptions of adoption.¹⁴

This study both supported and encouraged further research. Fellow Korean adoptee, Joy Hoffman investigated ethnic identity development using the “lived experiences” of 12 college aged Korean adoptees. While, David Palmer, also a fellow Korean adoptee, interviewed 38 adult adoptees and built a theoretical framework illustrating that Korean adoptees move towards a social justice advocate mindset.

Eleana Kim, not an adoptee but Korean, has also contributed to the literature with her book: Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging. As described by Kim her research objective is to,

…tell the story of Korean transnational, transracial adoption from the perspective of the adult adoptees who came of age in Europe and North America in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, a period commonly associated with globalization. As the pioneers of both transnational and Asian transracial adoption, these children represented a “social experiment,” the outcomes of which are subject to intense scrutiny and debate since the practice began in the mid-1950s.

These studies have advanced the field, have highlighted the gap in the literature, and acknowledged the importance and potential of the Korean adoptee lived experience. Thus, the Korean adoptee voice as an authority within the research has room for further exploration.

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15 Hoffman and Pena, “Too Korean to Be White and Too White to Be Korean.”
17 Kim, Adopted Territory.
PART III: LIVED EXPERIENCES

In this section I share stories that surround my lived experience as a Korean adoptee. The stories are accompanied by comparisons and references to past research and literature. As presented by Baumeister, “Identities exist in societies, which define and organize them. Thus, the search of identity includes the question of what is the proper relationship of the individual to society as a whole.”\(^\text{18}\) I specifically focus on the “adoptive identity” development research concept “self-in-context.”\(^\text{19}\) “Adoptive Identity” development is defined by how the adoptee constructs meaning around their adoption.\(^\text{20}\) Self-in-context is the connection between three dimensions of the adoptee experience: the intrapersonal, the relationships within the family, and social worlds (beyond the family). Self-in-context takes account of the importance of the adoptee’s awareness of the aforementioned dimensions and how it informs their global identity development.\(^\text{21}\) While these are foundational issues within adoptee identity, added complexity exists when the transnational and transracial are factored. Identity development is a life-long meaning making process; adoptees are challenged to look at these dimensions while acknowledging that they have personal history unknowns and ambiguity.

The concluding part of this section describes how my experiences eventually led to mentoring relationships. Through an epistolary approach I provide vignettes of

\(^{18}\) Baumeister, *Identity*, 17.
\(^{19}\) Grotevant et al., “Adoptive Identity.”
\(^{20}\) Ibid.
\(^{21}\) Ibid.
experiences with mentors that exemplify how these relationships helped support and illuminate my adoptee identity formation and provide a means to look at the dynamic of self-in-context.

3.1. Two Beginnings:

Entrance Narratives and Birth Stories

Adoptee documentation can be limited and birth stories incomplete, thus adoptive parents create “entrance narratives.” Rather than the biological birth story, what becomes the beginning of adoptee’s story is their arrival into the adoptive parents’ lives.

Initial research investigated how entrance narratives provided space for adoptive parents to recognize the complexity of their adoptee’s story. Past research has focused on the family stories surrounding identity from the adoptive parents’ point of view. Themes have emerged from their narratives, which have contributed to further understanding of parents’ experience. Lacking in the literature is the adoptee’s version of their own personal myth. Kranstuber and Kellas hypothesize that adoptee’s first person narratives and the internalization thereof “…will illuminate the theorized connection between family stories and individual identity development.”

Grotevant further expounds on this concept and emphasizes that adoptees must acknowledge, negotiate, and understand the “layers of complexity” within their narrative to form a cohesive self-concept.

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22 Krusiewicz and Wood, “‘He Was Our Child from the Moment We Walked in That Room.’”
23 Kranstuber and Kellas, “‘Instead of Growing Under Her Heart, I Grew in It.’”
24 Grotevant et al., “Adoptive Identity.”
Over the years I have heard my entrance narrative as told by my family. My adoptive parents, older brother, other family, and friends have contributed to this story. Listening to, living with, and being a part of this experience has made the story evolve and grow. The following is my entrance narrative in epistolary form to my adoptive family.

3.2. An Entrance Narrative: A Letter to My Family

To My Family,

April 1, 1984. It was a snowy day in the foothills of the Catskill Mountains in upstate New York. Snowflakes were clinging to each other and a smooth, thin blanket enveloped everything in white. I imagine that Mom saw Dad’s breath as he was shoveling the freshly fallen snow off the wood porch that wrapped around our four-bedroom blue painted house. Whenever mom recounts this story, I feel like she is looking just past my shoulder. Behind me is the scene replayed, just as clear and present as when it happened back in 1984.

Over the years, I’ve heard how Mom and Dad met in high school. He was a senior and she was a freshman. Mom has reminisced about high school proms, drive-in movies, and times with friends. Fifteen winters have passed since your high school days. I wonder if you ever thought this is what your life would look like on April 1, 1984.

Mom always remembers to tell me that she thought there wasn’t enough snow to warrant shoveling that day. She reminds me of this part of the story just as often as she reminds me about the dining room hutch. When you thought you couldn’t afford the adoption process you bought the biggest most expensive piece of furniture you could
almost afford. With that came the matching long rectangular dark-stained wooden dining room table and chairs. Through the years the table would see our family through many gatherings. Countless birthdays, anniversaries, holidays, and Sunday dinners would be invested at this table. And this is where I’d sit and study. I remember the wood having softness. My pencils would leave imprints from years of homework, fossilized by time.

You’d explain to me how you both made modest livings and did not go without. Everyone had a roof over their head, clothes on their back, and food in their mouths. Mom would explain to me how only once she moved from our rural hometown. She left for western New York, an hour and a half bus ride away, to attend medical secretary school. While there she learned to take shorthand notes and how to sit with perfect practiced posture. Upright and structured, this was the foundation needed to apply nail polish. While she was away, Dad waited for her return. And in that time he became a machinist that stood beside Mom’s father and brother. The cologne they all wore was made of the oil of the steel turbines that towered over them.

Everyone was anxious that day in April. Everyone included not just Mom and Dad, but my brother too. He would tell me how he gathered each and every one of his stuffed animals that his seven-year old length arms could hold. He would bring them all in the car, waiting to be shared.

Over the years you’ve always told me that you wanted me. Mom explained how after many trials, disappointments, and much heartache my brother was a triumph against odds. It always seemed that you wanted me to understand that you decided to adopt because you wanted another child in your family. That I was the missing puzzle piece
that would complete the family.

Throughout the years, we wouldn’t consistently celebrate April 1st. Celebrations of my birthday were on November 1st, my documented day of birth. I’ve heard others refer to their adoption day as “Gotcha Day.” This is how my nieces’ adoption day is referred to. There was a few years that you gave me gifts. I remember the Robert Frost book of poetry and a snow globe with floating pink hearts. And as I got older, we’d say that it wasn’t so coincidental that this day would coincide with April Fool’s, a day that celebrates humor and jokes. We all know that I tend to not only laugh a good amount, but usually during the most inappropriate times. Regardless, April 1st is and was a very special day for all of us. Although many years have passed since 1984, I can still imagine the snow and feel the imprints in the dining room table.

I write this and want to say thank you for wanting me.

Thank you for making a space for me.

With love,

ton

3.2.1. Intention and Identity

Past research show that themes have emerged that illuminate the multidimensional complexity that surround the entrance narrative from the adoptive parents’ perspective. Identified themes include: dialectical tensions (struggle between recognizing happiness for their addition and the bio-mother’s loss), destiny (the “inevitability” of the child coming to their family), compelling connection (the instant connection to the child), legitimacy, and rescue (saving the adoptee from environmental
circumstances). This research showed that themes were not mutually exclusive. Furthermore, it went on to describe that emphasized themes affect adoptees’ self-concept.

I believe that my parents’ intentions have always come from a place filled with generosity and kindness. I have never felt my parents withheld or falsified what they knew, but rather shared the story they believed. My family has always conveyed and was explicit in that I was not only “wanted” but also loved. This was not limited to their wanting or love. My parents not only spoke for themselves, but also spoke on behalf of my biological mother. Throughout the years they explained to me that my bio-mother also wanted to keep me. Their story was supported by my adoption paperwork, my Initial Social History Report. As far as I understood I was “wanted” on both sides of the world.

The feeling of not only having a place in my family, but also having a welcoming, loving place has been a piece of my self-concept and part of how I identify myself. In respect to the literature, what I have been told by my family and how I’ve framed my narrative and my self-concept may be different than another adoptee whose family focused primarily on a different theme, such as saving or rescue. Although I do not feel that being “saved” or “rescued” is my primary theme, I have always carried a feeling of indebtedness to my adoptive family. I believe this sentiment has contributed to my social consciousness.

As displayed by my family, they “wanted” me and that want came with a provided place in the family. However, over the years what I would struggle to reconcile was how I “fit” in that place. Although I had a place, I felt that the questions I had

25 Krusiewicz and Wood, “‘He Was Our Child from the Moment We Walked in That Room.’”
surrounding my adoption did not. I’ve always carried a growing curiosity surrounding my adoption. This curiosity and the questions that came with it would often be met with an emotional tension. Making room for bio-parents felt like I was taking away space from my adoptive parents. When I asked questions about my past it felt like my parents disappointedly heard, “Is our family not enough? Is loving you not enough?”

3.2.2. Documentation

Someone once said to me “…if it’s not documented, it didn’t happen.” This was when I was a case manager for a clinically informed therapeutic arts program for inner city teen girls in Boston. Each young person in our program had their own binder with sections that provided life logistics: contact information, school collaterals, and outside resources. As a case manager I learned to carry a binder to each and every meeting. The binder was the physical thread that connected all the facets of the young people’s lives. Nothing supported advocating for someone more than being able to voice dates and show details through documentation. When in doubt, I documented.

Over the years observing and reporting has become the backbone of my professional pursuits. After several years of direct service work I moved into co-teaching counseling courses and to in-direct human subject research, all while simultaneously continuing to work as a conceptual artist/metalsmith. As a co-teacher I’ve found documenting becomes the road map of reminders and reference points for what has been covered, shared, and sorted for the class. As a quantitative research study coordinator I have learned that the data, the numbers tell the research story. When the numbers don’t add up, documentation explaining why becomes critical. As a conceptual
artist/metalsmith where installations are constructed, deconstructed, bought, and sold documentation proves that the art existed.

Recognizing the power of documentation has led me to the understanding of how paradoxical it is. While references substantiate and legitimize logistics and events it can also concurrently emphasize the unknown, the undocumented. What has not been documented generates questions, speculations, and further inquiry.

I’ve reported what I’ve observed, just as I’ve been observed and have been reported about. As an adoptee I have adoption paperwork. My Initial Social History Report tells the story of the first sixteen months of my life. Around the age of ten my parents shared these papers with me. In turn, I would share them with the only other adoptee I knew.

3.2.3. Lily.

The crisp smell of autumn was in the air when I met Lily. Even when I was younger I was on the move. If you rated my pace on a scale of one to ten, I moved on average at approximately an eleven and a half. That day was no exception. I was darting in-between the other children and the obstacles of the playground. Suddenly, something caught my attention. This something was actually someone. I moved closer to her until we were standing face-to-face. She was wearing a dark blue denim dress. Her hair was pin-straight, jet black, and came halfway down her small back. On her smooth round face perched perfectly round owl like glasses. Peering out from her glasses were her almond shaped eyes. Even though I was neither wearing a dress nor glasses, I felt like I was looking into a mirror.
“Hi…I’m Tonya.” I heard myself excitedly say. My thoughts were racing, each trying to be first. I thought to myself, “She looks like me...She LOOKS like me!?” Then the questions came. Does she think I look like her? Does she know we look different than everyone else? Even better, maybe she was from Korea too?! She looks like she is from Korea. Was she adopted too? Would we be friends?

Until that moment what I knew was that people didn’t look like me. My family, friends, everyone I knew looked different from me. At the time, Lily was five and I was four years old. On that entire playground within our public school that resided within our rural community she was the first and only Korean, Asian, or person of color that I had met.

Lily was not only Korean, but she was also adopted. Our parents had even worked with the same agency. Through the years Lily and I’s friendship would grow. Although our temperaments and interests were different we remained friends throughout school. Through the years we would have sleepovers and in our pajamas; we would talk late into the night about school and crushes. However, the topic we’d most wonder about together was adoption.

One night we were talking about what we “knew” about our adoption. Excitedly, albeit naively, I shared with her that my parents had showed me my adoption papers. Within those papers I found names and locations of my birthparents. We shared the experience of adoption; surely, we would share the information we had around it. Anxiously, I waited for her to tell me the names of her parents and where they were. I thought, who knows maybe our biological parents were near each other in Korea. As I
waited with anticipation, slowly her eyes glazed, her shoulders lowered, and within
moments her petite frame wept and shook. Silently, I sat next to her while she crumbled.
I was witnessing her mourning the undocumented. She was mourning her abandonment.

From 1981 to 1990 there were 65,321 documented adoptions. I was one of the
47,153 adoptees documented and categorized as “single mother.” She was one of the
6,769 adoptees categorized as abandoned.

The first sixteen months of my life fit on three one-sided sheets of translucent
typewriter paper that has browning with time. My “papers” are secondary documents,
translations of the original paperwork. The writing is well intentioned but comes full of
flawed grammar and spelling errors. What has been lost in translation is unknown. As
such, I’ve revisited my paperwork and provide an expanded version of my Initial Social
History Report in epistolary form. It is a letter to my bio-mother.

3.3. A Birth Story (rebuilt):
A Letter to My Biological Mother

Dear 어머니 (mother),

I wanted to tell you that I received what you left me thirty years ago. I have no
memories of my own of “us.” I do not recall what you smelled like, how you held me, or
the way you looked at me. The words you provided have become an outline, or what I
think of as a skeletal souvenir of the first year of my life. This is the year we spent
together. Three decades ago, you made a decision that would affect both of us.

26 Ministry of Health and Welfare.
First, I want to ask you about him. You reported that he was born in the port city of Yeosu in the Jeollanam-do province of South Korea. His exact date of birth was not documented. Did you know when his birthday was and not share? Perhaps you were not asked. Maybe you told them and it did not make the paper. Did you ever celebrate his birthday with him? You did say that on October 7, 1983 he was twenty-two years old. That’s what made it to the paper.

You also mentioned that he was the eldest of his siblings. He had one brother and three sisters. I’ve read that South Korea’s culture and family structure strongly reflect that of 6th century Confucian principles. I’ve learned that family represented a part of the whole larger community, and with that relationships were understood as being connected from self to family, family to society, and then society to the universe. The size of his family seemed to represent the norm. Continuing in the Confucian principle and practice, the traditional South Korean family structure was built on a patriarchal foundation. As such, I can imagine that he and his siblings obeyed his authoritarian father, just as his father’s father was obeyed. Given the precedent set, do you think he was aware of his position and the power that came with it?

Did you know his family? Did you ever see their home? Was his family more traditional than not? And, did they follow sarangbang and anabang? Do you know if his father, brother, and he had sarangbang, a room dedicated to them? Or if his sisters and mother had anabang, their separate space? I’ve read that traditional families placed

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28 “The Value and Meaning of the Korean Family.”
their eldest son’s room facing the street or near the entrance of the home. Is this where his room was located? More importantly, were you ever welcomed to their home?

Did he ever talk about his place in the family hierarchy? Did he ever mention how each family member had designated seats that represented their place of power? As the eldest son, he was only second to his father. Did this show itself when his family ate their meals? I can imagine that he, his father, and brother sat at a table while his mother and sisters ate seated on the floor. Do you know if his family ate in one room together? Would he be found sitting in between his father and brother nearest the heater? Would he hold in his hand an individual bowl of quality rice while his sisters and mother sat across from him eating from a communal wooden hamjibak?\(^{30}\)

He was the eldest male and with that came privileges, power, and expectations. Do you know if he understood that eventually he would inherit the majority of the family’s wealth and with that the responsibilities of taking care of his aging parents? When his parents passed, do you think he would observe the strict mourning rituals and annual ceremonies?\(^{31}\) Did he understand, and do you think he would follow, the cultural tradition that he was forever indebted to his parents? Do you think he valued the idea that he not only owed them respect but also the continuity of the family?

You did say that he graduated from high school. Do you know if he liked school? Do you know if he had preferred classes? Perhaps he excelled in math? I imagine him being in classes that bored him. I picture him combating boredom by doodling instead of taking notes. Maybe you saw some of these drawings? Did you think

\(^{30}\) Ibid., 45.
\(^{31}\) “The Value and Meaning of the Korean Family.”
he had an artistic aptitude and maybe that his sketches showed how he saw the world?

Was there ever a favorite teacher mentioned? Perhaps he wished that more teachers could explain subjects in the way he best understood.

You reported that he was 5’7.” This makes him just a bit shorter than the average height of Korean males. His build was not documented. I wonder if he was lean and walked lightly or was a heavier build, and his footprints left deeper impressions.

Only one interest was mentioned. Is it possible that it was his sole interest? Or was it that it was his interest that showed itself most often? You said that he had an interest in sports. Given these possibilities, I imagine that he was an athlete of some sort. Perhaps he was naturally inclined to be active? It’s quite possible he took pride in being athletic and held a graceful posture from hours devoted to training. Maybe, out of all the sports he participated in he may have preferred running? The Japanese fiction writer, Haruki Murakami describes running in this way,

For me, running is both exercise and a metaphor. Running day after day, piling up the races, bit-by-bit I raise the bar, and by clearing each level I elevate myself. At least that’s why I’ve put in the effort day after day: to raise my own level. I’m no great runner, by any means. I’m at an ordinary – or perhaps more like mediocre – level. But that’s not the point. The point is whether or not I improved over yesterday. In long-distance running the only opponent you have to beat is yourself, the way you used to be.\(^{32}\)

Perhaps he favored running for varying reasons, but maybe he was most drawn to how simple and straightforward it was. It’s possible that he ran because he loved nothing more than to feel his heart in his chest. He may have loved the feeling of getting to the point in a run when walking with his hands on the top of his head helped open his lungs and calm

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\(^{32}\) Murakami, *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*. 

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his entire body. Maybe as the eldest running was the only time he felt he could be alone. I also can imagine that in the port city that you both lived his feet were his mode of transportation between places. Perhaps he ran from home to school, racing himself each time. As he aged this way of moving through the world may have been his favorite from his childhood. Could it be for that reason that he continued to run later in life? Running may have connected him to the awareness that his heart beat faster and each breath counted, and for that he could thankful.

You told the agency that the religion he followed was Catholicism. To what extent did he practice? I imagine it’s possible that he attended mass and that was part of his daily routine, just as it is possible that it was a family expectation. He may have been a devotee that found solitude in prayer. It’s conceivable that routine and more importantly ritual was important to him. Perhaps religion provided him a sense of structure? Maybe he liked how the church appeared and the spaciousness it provided, compared to the space his family shared. Do you know if he acquired his own bible? Did you ever see it with its folded corners and marked text, to emphasize the passages that spoke to him? Did he find a sense of security in speaking to god through prayer?

I found it interesting that similar to his single interest, a single description of his personality was listed. He was “hot tempered.” Did his temper show itself rarely? Or was it a frequent loss of composure? The level of irritability he displayed didn’t make it to the paper, just as what triggered such flare-ups and how it escalated is equally undocumented. Did he make it known to any and all that were around him when he was upset? Do you think his body couldn’t calm itself and that he needed some sort of
collision for release? Perhaps he held a great deal of patience, but when it reached capacity he could no longer stay silent. It was not stated if he felt he had to use his words or his fist to prove a point. And there is the possibility that his temper brought an inward quietness, a silent rage. It may be the case that he was silent most of the time and only spoke when he felt he really had something to say. Perhaps he was passionate by nature and when he spoke it was loud and with force. Maybe he had a stubborn streak and when his stubbornness was met with opposition he felt the need to defend. Perhaps he only knew how to speak from a fiery place. I wonder if he ever came to terms with the anger and if he eventually learned to walk away and not fight every fight.

And you…

You were born in the same southern port city as him. Like his story, your story does not begin with an exact birthdate. In 1983, you were twenty-one, a year younger than him. Your family was also a traditional size. However, your place in the family hierarchy was opposite his. What was it like being the youngest and only girl with three older brothers? This reminds me, biologically I am tied to four uncles and three aunts. I know they exist, I wonder if they know I do.

Where was your room located in your home? Was it closest to the kitchen where you and your mother prepared the meals? Did you and she eat apart from your father and brothers? Did you share a bowl with your mother and wish you had an individual bowl of rice like your brothers? Was it during the times when you were sharing and waiting for your mother to finish that you most envied your brothers? Were there times that you snuck tastes of the finer grade rice when your mother was not looking? Or did you just
think about what it would taste like? Were there times you wished you had another sister to share the expectations and house duties? And when you thought of this, did you draw a long breath and release a silent sigh as the thought crossed your mind? What did you think of your place in the family and the expectations that came with it? As such, you would eventually be married off. You’d leave your family to be with your husband’s family. Did you think it would be his family?

Your eye and hair color were not documented. However, I assume that you did not deviate from the standard Korean appearance of dark eyes and dark hair. There have been days that I have imagined how dark your eyes are. Most days I envision them being the color of black coffee, rather than that of coffee with cream. Some days I imagine you with short straight black hair, sitting on a stool as your mother cut it. Just as there are days I think you had long hair that you always tied back with ribbon so it wouldn’t fall in your eyes. Although I do not remember meeting you, I see you every day. I look into the mirror and I know that the silhouettes in the contours of my face, my complexion, and the shape of my eyes are yours. You are my shadows. You are my ghosts of a past-life. There are days that I look in the mirror and think I look more like you than him.

You told the agency that you also graduated from high school. As the youngest and only girl did your family make an exception to the traditional standards? Did they teach you the native Korean alphabet Han’gul?33 Was your school separate from your brothers? Did you enjoy going to school? Was it your favorite thing to do? Did you look forward to school because it meant for several hours you were not doing house chores or

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33 “The Value and Meaning of the Korean Family.”
helping your mother? I can imagine that you knew that expectations would be waiting for you when you returned and school may have expanded your world.

Unlike him you had a two-word personality description. One documented description was that you were “genial.” Perhaps friendship came easily to you? And maybe you knew many people but held a few close. Did you have friendships with other girls at school? And did these relationships remind you that you were not alone? The second documented description I read was “introspective.” It’s possible that you enjoyed being around people but also valued the time alone with your thoughts. Did you find yourself needing time for yourself after being “genial”?

October 1981. You met him. You said that you met him through a mutual friend. Perhaps you met him through one of his sisters? Or it could have been one of your brothers? Of course, it easily could have been a friend and not a sibling. I’ve read that South Korea saw cultural changes post-World War II and although arranged matches were still the majority, love matches were not completely dismissed. Do you remember the first time you met him? And was it surprising for you? Perhaps he looked at you in a certain way and you smiled in return. Did it feel like it was the first time someone really saw you?

November 1, 1982. I was born. You gave me the name In Sil. It was translated that “In” in Korean means good minded or kindness, while “Sil” means fruitfulness. Did you ever think I would be renamed and answer to something else? You reported that I was a full-term baby and the delivery was normal. You did not take medication during the pregnancy. I weighed 3.2 kg.
When I was born, he and you were unmarried and with that came the label for me, “illegitimate.” You said you were together, but were you living together? Were you living with his family? Did you feel the social stigmatization and unwanted attention from our circumstance? As you walked down the street did you feel people’s eyes and catch whispers with your ears? You indicated that after a few months you and he separated. Where did you go during this time? Perhaps you tried returning to your family. I can only imagine how brave you were. I can only hope that your family allowed you to come home. As an unwed mother did you become a social outcast? Was there a point that the shame and prejudice became too much? Where there shelters in Yeosu? Did you take you several attempts to actually enter one? Was that a dire strait option? Perhaps you found relief in having a roof over our heads. Perhaps it was the best of the worst options? These things I can only imagine.

October 7, 1983. You and I entered the Yeosu agency. Was it only us? Did one of your brothers go with you? Perhaps a friend? I hope you had someone to hold your hand and wipe any tears that were shed. It is documented that you explained to the social worker that you tried to live together with him after my birth. It’s also documented that you separated due to the “disparity of his character.” Was that why his temper made it to the paper? Would he yell at you? Would he ever get physical? Did he ever push you around? Did it escalate quickly, quietly, or both?

And looking back at October 7th, does that day feel like a death to you? Do you carry the details of the day with you? I have read my papers and the questions asked seem skeletal. Life logistics about feeding, sleeping, speech and response are listed. Perhaps
you told them all you could. Maybe you started with single word responses and they had to coerce more information. Perhaps single word responses were all you could muster. Living a year as an unwed mother, an outcast, did you forget how to use your voice? Did you speak quietly? Were your answers made of exhales and whispers? Maybe you responded with long answers that didn’t make it to the paper? It’s possible that you tried to draw out the process. If you answered slowly perhaps it gave you more time, even though feelings of finality were looming.

Feeding. You reported that I ate gruel five to six times a day. Three times a day I drank 180cc of formula. I could hold a cup in my hands. Cookies, bread, and fruit were my favorite and my digestion was “good.” I wonder if I had a favorite treat. I wonder if you smiled at me warmly when you put it in my hand.

Sleeping. Apparently, I slept well if held and rocked. However, I was a bit fussy before bed. My sleep time was usually 8 pm to 6 am. At night I would wake up once or twice, and when I did I grew fretful. You told the agency that I would return to sleeping quietly if someone held me. While holding me, did you sing? Was there a favorite song?

Speech and Response. When I heard my name I acknowledged by looking at the person calling me. When music played I danced. If someone was near I was willing to engage with him or her, however I also played by myself with toys. You described me moving throughout spaces on my own. I recognized both blame and praise. When angry I would settle down if given something to eat. Social interactions were present. I shook hands, bowed, and waved bye-bye when I parted with people.

It was documented that you felt it would be difficult to raise me on your own.
There is much unknown from October 7, 1983. What is known is that I was not in your arms when you exited the agency. I imagine that the missing weight would be carried with you through the years. I wonder if some days felt heavier than others. The depth of your loneliness was not documented. It is undocumented where your life went after this visit. I imagine that I waved “bye-bye” to you when we parted.

I do not know if you already aware of the rest of what I am going to share with you. I imagine you may not be. After the initial intake, I was transferred from the Yeosu Agency branch to Seoul. While in Seoul I was placed in a foster home. It is documented that my foster mother had experience nurturing orphaned children and cared for me with “deep love.” My foster mother was married and had a son. It is noted that I took to men easily and usually did not grow awkward with new faces. It was documented that I held a cheerful disposition and when I became excited shouted “Dadada.” My favorite activities were being carried on one’s back and going outside.

It is not documented if other orphaned children were in foster care with me at the time. Just as it is unknown the exact date I departed the foster home. If my foster mother, father, or brother had difficulty letting me go when the time came is also undocumented. I may have been my foster mother’s last child. There may have been several more. Coinciding with that thought, you may have had more children.

I write you and wonder if you had a copy of these papers. If you tucked them away somewhere to prove that I once existed, to prove that we existed together. Perhaps you needed support in keeping this information alive and that is why you chose to go to an agency instead of leaving me somewhere. I wonder if you included your name and
your location in hopes that someday I would come looking for you. I wonder if you think of me as a death. Perhaps you think of me as a loss, something misplaced waiting to be found. These things you could not know back then…these things are undocumented.

당신의 딸 (your daughter)

3.3.1. Trustworthiness

Although I have documentation I cannot ignore that falsification is all too common of an occurrence in adoption. In the documentary *In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee* a Korean adoptee finds that she was reassigned a name so that she could fit the documentation that already existed. This phenomenon shifts the questions surrounding documentation from “What is known from documentation?” to “Can documentation be trustworthy?”

As an adoptee with documentation I want to believe that my past is what is on the paper. I want to believe that what was documented happened. Although the information is brief I do recognize pieces of myself in the limited number of words. I have a temper that I’ve come to terms with over the years. I also have an inclination for “sports” and being active. As an INFJ, both genial and introspective are words I identify with. Even though there are only a few descriptive words, I still feel validated. Although the unknown outweighs the known, trustworthy or not, it is a beginning. It is a beginning that I actively choose to be part of my story.

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34 Deann Borshay Liem, *In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee*. 
3.3.2. Lineage of Loss

After sharing my experience with Lily, I felt alone. I empathized with her unknown because it sat so closely to my own. Her story could have been my story. We both felt disconnect and suffered a loss to a past life that we had limited understanding of. My experience already felt isolated from my adoptive family and the only person I knew who had this commonality, seemed no longer to be an option. Sharing my thoughts around documentation served as a reminder of the documentation she did not have.

Prior to my entrance narrative and my life in the United States, I survived a “death.” Being “given up” for adoption is as a symbolic relational death of my biological parents. The loss of my birthparents is the beginning of what I refer to as my “lineage of loss.” This is an ever-evolving timeline that spans through life. By acknowledging events in my life where I have experienced loss, I have been able to reclaim the experience of desolation.

I realized from a young age that I could not change what I did not know. The unknown, the ambiguous was what I knew. I turned the looming cloud of ambiguity into questions that I chose to embrace. And some days when the questions weren’t enough on their own, I made up answers. I used my imagination and wandered into ideas that couldn’t be proven, but also couldn’t be disproven.

3.4. A Reconciliation: Entrance Narrative and Birth Story Meet

The reconciliation of my entrance story I’ve heard through the years and the birth story that I constructed brought an unexpected event. I had set out to use what documentation I had to build a birth story for myself. I used my adoption papers as a
skeleton and fleshed it out with pieces of Korean culture and history that I researched. I was surprised by what was uncovered through this experience.

3.4.1. Do You Want to Go to Korea?

As a Korean adoptee common questions I hear are, “Have you been to Korea?” And, because I haven’t since my original exportation, it is usually followed by, “Do you want to go to Korea?” Throughout the years I’ve always felt a certain obligation to say “yes.” When I was younger I was curious about the world at large and there were a lot of places I wanted to go. However, I held ambivalence towards Korea. I felt like I should want to go to Korea, but I didn’t have a reason to go. I felt disconnected to the country that I was born in. It was easier to respond with, “Yes…I want to go to Korea, but I also want to go to Japan, California, and Brazil.” Given the day the last three locations were interchangeable. As years passed I would still want to go, but it felt dishonest and not worthy enough to think of it as just a vacation. If I were to travel there, was I really just going to see the sights? Or was it a quest where I was trying to search for something? Rather, was I searching for someone?

Part of what I was told was that I was born near Seoul. Seoul is the capital of Korea, and over time I’ve synonymized that with a myopic anonymity and homogeneity of other capital cities. This further fed into my ambivalence towards visiting Korea.

It was when I was piecing together my birth story that I found that my biological parents had met in the city of Yeosu. With a few quick keystrokes a beautiful port city comprised of over 300 islands filled my computer screen. Over the years I’ve seen photos of Seoul and remember it looking different. It looked curiously different. I then
searched the distance between Yeosu and Seoul. They are approximately 200 miles away. And while 200 miles can be argued as “near” it was not the same. Seoul is located in the northern part of South Korea, while Yeosu is located on the southern tip of the peninsula.

I returned to my paperwork. There it was in black serif typewriter text. I was born in Yeosu and had been transported to Seoul.

It’s a bit unnerving to find out that you were born somewhere other than where you thought you were. It wasn’t the location change that caused anxiety. What makes the experience jarring is finding out something you’ve carried so long is incorrect. It was the type of unsettling that shakes your foundation. It makes you wonder, what other parts of my story could be known? What other half-truths are out there?

3.4.2. Choice: Could, Should, Would…

It was my bio-mother’s decision to enter the Yeosu adoption agency. It was my bio-mother’s decision to leave the agency without me. Just as it was my adoptive parents’ decision to actively seek another child. It was also upon their decision to welcome and accept me into their family. However, it is my choice how I want to approach my current life choices.

There are several ways that I could choose to come to terms with finding out that my birthplace wasn’t my birthplace. I could be angry with my adoptive parents for providing me with information that wasn’t sound. Should I be disappointed with “losing” years that I “could” have known this city? Should I be upset with myself for not examining my paperwork closer years ago?

At this point, I’m excited that I know, regardless of time. I feel empowered
having this information. After years of ambivalence it’s liberating to know that if someone asks me if I want to go to Korea I can now answer with certainty “yes” and support the response with a reason. I can now say, “Yes. I want to go to Yeosu. It’s a beautiful port city at the southern tip of South Korea. I was born there and would love to see it.” This is a part of my story that I’m choosing to acknowledge.

3.5. Colorblind: A Family Story

Middleburgh, NY is the small rural town located at the foothills of the Catskill Mountains. It is also where I arrived on April 1, 1984 and would spend the next sixteen years of my life. It is the type of town that has a Main Street (named aptly so) that serves as the major artery. Throughout my adolescence the town was historically revitalized. With that came a thoughtful layout and landscape that included beautiful storefronts accented by streetlights with colorful overabundant hanging flower baskets. Surrounding Main Street is the lush green valley that prides itself on its farmland. It is the type of town where people’s houses are landmarks for directions and I grew up being introduced to people relationally. I was the “daughter of,” “grandchild of,” or “cousin-of”…

As of the 2010 census, Middleburgh’s population was 4,582. Of those people, 98.5% were one race, white. At the time of the census there was one Korean male present. I can tell you that this singular Korean is also an adoptee. That he is my cousin’s best friend. Middleburgh is that type of town.

35 “Middleburgh, New York.”
3.5.1. Show & Tell

If you ask my brother about my adoption, he would be the first to share how excited he was. He has always held a great deal of kindness in his heart and placed a high value on family. After all, the night I arrived from Korea he brought all his toys in the car to share with me on the ride home. Sitting in the backseat of the car, throughout the duration of our travels to Middleburg he would try to wake me up. However, he was no match for baby jet lag.

My brother was very proud of being an older brother and he wanted to prove it to everyone. What is the best way to show what you love when you’re seven years old? “Show & Tell.” I’ve been told that my mother took me to his first grade classroom that day. He presented me and like a politician I proceeded to smile and walk around the classroom shaking everyone’s hand. Given the 2010 census results, it is not inconceivable to speculate that I was the first Korean, if not first Asian, or even perhaps the first person of color that the first graders in Middleburgh, NY met that day.

Years later my mother and I would find out that “show and tell” was not our family’s story. In shock, my mother’s eyes widened and her jaw lowered. She explained how she thought this was a funny family moment of ours. After all, our family was not drastically dynamically different from the peers in our community. We had a father, a mother, a son, and a daughter present and with that normal family happenings, events, and memories. And while we did have our memories just like any other family, what was overlooked was the obvious difference that our family held. I looked different than my
family.

My mother told me stories of people directing looks and whispers at our family when we went out. As if it was a new occurrence, each time she would wonder what they were staring and talking about. This would be followed with her wondering, “What are they looking at?” and then the delayed realization that would pass quickly. I imagine her thoughts transitioning from, “What are they looking at?” to “Oh that’s right…” to “It’s so nice to be out with the family.” That was the beginning and end of these conversations around me being visibly different than my family. It’s easy to overlook what you really don’t see. And what you don’t really see lends itself to not being talked about.

As seen in the research, white parents have adopted Korean adoptees at a high rate. Although transracial research suggests that acknowledging racial and cultural differences are important to identity development, parents are more likely and often will intentionally and unintentionally “minimize” differences and “emphasize” the color-blind approach.

Although my mother didn’t see why we drew people’s attention, I did. Korean adoptees, such as myself are transracial. The transracial nature makes our adoption status “visible.” Visible adoption is the obvious physical racial difference between adoptive parents and their child. This affects identity as it draws attention to the racial experience

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37 Lee, “The Transracial Adoption Paradox History, Research, and Counseling Implications of Cultural Socialization.”
38 Finding Families for African American Children: The Role of Race & Law in Adoption from Foster Care.
of the adoptee.\textsuperscript{39} Thus resulting in both intentional and unintentional external and internalized racism.\textsuperscript{40}

As depicted in Hoffman’s research, “Adoptees’ awareness of identity remained an omnipresent part of their daily lives.”\textsuperscript{41} I don’t believe it is a coincidence that I have such a vivid memory of meeting Lily and excitedly thinking, “She looks like me.” I didn’t know it at the time but I was craving a “biological mirror”.

While my family had a “colorblind” approach and often didn’t see “it,” I knew I was different. I can’t say that I wanted to achieve “whiteness” as described in previous research.\textsuperscript{42} “White culture” wasn’t a concept I had an understanding of in my adolescence. The culture I knew was rural, small town culture and was defined by socioeconomic status rather than race. However, in my experience small towns hold small town values and the overarching sentiment of “fitting in” was a well-regarded sentiment.

I knew that I could and would never physically “fit.” This wasn’t an easy thought to come to terms with. My best friend growing up was a thin blonde with big blue eyes. She looked like my dolls at the time and together they reminded me what I did not look like and would not look like. And while I didn’t wish to look like her, or achieve “whiteness,” I did wish for anonymity that I didn’t have. Just as I know the singular Korean male from the 2010 census, growing up I knew that if you referred to “that Asian

\textsuperscript{39} Huh and Reid, “Intercountry, Transracial Adoption and Ethnic Identity.”
\textsuperscript{40} Friedlander, “Ethnic Identity Development of Internationally Adopted Children and Adolescents.”
\textsuperscript{41} Hoffman and Pena, “Too Korean to Be White and Too White to Be Korean.”
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
girl” it narrowed down to Lily or myself.

Over time, I think instead of trying to be something I could and would never be, I accepted me because that was all I knew. And thus, I made space for myself by “fitting in” not fitting in. And while this was constantly a challenge, and some days were easier than others, it became a way that I adapted and learned to accept myself. I wasn’t my doll, or my friend, nor did I look like my family, but I still had something to offer.

3.5.2. Summer Camp: Two Tales of Anxiety

Each summer I would leave Middleburgh and attend Korean Culture Camp in Albany, NY. Korean Culture Camp was founded by adoptive parents and was connected to my adoption agency. And like most families, my parents and I experienced dual summer camp anxiety.

Labeling my father as a “worrier” would be an understatement. His concerns weren’t limited to logic and came at a perpetual pace. For example, black ice would be a concern in the middle of July in upstate New York. Next to black ice on his list of summer concerns was camp pick-up duty. With the day’s end my father’s anxiety would grow. Each day he would arrive to camp in his oil stained union clothes from working as a machinist at the nearby turbine plant.

As he approached camp his heart rate increased. When he arrived to camp he would exit his robin egg blue Ford truck and use it as a brace. This was 50% due to strategy and 50% due to anxiety. Nervously, he would wait for me. This was because, as he told my mother, he didn’t know which one I was. Back in Middleburgh he could always pick me out of the crowd of children. And to this day when my family reminisces
about this story we do it with humor. After all, we’re pretty sure that he brought home the “right” one.

Although adoption seldom came up, this story exemplifies how my family approached it. While my parents didn’t “hide” that I was adopted, any conversation came anecdotally. Especially in reference to disparity, whether it was race, nationality, or “otherness,” “it” was approached through levity and limited in length. “It” was regarded with a “that’s funny” attitude accompanied with a shake of the head and a laugh. This approach wasn’t limited to our nuclear family. A similar series of events would occur during college parties I went to with my white cousin and his best friend (the Korean from the census). With a sly smile he would introduce me by saying, “These two aren’t related…but we’re first cousins.” Today, it’s still one of his favorite “party tricks.”

My first day of camp I hopped out of my father’s blue truck and like my father I was instantly paralyzed by anxiety. Coming from Middleburgh I had only ever known looking different from everyone around me. This was a deep contrast from the camp environment. Adding to the overwhelming experience, I not only saw children that looked like me but also saw adults that carried the same physical characteristics. I remember being visually overwhelmed. I saw a sea of me. I saw future me. I wished for a “biological mirror” and all of a sudden I received a hall of mirrors where all the reflections had their own minds and movements. I had “fit” by not fitting. And now, I felt displaced. Through time my anxiety surrounding physicality would subside and another would take its place.

At camp I would meet other adoptees that were submerged in Korean culture.
Their parents enrolled them in Tae Kwan Do (Korean martial arts) and other Korean culture courses. Looking back, I assume they were from the Albany area where cultural resources may have been an option.

I remember one mother asking me if I took Korean language lessons. I responded with a simple “no.” In response she shook her head and told me that I should. I wondered why. I wondered why because I wasn’t sure how it was relevant. Why did I need to know how to speak Korean? I felt disconnected from Korea in general, so why would I need to know the language? It was a faraway place I didn’t know and only vaguely heard about. In fact, camp was pretty much the only time it ever came up. The other 362 days of the year it was a country, a world away. I knew I was connected to it, but didn’t know in what ways it mattered. Wondering why I needed to know how to speak Korean segued to wondering why I was even attending camp. I knew I was from Korea and I knew I was adopted. There was disconnect. “It” just didn’t “fit” into what I understood about the world at the time.

Transnational adoption is when an adoptee’s nationality does not match the parents. Thus, cultural differences including but not limited to tradition, food, and language can be experienced. While transracial adoption and transnational adoption issues can overlap there are issues that can emerge separately. However, both are influenced by ethnic knowledge and both affect identity formation.43

Looking back at my early adolescence, because of its visibility, the transracial stood out to me, although it didn’t come in terms of “white” or “Asian.” It came as a

43 Chen, “Asian Transnational Adoption.”
difference of an overarching otherness. The transnational component remained in the backdrop of my understanding. As I moved out of adolescence and into young-adulthood, the challenges and confrontations of acknowledging my adoptee identity and the transracial and transnational that surround it grew.

3.5.3. Minority as a Means

In school I had always achieved scholastically and had participated in extracurricular activities. And like my friends who had these pieces in their pockets, we carried them into the College Night event. This was when visiting college admissions representatives gathered to meet and recruit us graduating seniors. As I approached each college’s table I was given a brochure and handed a separate colored piece of paper. The theme of the rainbow collection of papers I collected that night was minority scholarship information.

I remember that this would be one of the only times my mother directly acknowledged my race. That night she and another adoptive mother of a Korean adoptee had been chatting. They shared a laugh because they both almost made the mistake of mixing the two of us up when they saw us from a distance. And then my mother pointed out that my being Asian made me eligible for scholarships. Looking back at the SAT’s and other standardized tests that collected demographic information I always choose to identify as “Asian.” While I didn’t identify as “white” it also didn’t occur to me to use my minority status as a means.

Post-high school I would study abroad in Brazil. I was a Rotary Club International Youth Ambassador from the United States. I was an “American” who had an Italian last
name but an Asian face. My first Brazilian host mother would giggle excitedly and say, “Você minha filha americana, italiana, coreana, e brasileira! You are my American, Italian, Korean and Brazilian daughter.” During my time in Brazil both Brazilians and other exchange students often assumed that I was from Japan. While there I learned that Brazil held the largest Japanese population outside of Japan, in Sao Paulo. I also learned others’ assumptions were advantageous. It was better to travel through Brazil with someone thinking you were a visitor from Japan than the US. Surpassing that notion was being considered a “native.”

3.6. What’s in a Name?

In Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*, Alice asks Humpy Dumpty doubtfully, “Must a name mean something?” His response (with a short laugh), “Of course it must…my name means the shape I am - and a good handsome shape it is, too. With a name like yours, you might be any shape, almost.”

“How do you spell that?” Like the (Italian) car I say in regards to my last name. This interaction looks different when it is on the phone versus when it is in-person. The in-person response comes with a subtle but apparent eyebrow raise or a slight slant of the head. It appears to be a seemingly inadvertent tic. When it’s an obvious reaction, I respond with a large smile and say, “I’m Italian.” Unto which, a deeper look of confusion occurs. I then follow up with, “I’m adopted.” And then the “Oh…I get it” head nod and smile from the asker completes the interaction.

I’ve always felt unattached to my name. Upon my adoption, my adoptive parents

44 Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There.*
renamed me and with that unintentionally cut ties to that piece of my ethnic identity. I
believe that they felt my story started with them and with that I needed a new title. I
believe that having people constantly point out that my face doesn’t match my name has
contributed to the detached sentiment.

As stated earlier, my brother was always very proud of being an older brother and
was given the task of renaming me. Inspired by his favorite television show, The Dukes
of Hazzard he chose Daisy. My parents vetoed this (thankfully) and his next choice was
inspired from an elementary classroom crush. A little blonde girl named Tonya.

Over the years I’ve negotiated the use of my name by accepting both names.
Professionally, I use the name my adoptive family gave me, the name my brother chose
for me. Personally, I also use Tonya, but my family and close friends have shortened it to
Ton. And often in my art, writing, and for myself, I use my Korean name as a
pseudonym. I use them all because I believe they represent different facets of me. This is
an example of how I’ve navigated and negotiated my “social interactions” and
relationships both inside and outside my family through the lens of my adoptive identity.

3.7. The Exterior of Identity

3.7.1. A “banana” in Boston

While in college, my half-Japanese and half-Russian roommate who is more of a
brother than a friend looked at me and said, “You’re such a banana…or a Twinkie.” I
responded with a raised eyebrow. He laughed and said, “You know... yellow on the
outside and white on the inside.” My eyes widened and I was slack jawed. “You don’t
know what that is?” It was the first time I had heard this expression.
My roommate knew that I was adopted and had visited my hometown. He walked down Main Street and met my family. During our visit we went to the County Fair where we made poor but sincere decisions about going on carnival rides and eating fried food. Until that point I had realized that I looked different and held disconnect to the place I was born, but was still trying to grasp what that difference and disconnect really meant to myself. I was introspectively exploring and hadn’t taken account of what that could mean for others. His mother was Japanese, and with that came Japanese culture. Did that make him more “Asian” than me?

This all took place when I was living in Boston during college. It was exciting for me to live in a city that provided anonymity that I never had. However, that anonymity came with a new set of experiences and assumptions.

3.7.2. All Look the Same?

I once learned in a developmental psychology class that whatever your mother ate during pregnancy affected your sensibilities towards food later in life. When asked at a restaurant how spicy I would like something I usually reply with, “If it hurts a little, I’ll love it.” Granted, I recognize that I may have a place for hyperbole in my life, as I’m not above ordering my coffee, “black like death.” Regardless, my bio-mother must have had a taste for kimchi, the signature food of my people. I know this because I can barely taste things without some sort of kick and I have cayenne pepper, red pepper flakes, and hot sauce in my reach at all times. It was in Japanese grocery stores that I would fill my basket full of Shichi (aka Japanese Seven Spice or as I think of them, little happy sprinkles of heat heaven that make my noodle bowls sing). I continued through the aisles
and picked-and-chose through the selections of kimchi, miso paste, and seaweed. And I can’t ignore that hours of my life that have been lost in the vortex that is the cute cookie section. The dancing pandas, winking koalas, and Hello Kitty siren songs have wooed me many a time.

One day, I arrived to the checkout with my full basket of imported, authentic Asian goods. Behind the counter sat an elderly Asian woman. I assume she was Japanese as it was a Japanese grocery store. Her hair was black with streaks of silver. Her face told the story of having been amused a great deal, as her mouth was surrounded by fine lines that echoed those times. She smoothed out the white apron with blue flower print as she stood up. As she shuffled towards the register her feet made a sound as if she had sandpaper for soles.

When she arrived to the register, she gave me the full on elders’ examination. I often get this at Asian Grocery Stores, Asian restaurants, and Chinatowns (regardless of geographical location). However, it was in Boston where I became well acquainted with it. The elderly Asian woman completed the scan by looking me directly in the eye. She squinted. Then, she squinted a little more, craning her head a bit towards me. A few quick sentences followed. I smiled in response. With her head still craned and her eyes still focused she continued her thought.

I’ve grown accustomed to responding in a similar fashion to situations where I have no idea what is being said or what is being asked of me. I simply smile and bashfully apologize for not understanding. On cue, I proceeded with my ritual response. She continued to squint, her eyes narrowing more. And then, suddenly her face lit up. She
had reached a point of resolution! Her neck calmed, her eyes widened and glowed, and the lines surrounding her mouth showed just how many laughs she had. Rapidly she used her index finger and began circling clockwise the perimeter of her face. Gaining speed with each rotation she then excitedly giggled her discovery, “Ohhh…Kor-EEE-aaahhhnnn. BIGGGGGG FACE.” I responded with a smile and a head nod. After all, she wasn’t exactly wrong.

This guessing game is something I end up playing regardless of me signing up or not. A website exists that promotes this “game” where one can try to differentiate which Asian someone is. Living this game generates questions.

Questions that I’ve asked myself are, if I’m a “banana” then am I “real” Korean? Leading to, what does it mean to be a “real” Korean or Asian? While in my childhood I didn’t try to achieve “whiteness,” because rural middle-class American culture absorbed that concept. However, in my adulthood as I’ve become mobile, I wonder about my “Asianness” and have asked myself, “How Asian am I?” What does it mean to be Asian American? And is that different looking than Korean American? And what are “real Asians?” And what do “real” Asians think of “bananas”? Do they think I’m a “banana?” And if I’m a “banana” then do they reject me because I’m disconnected to culture? And if I were to go to Korea where the language I speak natively doesn’t “match” my face, what would that look like? These transracial and transnational questions shape a complex transcultural experience.
3.8. An Aunt: The Other Side of Adoption

“How did the interview go?” I asked excitedly. “Well, she (the social worker) wanted me to ask you what it was like for you…” my brother trailed off. “What was what like?” I said. “Yes…well…you know, growing up…in our town…being adopted?” And I answered with a question, “How do you think it was for me?” “I don’t know…I never really thought about it…” he replied.

This was the beginning of the phone conversation with my brother when he was going through the adoptive parent process. I explained, “Well, there were some things I knew. I knew I was loved…and I knew I was different. In a small town where fitting in is valued…it was hard.” And while I supported his going through the adoption process, I also was coming to terms with what it looked like being on the “other side.” The following is a letter to my adopted nieces, Jada and Ellie.

Dear Jada and Ellie,

We share not only family, we share an experience. As an adoptee I have questions just as you will have questions. The poet Rilke once wrote,

Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.45

Our stories hold unknowns, but we are united in our unknowns. While we may have had choices made for us, we have a choice in how we approach our unknowns. I

45 Rilke and Kappus, Letters to a Young Poet.
have made meaning of my unknown by following paths that celebrate ambiguity and innovation. My path has led me to embracing and loving questions. You will have decisions to make and will follow your own path. More importantly, you have the power to narrate your own story.

It is through connection with others and sharing my story I have learned to strengthen and trust my voice. And I’ve learned that “voice” can come in different forms and that a story can come in many forms. It can be through words in creative writing and academic scholarship, through images via the visual, or melodies in music…

I have shared my story, because right now there are a counted few of “us” that have done this. I share it because I felt aloneness and know that it doesn’t have to be this way anymore. There are many of “us” and the more “us” that share, the more we strengthen what that means for both “us” as individuals and as a collective. And once we have confidence in ourselves, we can then confidently begin to share our findings with others.

It is not our choice that we are symbols of complex ideologies that live in sociocultural and geopolitical realms. We are symbols of a multifaceted transcultural experience. However, we can choose how we want to represent ourselves in those capacities. And in doing so, we can start with the families be it our adoptive ones or the ones that we’ve chosen. We can share with those who are closest to us. I hope you have courage to share your story. It is a difficult thing to do, which makes it even more important.

With love,

The psychologist Carl Jung wrote, “Loneliness does not come from having no people about one, but from being unable to communicate the things that seem important to oneself, or from holding certain views which others find inadmissible.” As a transplanted, Korean adoptee raised in a small rural town, in a blue-collar family, talks at the dinner table matched the meat and potatoes that we ate: traditional, grounded, and consistent. Certain topics never made it to the table, while others were purposefully overlooked. Although my family recognized my adoption, they also saw it as a simple and contained experience. I learned quickly that conversations surrounding my adoption made my mother and father figuratively and literally walk away feeling uncomfortable and inadequate. I understood their reaction about being curious about my past as not appreciating my present. And although, that was never my intention, I learned what to speak of and what not. The many facets of adoption were exotic and unpalatable, not easily digested at the dinner table.

The moral of my entrance narrative as told by my parents was that I was wanted. They loved me before I came to them, and when I arrived they were waiting to welcome me. My family’s “colorblind” approach to our family came from a place of acceptance. I believe that their love and support helped me recognize the privilege that I was afforded. An unspoken sentiment I carry is an intrinsic indebtedness to them. It is a sentiment that

46 Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. 

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only deepens my curiosity and social consciousness.

Contrary to their version of my adoption story, the more I thought about my experience, the more I found it expansive and complex. I recognized that I lived in a small community that lacked any sort of ethnic diversity and, unlike my friends, I held an unknown and ambiguous past and a disconnected culture. I was reminded of my “otherness” and how I didn’t “fit” each time that I looked into a mirror, when I saw my friends and family in the town I grew up in, and especially when I was reminded that my name didn’t match my face.

While my family always showed a great deal of affection towards me, the “otherness” was something that I felt in relation to them. I believe my parents are similar to other parents with multiple children with whom they want to share their love. They affectionately care for their children, all their children. I believe that my parents synonymized this concept with approaching and treating their children the same. Nights in our living room would be my brother watching a basketball game on the television while I’d be drawing. When my parents said “no” to something he requested, he would accept finality in their answer. I, on the other hand, would look at the “no” as a starting point of a debate. I knew I looked different, and over the years I would be reminded that my temperament was quite different as well. Over the years I have come accustomed to hearing my mother say, “I love you; that should be enough.” And I wonder if she means, “I love you… (was enough for your brother), why isn’t it enough for you?”

The disparity and incongruence of “otherness” and lack of “fit” was not limited to the physical. I’ve always had an insatiable curiosity that my adoptive parents did not
relate to. Over the years in response to my many questions and curiosity, my mother has often responded with, “You think too much.” I would learn to answer with, “I am just compensating for those who don’t think enough.” Feeling that I could not speak to my family about my expanding curiosity around my adoption experience led me to lean into my imagination. While I had a “place” in my family, I could choose how much I could and would “stay.” Although I was isolated in terms of adoption, and the transcultural experience, I determined for myself, that I would connect in other ways.

3.10. Ambient Mentors

When I thought about my adoption, what I knew was what I didn’t know. And when my questions fell upon closed ears, I turned to literature, music, and art. I surrounded myself with stories that celebrated thinking, “otherness,” outlaws (the ones that didn’t quite “fit”), and both the loneliness and liberation that came with it. Through authors and artists’ work I connected to them. I choose them. They inspired me and they took form as ambient mentors.

I remember the first Kurt Vonnegut book I read, *Welcome to the Monkey House*. I fell in love with how he too was connected to General Electric in Schenectady, NY where my father worked as a machinist. I imagined him touring the building that housed the turbines and cranes and wondering if both the machines and the people who worked among, the blue-collar workers like my father inspired him. Vonnegut’s satire led me to Orwell’s and Huxley’s dystopia. Dystopia provided honest worlds where characters were challenged to rebel and be revolutionaries. And along came anti-hero books written by the likes of Salinger followed by Kerouac and The Beats. The poetry of e.e. cummings
and Ginsberg came next. Each author became an ambient mentor, a lantern, and one lit the path to the next. Their light kaleidoscoped my world; my small town with its limited cultural diversity became a starting point rather than a resolution. I may have been physically geographically isolated, but I could travel through time and space through the literature. Their words provided social commentary that resonated with my social consciousness. I found a “fit” among those with artistic temperaments, those who voiced their aloneness, the outlaws who dared to understand the rules only to break or bypass them, those who lived passionately, and most of all those who were curious.

Throughout my reading I would find that much visual art inspired many of these writers. The artistic temperament wasn’t defined by medium. The artist Pablo Picasso once said, “For those who know how to read, I have painted my autobiography.”47 It was through art that I began to have conversations with myself and tell my own story. I found that art made meaning for me, and it recognized that my emotional experience mattered. Art was about capturing the nuances and sensibilities of the human experience, all the human experiences. In art there is always room for growth, for learning, for questions, for exploring. It celebrates imperfections, mistakes, being different and being the same. This is how I have made meaning of my own ambiguity. The acknowledgement of my own loss and unknown has strengthened my love for inquiry and fueled my creativity. And in my search I have connected with both ambient and proximal mentors who despite their disciplines carry a love for inquiry.

47 “Pablo Picasso Biography, Art, and Analysis of Works | The Art Story.”
3.11. Proximal Mentors

I recognized disconnect and lacking in the town I grew up in. In response, I found ways to connect to others intellectually, these “ambient mentors.” When I entered college and into early adulthood I further explored these types of connections. My mentors moved from “ambient” to “proximal.” These “proximal mentors” are people that I have been fortunate to experience relationships with, create connections, and have influenced my life, academically, professionally, and personally.

Through these experiences I have been able to approach, develop, and rebuild pieces of my adoptee identity and acknowledge my “self-in-context.” Loss is a core issue seen in adoption research.\textsuperscript{48} Adoptees have feelings towards disempowerment by choices that have affected them. Through relational connection I have had the opportunity to be an integral part of the “choice” in entering a relationship that is akin to that of a parent and a child. Through mentoring relationships, as an adoptee I have been able to explore parts of my identity that were (intentionally or unintentionally) discouraged by my parents.

In my experience I’ve found that the mentee/mentor relationship can readdress and model a form of familial relationships that might not be possible in the actual family environment. The following section is a series of letters. They are directed to “proximal” mentors that guided me, led me to insight, provided wisdom, shared support, and served as inspiration for my ever-evolving adoptee identity. Out of respect of their anonymity, I have omitted their names.

\textsuperscript{48} Brodzinsky, Schechter, and Henig, \textit{Being Adopted}. 
3.11.1. Mentor I: Art is Ambiguous

To my Artist (with a capital A) Mentor,

“Schizophrenic” is how you referred to living your life as an Artist. An Artist with a capital “A,” is a professional maker. You described to me what your life was being an “Artist.” That it meant accepting and acknowledging a lived struggle. Being an Artist translated to being in a constant state of transition. Transitioning between expectations of yourself, the people in your life, and the temperamental field at large. Being an Artist meant living with sacrifices. The biggest sacrifice was time. Time researching, doing, making, and creating art meant time sacrificed from other places in your life. It meant time away from your family, from friends, from other interests. Being an Artist meant understanding that producing work was compulsively introspective and consumed time.

My freshman year in college I met you. You were my first proximal mentor. During class you shared images of your own college work when you created public site-specific installations. By intentionally choosing geographical locations you’d engage the public. One installation in particular that I remember was comprised of life-size papier-mâché people. Positioned as if they were sunbathing, amongst these “bodies” you juxtaposed yourself. All this took place in front of an urban downtown municipal building.

At the time I was “part-time” at a therapeutic arts program. I had such difficulty negotiating for myself how art could both exist as expressive and aesthetically viable. It seemed that the best work balanced the two. Even then I was curious about what possibilities and potential art held.
Guilelessly you would say many things to me. Unlike my parents, it seemed like everything was on the table. I remember how much you encouraged me to go to grad school for fine arts. My family never spoke of Grad School. My father was a high school graduate, my mother went to a technical school, and my brother was a community college graduate. This was an option? Swiftly and succinctly you presented three options: “You go to New York City because that’s where you should be…You go to the middle of nowhere because that is where they’ll pay you…or…You go to Rhode Island School of Design because that’s where they’ll love you (I believe this was because of the supportive community that was cultivated at the school and my aesthetic at the time).” And you said so bluntly, how you don’t need a Masters in Fine Art, emphasizing the word need. In the art world you went for your Masters to give yourself time and space. You went to make time for yourself to cultivate your work in a provided space. And then you would tell me that conceptually my ideas were sound but that I needed more “cerebral friends” because that would support my work. That would inspire my work.

The artists Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb wrote a manifesto that announced, “To us art is an adventure into an unknown world, which can be explored by only those willing to take risks.” And amongst all the conversations, the one that resonated with me the most was when you explained to me with a smile, “Art is ambiguous.” Excitedly you elaborated that art was best when it was mysterious and unknown, when it was “other” and inspired curiosity. That taking risks was the artist’s duty. More importantly, art honored ambiguity, and as an adoptee, ambiguity was home to me.

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49 Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb, “A Letter from Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb to the Art Editor of the New York Times.”
3.11.2. Mentor II: Save Your Secrets

To my Metalsmithing Mentor,

People come to this class to make “pretty” things you would tell me in our jewelry class. After a classroom critique, I was left targeted. You’d go on to apologize for the class not understanding that “pretty” wasn’t the only purpose for jewelry. That it could be more, much more.

I remember one of the first techniques you taught me, a basic. The process started by heating a piece of metal with a blowtorch. It was a piece of copper. Copper when heated and properly annealed turns the most beautiful cherry red color. It glows the way red apples in spring glow against the lush green leaves they hang among. Once heated or “annealed” (as referenced by a metalsmith), you’re able to manipulate the metal. Then you’d show me how to hammer patterns in and use a roller press to create aesthetic indents. Once a “negative” pattern was achieved I had another choice. By heating up a second piece of metal and placing it facing the “negative” pattern and putting it through a rolling mill a “positive” could be created.

At the end of the process I found that I was pleased with both my positive and negative. I wanted to use both within the piece. That’s when you pursed your lips, shook your head, and said, “Don’t give away your secrets.” It was important for to me to be reminded that in art, secrets are celebrated. That it’s not only okay to keep secrets but also the power that comes with being intentional with them. In art there is not only room for mystery and the unknown, but also a welcoming of it.

More importantly you would emphasize the importance of the basics and honor
the history of the art of metalsmithing. Keeping this awareness in mind helps me stay close to the essence and integrity of the ritual and practice. I don’t believe honoring this awareness solely applies to the visual arts and metalsmithing. The fiction author, David Foster Wallace gave a graduation speech describing this. He said,

The capital-T Truth is about life BEFORE death. It is about the real value of a real education, which has almost nothing to do with knowledge, and everything to do with simple awareness; awareness of what is so real and essential, so hidden in plain sight all around us, all the time…

I believe that reminding myself about the “basics,” the simplicities of life, and having not only awareness but honoring them is choosing to live.

3.11.3. Mentor III: Who Are You?

To My Mentor Behind the Curtain,

“Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain,” You’d say, while you introduced how the Wizard of Oz inspired you as a counselor. I had no idea at the time by signing up for your class it would be the start of an on-going, ten year in process relationship.

The first course I took with you, Counseling Theories, you shared that during your graduate education the university was moving from psychoanalytic to behavioral theory. Stories were shifting to numbers, and although you spoke of and taught an amalgamation of Yalom’s existential and Carl Roger’s humanistic theory, you deeply valued “the research.” It was through your class I began reading journal articles and began to notice the “gaps” or as I like to think of them, the opportunities. I applied this to

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50 Wallace, This Is Water.
my own life. At the time I was doing therapeutic art and the literature was lacking to support and advocate for it.

And in this class, like every other class I would assist you in through the years you always brought yourself. When I say yourself, I mean all of your genuine self. You arrived with your enthusiasm, interest, anxiety, idiosyncrasies, and unabashed honesty. Through stories you presented each individual theorist in terms of their narrative. You then challenged us to recognize and reflect on our own narrative and how that would inform our own theory. You asked us, “Who are you as a counselor?” And each answer I provided represented a starting place for further analysis for finding ground and making meaning. And as I strengthened my foundation of who I was, the question evolved. It grew into other questions like “What do I want to be my legacy?” and “What do I want my contribution to be?”

You presented us a societal theory. In Freud’s time the social issue was sex and today, one of our societal issues include death and death anxiety. In your class I would read about Irvin Yalom’s existential therapy. He explained, “Though the physicality of death destroys us, the idea of death may save us.” As a therapist Yalom asks patients about their death timeline. Through examining dying and the significance of acknowledging finitude one could make meaning of their living. By paralleling and acknowledging my adoption loss, I was able to ask how it made meaning in my life.

Although introduced in a single semester, these would be questions I continue to carry with me. I entered your classroom with my own way of asking, “Who am I?” I was

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51 Yalom, The Gift of Therapy.
defining myself by how I “fit” and how I didn’t. In answering the questions you presented, I reframed my question and began supporting my own meaning. The connection I would find was that my personal and professional pursuits were a symbiotic relationship. My personal investments, what I cared and was intrinsically curious about, led to my professional growth.

You would also ask us to examine our strengths and weaknesses. And as I explored this I found that one of my most prominent strengths was also my most prominent weakness. I have always known that I have had an insatiable curiosity. However, this insatiable nature doesn’t acknowledge boundaries, whether it is fields, professions, interests, or time. This is how I have evolved from an apprentice art therapist, to a human subject working in quantitative research, all while being a metalworking visual artist. While I am passionate in my endeavors over the years I have come to recognize that, too much is always still too much.

Through our on-going relationship I am reminded to honor my curiosity and keep the question “Who am I?” open. I have come to believe that this question is at the heart of the adoptee experience. By keeping this question approachable and challenging myself to answer, I’ve gained insight. Being aware and asking “Who am I as an adoptee?” is just as critical as me asking myself “Who am I was a friend?” or “Who am I as colleague?” And while the answers evolve over the years, the connections between the answers strengthen, the foundational question, “Who am I?” and builds a foundation to answer, “How has my loss made meaning?”
3.11.4. Mentor IV: Affectivity

To My Mentor Who Cares,

The fiction writer, Kurt Vonnegut wrote, “Many people need desperately to receive this message: ‘I feel and think much as you do, care about many of the things you care about, although most people do not care about them. You are not alone.’”\(^{52}\) You were aware I was having a reactionary fight or flight response to a personal life crisis. I was sitting in your office and you shared with me that you’d be heartbroken if I’d left.

It is and has been an honor for me to say that I work for a female Principal Investigator in a multi-million dollar, nationally funded, health study. Supported by this fact is that we are not only doing research, but we are doing what is considered to be the gold-star of research, randomized clinical trials. But most importantly, you’ve been a model for me, showing me that professional pursuits and the personal can co-exist. You value our work, and value your family. And you know, acknowledge, and understand when “life happens.”

You’ve always shown me genuine care and support through the years. And when you told me how you’d felt if I left, I realized that there is a place for affectivity in the professional academic world. That affectivity and caring not only mattered, but also was essential to both professional and personal growth.

I came to our research team not with a scientific research background but with visual art and human service backgrounds. And you made room for me in your lab and have encouraged me to use my background as strength. Being able to reconcile and

\(^{52}\) Vonnegut, *Timequake.*
integrate parts of myself professionally has been integral in my development. In acknowledging my own adoptive development, the outside acknowledgement and encouragement of “wholeness” has been a critical component for understanding my identity.

3.11.5. Mentor V: The Interdisciplinarian

To My Mentor Who is An Artist With Words,

“You’re a walking irony” said in class. And then you share that I worked in the College of Medicine, in Psychiatry, but I was also a metal sculpture and a writer. You’d tell me that if you had a dinner party with Howard Gardner, who believed in multiple intelligences, I’d be invited.

Approaching an interdisciplinary mixed-method thesis you warned me would be difficult. And rather than pushing me one direction or the other, you challenged me by saying “No one’s ever done a thesis with sculpture....” I understood it as a challenge rather than a request. You encouraged me to share my story, because my story was important. And throughout your classes I would dig a little deeper and find fresh ground. Throughout the courses I was able to locate my philosophical moral truths, values, and beliefs. Within the classroom I was able to ask myself “Who am I?” and existentially answer.

In the Religion and Spirituality course you asked us to think about our own spirituality. You explained, that in Latin, “spiritus” meant “breath.” And you asked our class, “What takes your breath away?” Being asked a question like this helped me find truths and values I hold today. I can now name the importance of ambition in my life, and
how it needs to be balanced by humility. I can tell you how I believe courage and risk, especially in the face of ambiguity, are values I believe in. That honesty conveyed with kindness (especially, using humor) is the way I prefer to communicate. And caring connects all of these beliefs and values, which comprise the wholeness that illuminate my integrity. In the daily-literal sense, going to bed and waking up with integrity is of the utmost importance to me, and keeping my truths in my daily consciousness is the key to all of this. These are the themes that emerged in the writing I have done in your classes.

While specifically, the Korean adoptee research is calling for “lived experiences,” it is not an easy task to volunteer for. These acknowledgements have been critical in the process of my thesis project. This is because without this foundation I don’t believe I had the courage to share my own narrative.

3.11.6. Mentor Modeling: A “Better” End

In the last few years I have been witness to several of my mentors being sentenced with severe health diagnoses. It is a heart-breaking thing to find out that someone who is full of life and a sharp mind can also have a body that fails them. And while no one can predict such things, I have come to find that I can choose how to approach these predicaments. While any relationship can come to an unexpected or uncontrollable end, mentoring relationships can provide a means to model a “better” end (whether that end is a symbolic or actual “death”).

Anxiety surrounds death, finality, and loss, but through a mentoring relationship I believe I can approach this fate as a witness and companion for my mentors. Just as they’ve stood by my side, I can then offer my own awareness, appreciation, and support.
I can offer the generosity that they have provided me.

As a mentee, I can choose to be not only present for a “loss” but I can learn from the active experience of loss. My “lineage of loss” can be contributed to in an aware and intentional way. It then becomes a choice to preserve their legacy within my own understanding. Through awareness and appreciation I’ve recognized that mentors at their best serve as x-rays. Their light has guided me to examine myself from the inside out.

3.11.7. Mentor as Me

The mentee experience at its best can lead to self-mentoring. It is through the wisdom of my mentors and the acceptance of myself that I have been able to negotiate the difficulties of disparities that challenge my feelings of “wholeness.” In the adoptive identity, wholeness of the self-in-context (the intrapersonal, family, and society) is the obstacle.

As described by Carr, “self-mentoring occurs when the achiever (mentee) is willing to take the initiative while accepting responsibility for his/her own development…to make the most of opportunity to strengthen competencies…”\(^{53}\) I believe that the self-mentoring goal of responsibility of development can help inform the adoptee identity experience.

The goal of self-mentoring is ultimately to have honest conversations with oneself, while addressing strengths and weaknesses candidly and examining one’s own accountability in situations. Ultimately, the goal, as I’ve experienced as an adoptee, is to answer the evolving question of “Who am I?” As an adoptee, there were choices that

\(^{53}\) Beckford, “Mentoring Yourself to Success.”
were made for me. I cannot change those circumstances. However, what I can choose is how I approach, assess, and advance in the present by partaking in honest evaluation and examining myself within experiences.

With the foundational investigation of the original question, “Who am I?” I am able to acknowledge who I am as a Korean adoptee. It is through this question that I can approach the transracial and the transnational components of my transcultural experience.

My mentors have helped me acknowledge, examine, and support pieces of myself. Through their support and encouragement I have come to a place of appreciation in our relationships, but also acknowledged the importance of appreciating myself as my own mentor. By exploring my otherness, accepting it, and “not” fitting in, I have been able to make my own way academically, professionally, and personally.
PART IV: VISUAL ARTISTIC RESEARCH

Integral to this interdisciplinary project is visual artistic research. In adjunct to the writing portion of this project is a series of jewelry/sculpture. While all of us have stories, many of us don’t always have the words to create them.

As I’ve previously mentioned there were many times in my life that conversations didn’t happen within my family and silence held space. I had made meaning by not speaking of my experience, but stealthily showing my experience. Throughout all my lived experiences art has been my way of synthesizing and integrating ideas, it has been the “glue” in my life.

I have studied art formally and over the years I have come to believe that artist statements are ever evolving personal narratives. They are living testaments and speak from the core of artists. Through telling, reading, and sharing of these statements I have felt bonded to other artists. I believe that engaging in sharing narratives breaks down the illusions of being separate beings and creates space to understand our interdependent collectiveness. It was through writing multiple artist statement drafts, many revisions, and varying series of work that I began to hone in on what my themes are and the meaning I make as an artist. By sharing my narrative, I too contribute to the collective. I contribute to artistic culture, which then lends itself to shaping the global community.

As an artist, my hope is to design and craft pieces that tell stories and also provoke stories, turning the observer into an active participant. I choose to create jewelry/sculpture. Aesthetically, I treat jewelry as site-specific installations for the body that are “aggressive.” My definition of “aggressive” is defined as not to be worn.
passively. My jewelry/sculptures are statement pieces that are specifically meant to encourage and generate conversations. The jewelry when not worn functions as sculpture.

I believe that jewelry and adornment bring a different function to art. Jewelry holds its own varying symbolic meanings: decoration, sentiment, promises and resilience. I believe that when one chooses a piece to wear, they are choosing to invite others into their world.

An Art Opening: mis(fit)s: identity & adornment

Art at large provides a means to make complex concepts approachable. It also provides a vehicle for silenced topics to have a “voice.” Art openings and events thereby provide an approachable and accessible space for silenced and unspoken topics to have a platform within the community and the public discourse.

mis(fit)s: identity & adornment was installed on UVM’s campus at The Gallery in the Living/Learning Complex accessible to both UVM’s residential community and the greater Burlington community. It was advertised in the local newspapers, Burlington Free Press and Seven Days, and was represented in the locally distributed art community’s Art Map Burlington (all were announced in print and online). The following images include the official gallery announcement and the gallery opening reception.
Figure 1: Gallery Announcement: mis(fit)s: identity & adornment
Willionaire (Will Andrews of Japhy Ryder) performed during the event. Instrumental space jazz was played, which strengthened the overall ambience and themes of the installation that included time, space, and memories.

Figure 2: Gallery Opening: Willionaire (Will Andrews)
The presentation and culmination of the visual artistic research in this project was a site-specific installation and gallery opening at UVM. The following is my artist statement for the series, in epistolary form:

Dear Viewer/Observer,

mis(fit)s: identity and adornment is a series of jewelry/sculpture that explores the question, “Who am I?” In my experience as an adoptee, the epicenter of this experience is loss. Part of the adoptee experience is a relational “death” and disconnect that includes but is not limited to the biological parents, ethnicity, and culture. Inspired by memento mori (Victorian mourning jewelry), I attempted to create symbolic artistic reminders of
the human experience of loss, mortality, the inevitability of finitude and how these affect identity. By comparing and contrasting memories and lived experiences, I explore psychological uncertainty. Principally I work in metal, while experimenting with every day “found objects.” By manipulating both media I attempt to transform this loss into a landscape of wearable reminders of anatomical fragility and existential consciousness.

Each title within the series is homage to other artists, musicians, and writers’ work. This is in relation to what I refer to as “ambient mentors,” people whose work I’ve felt connected to and served as inspiration. It is through these relationships and “proximal” mentors that I have been able to re-evaluate my “losses” as gains.

This is the visual art component of my mixed-method thesis project for the UVM Interdisciplinary Master’s program. The thesis titled, Letters From an Interdisciplinary Artist: Illuminating Korean Adoptee Identity Through Mentors and Metal integrates personal narrative and letter writing supported by previous research findings to explore adoptee identity formation.

Installation: Representing the Process

Jewelry is often presented and exhibited on forms that echo the shape of the human body. While all the pieces can be worn, they also serve as a function of sculpture.

In displaying the work, I attempted to represent themes that emerged throughout this project. For example, I wanted to acknowledge and create a sense of time passing, and represented that by having giving the pieces a withered and wornness. The metals were often given a patina (treated, colored, or darkened) to create this effect. I also wanted to represent memory and the instable and often fragmented nature of memory. In
recognizing this, I choose to suspend pieces within glass orbs and then suspend the glass orbs themselves. Suspending the orbs provided the viewers the ability to see each piece with a 360 degree view. Also, as viewers walked through the gallery the natural air currents would slightly spin the orbs, creating another interaction and dynamic with the viewer.

The following images are documentation of the installation.

Figure 4: mis(fit)s: installation 1
Figure 5: mis(fit)s: installation 2
mis(fit)s: Images and Descriptions

There are a total of 11 pieces that are part of this series. Each piece was created to stand on its own, however its purpose was also to contribute to the overall strength of the work as a series. Provided are images of each individual piece (some images are from the installation), titles, dimensions, and the materials used.

Figure 6: what is still undone

Dimensions: 3” x 3” x .75” (each bracelet)

Materials: brass, copper, and gold filled

\[54\] Rilke, *Rainer Maria Rilke*, 106.
Figure 7: i dream light years

Dimensions: 3.5” x 2.25” x .5” (brooch)

Materials: brass, copper, gold filled, and Polaroid 600 photograph


75
Figure 8: and the boths, and the neithers\textsuperscript{56}

Dimensions: 8” x 7” x .25” (necklace)

Materials: sterling silver, copper, and black diamond

\textsuperscript{56} Cummings, \textit{100 Selected Poems}, 96.
Figure 9: all of it is yours & mine\textsuperscript{57}

Dimensions: 2.25” x 1.75” x .25” (pendant)

Materials: brass, sterling silver, and gold-filled

\textsuperscript{57} Iggy Pop, \textit{The Passenger}.
Figure 10: a temporary container

Dimensions: 2.25” x 2.25” x .625” (box), 2.25” x .75” x .25” (earrings),
size 5 (teeth ring), 1.5” x 2.25” x 3.75” (antler pendant), .5” x 1” x 1” (crane)

Materials: brass, gold-filled, plastic, copper, sterling silver, US one dollar bill,
Polaroid 600 photograph and mokume
Dimensions: 3.25” x 2” x .5” (pendant)

Materials: copper, turquoise, pyrite, and sterling silver
Figure 12: …this is water\textsuperscript{58}

Dimensions: 12” x 8” x .25” (necklace)

Materials: copper, wood, and acrylic paint

\textsuperscript{58} Wallace, \textit{This Is Water}. 
Dimensions: 2.25” x 2.25” x .625” (box), 2” x 1.5” x .25” (anchor pendant), and 1” x .75” x .25” (skull pendant/wax seal)

Materials: sterling silver, leather, Fuji Instax photograph, wax, felt, copper, steel nail, and brass
Dimensions: 4” x 2” x 1.25” (pendant)

Materials: sterling silver, copper, champagne, black diamond, champagne diamond, and white sapphire
Figure 15: empty spaces

Dimensions: 2.25” x 1.25” x .25” (brooch)

Materials: gold-filled, brass, copper, and fuji instax photograph
Figure 16: my skin keeps the storm inside\textsuperscript{59}

Dimensions: 1.75” x 4” x 2.75” (box), 1.75” x 1” x .75” (ring)

Materials: sterling silver, plastic, tin, moss, faux-fur

\textsuperscript{59} Minutemen, \textit{Storm in My House}. 

84
A mis(fit): …deconstructed

While each piece held its own story and representational significance it is important to strengthen understanding with a further detailed background of a piece. “…this is water” (as seen in figure 10) had a direct link to the writing portion in this thesis project.

In section 3.4. A Reconciliation: Entrance and Birth Story Meet, I share the experience of finding out that there were incongruences in the convergence of my stories. “…this is water” represents the process and sentiment around that experience.

Figure 17: …this is water
While investigating my actual birth city, Yeosu, I found that the beautiful port city was comprised of over 300 islands. A symbol of Yeosu is the camellia flower. I then implemented a photo-transfer technique to represent this symbol. Behind the copper flower I created a representational wooden bridge. This is both a symbolic and a literal representation. Symbolically it represents the “bridge” between my birth story and my entrance narrative. Visually it echoes the other pieces in the series, as it has an anatomical vertebrae/spine likeness. This also serves as a literal representation. While researching my birth city, I came across a story of a footbridge that connects some of the islands of Yeosu.

The title of the piece, “…this is water” is in reference to David Foster Wallace’s commencement speech at Kenyon College also referenced in my letter to my nieces. This essay touches on the importance of everyday awareness and how we choose to perceive the interactions and events in our existence.
PART V: METHODOLOGY

5.1. Introduction: Scholarly Personal Narrative, epistolary Scholarly Personal Narrative, and Artistic Research

5.1.1. Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN)

In Dr. Robert Nash and DeMethra LaSha Bradley’s book *Me-Search and Re-Search* they define Scholarly Personal Narrative,

Scholarly personal narrative is a methodology that allows for the “subjective I” of the writer to share the centrality of the research along with the “objective they” of more traditional forms of scholarship.

The “subjective I” does not have a prominent place in other methodologies. It is through the “subjective I” that the researcher can explain why they are curious about their topic, how that topic affects their life, and how it makes meaning within the context of their own lived experience. Nash and LaSha Bradley go on to further elaborate this. They explain,

The research is further stimulated by the expansion of the author’s personal connection, or, in some cases, disconnection, with the content or data being studied. SPN not only creates a space for the researcher, which is not unlike qualitative research, but requires the researcher to bring their subjective self to the table for a universal conversation. The “self” in SPN brings in experience through affectivity.60

Lacking in the literature within Korean adoptee research was the lived experience of the adoptee. SPN provided a platform for me to approach this “gap” in a scholarly, creative and affective way. It serves as a vehicle for voice within academic scholarship.

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60 Nash and Bradley, *Me-Search and Re-Search*.
5.1.2. epistolary Scholarly Personal Narrative (eSPN)

A branch off the SPN methodology is epistolary Scholarly Personal Narrative (eSPN). eSPN takes on the form of a letter. The “letter” corresponds with an audience that can include, but is not limited to, topics, “self”, people (fictional, non-fictional, living, or dead), places, and things. By defining an “audience” the research itself becomes approachable and accessible in a focused way. It also empowers the researcher in that the researcher is able to set up a power dynamic that encourages a response from the reader. eSPN provides space for welcoming further discussion.

5.1.3. Visual Artistic Research

The educational researcher and aesthetic advocate Eliot Eisner presented the concept of “Aesthetic Modes of Knowing.” He goes on to explain,

The phrase, “aesthetic modes of knowing” presents something of a contradiction in our culture. We do not typically associate the aesthetic with knowing. The art, which the aesthetic is most closely associated, is a matter of the heart. Science is thought to provide the most direct route to knowledge. Hence, “aesthetic modes of knowing” is a phrase that contradicts the conception of knowledge that is most widely accepted. I hope to show…that the widely accepted view is too narrow and thin and that the roads to knowing are many.”61

Visual art serves as a means of communication. Visual artistic research is a developing method of inquiry that acknowledges visual artists’ imagination, intellect, and produced work as a body of research. The goal of artistic research is akin to other methodologies in that there is a systematic approach to inquiry and a resulting goal of new knowledge.

The artist Jackson Pollock once said, “Method is, it seems to me, a natural growth out of a need and from a need the modern artist has found new ways of expressing the

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61 Eisner, *Learning and Teaching the Ways of Knowing*, 23.
world about him.” As the global community widens, technology grows, and “worlds” (academic, geographical, cultural, political, etc.) collide, new ways to approach and respond are needed. In a “seeing” culture, it is advantageous for researchers to use our resources in new and creative ways, and with that the visual becomes critical for inquiry, communication, and information consumption and digestion.

Another factor that makes visual artistic research advantageous is that it provides a means for public engagement. The nature of a visual art body of work is to be shared in a public space. Art openings provide an accessible way to approach the body of work and call for community attention and participation.

5.2. Integration of SPN, eSPN, and Artistic Research

An “artistic way of knowing” or “artistic experientiality” at its very core connects the aesthetic and sociocultural context. Art and aesthetics intrinsically have a nature of producing awareness, which can lead to knowledge.

SPN research and visual artistic research are similar in that they share a paradoxical existence that is simultaneously intrapersonal and interpersonal. Both SPN scholarship and visual artistic research requires oneself to draw myopically introspective and stay close to the topic at hand. However, both methods provide socially innovative opportunities to join and connect to a community.

Both storytelling and visual research in its best form come from a place of integrity and truth. Through the sharing of the lived experience SPN scholars and artists can both support and strengthen their voice and call to the global community. Both

methodologies critically and creatively approach the world and generate awareness. It is through these means that lines of race, nationality, culture, politics, and ethics can be approached, acknowledged, and communicated upon. Both SPN scholars and artists do not ask the community to “be” them or “see” what they see. They are not requesting to have the same nuanced lived experience. However, what they both do is challenge the scholar to bring attention to the connection between human experience themes.

5.3. Approach

5.3.1. How It Was Conducted

The writing started with my lived experience. I began this process by gathering my own stories and anecdotes. I asked myself what memories I had that remained over the years. Hemingway wrote in his memoir, “All you have to do is write one true sentence. Write the truest sentence you know.” That is how I started this project. I wrote what I believed, what I trusted, and my experience.

Recognizing that I am not the only adoptee or Korean adoptee, I then approached past research. It was in the literature that I found that the lived experience specifically of a transracial transnational Korean adoptee was lacking and being called upon.

Throughout the process, in tandem, I used my artistic background to synthesize the experience. Not dissimilar to qualitative reflexive journaling it became a place for me to digest the “data.” Data included but was not limited to my own stories, the letters I was writing, quantitative research, and qualitative research.

63 Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast.*
5.3.2. Why SPN, eSPN, and Visual Artistic Research

In 1958, William Bruce Cameron a Professor of Sociology published an article in the National Education Association titled, “Tell me not in Mournful Numbers.” In this paper Professor Cameron wrote,

Counting sounds easy until we actually attempt it, and then we quickly discover that often we cannot recognize what we ought to count. Numbers are no substitute for clear definitions, and not everything that can be counted counts.64

I am a Study Coordinator at the Health Behavior Research Center (HBRC) in the University of Vermont’s Psychiatry Department. The mission of our clinical research center is to investigate how technology can increase accessibility to behavioral treatment. The specialization of the HBRC is to provide randomized controlled trials (RCTs) focusing on Interactive Voice Response (IVR). IVR is a technological tool that uses automated telephone systems to provide patient monitoring and health behavior intervention.

I have come to learn that in the hierarchy that exists within quantitative research, RCTs are considered “the gold standard” of “evidence-based” clinical trials. RCTs are known for their structure and more importantly their findings. RCTs look at correlations (x and y seem related) and causal statements (x increases y). What RCTs do not try to explain is why something does or doesn’t work. Quantitative research uses numbers to tell a story of if something works and how well. “How many” and what can be measured are at the essence of this methodology. It is an empirical way of knowing.

64 “Not Everything That Counts Can Be Counted | Quote Investigator.”
Another scholarly approach to research is qualitative. Qualitative research is defined as “Explaining phenomena by collecting numerical data that are analyzed using mathematically based methods (in particular statistics).” In the qualitative research world, instruments are specifically designed to convert phenomena that doesn’t exist in numeric form into data that can be analyzed statistically. The guiding principle of qualitative research is to “illuminate” phenomena. The very essence of this methodology is to explore the questions that quantitative may not be able to answer, “Why?”

Quantitative research is objective and looks to describe, explain, predict and count what needs to be counted. Qualitative research is subjective and looks to explore, discover, and construct. Why choose Scholarly Personal Narrative (and eSPN)? And why integrate it with artistic research?

There are an infinite number of research questions to be asked and with that an infinite number of stories to be told. Some stories are best told quantitatively through numbers, some qualitatively through description and context, and some best told through belief and value with the researcher front and center. And some are told best without words. All the methods provide ways to tell stories in ways the others can’t. As further explained by Nash in Liberating Scholarly Writing,

> Every research paradigm in the academy—whether grounded in the traditional scientific method or in critical theory, in phenomenology or in hermeneutics, in ethnography or in statistics—has a valuable function to perform. Much good has come from each and every method in scholarly inquiry…

The numbers that narrate a quantitative adoption study that uses a scale can

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65 Aliaga and Gunderson, *Interactive Statistics*.
evaluate the extent of family involvement in cultural activities. Suggestions from such a study can tell you that a child’s participation in Korean cultural activities and the ease of communication between a child and their parents have an association with ethnic identity.

A qualitative study that uses semi-structured interviews to ask intercountry adult Korean adoptees about their cultural identity highlights the themes of their collective experience. Themes can emerge from these interviews such as denial and an “emerging cultural consciousness.”

And through SPN (and eSPN), I can use my lived experience as a resource and tell you about what it was like for me navigating and negotiating my transracial and transnational adoptee experience and finding ground, accepting that the Korean adoptee experience is transcultural. Through SPN I can explain how researching this experience helped make meaning and connected my own understanding as an academic interdisciplinarian. SPN validated my story, just as it has and can validate others.

We all have stories, lessons to be learned, and insights to be gained. However, not everyone has the words to communicate their story. Visual artistic research and aesthetic knowing provides a different subjective knowing not unlike qualitative or SPN. Again, I can draw from my lived experienced but with it synthesize and communicate in a way that the aesthetic is central.

5.3.3. Limitations

Every research paradigm has its limitations. The following is an epistolary approach to the acknowledgement of this.

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67 Meier, “Cultural Identity and Place in Adult Korean-American Intercountry Adoptees.”
Dear fellow researcher (potential and/or current),

I am writing you as a quantitative, a qualitative, a Scholarly Personal Narrative, an artistic researcher, and/or as any other researcher not named. I am writing you as a mixed-method researcher who has used Scholarly Personal Narrative with visual artistic research.

First, I must acknowledge that combining multiple methods is a challenge. It is a challenge because one has to honor each method. One must satiate the precedents set by each method’s requirements. And with those challenges also come the criticisms and highlighted shortcomings of each method.

In working on this thesis I was met with my share of challenges. With SPN was there enough scholarship? Did I have too much or too little personal narrative? And then the art, do I have enough pieces for the series? Is the work comprehensive? Were pieces conceptually and aesthetically sound?

And then I zoomed out. What about the larger research and academic world? Would there be a place for this work? By trying to navigate between the practical and the reflective I was met with a great deal of uncertainty. I had found the gap in the empirical research literature and was trying to not only fill a small portion of it, but also do so in a way that was untraditional. I was building my structure as I went.

Concerning my topic at hand, the literature pointed to a lack in Korean adult adoptee experiential voices. While the limited literature held truths, it cast a shadow on adoptees’ experience as defined by the adoptee. As a Korean adoptee approaching this with research methodologies that specifically use the subjective “I” as the primary source
of information, was critical. It was through these methods I could share the essence of my experience and the nuances within a lived sensibility.

Scholarly Personal Narrative comes with its criticisms. I wondered if SPN would be dismissed as journaling or “Dear Diary-ing,” and thus not make the academic scholarship par. There is no question that SPN can be cathartic for the writer. It provides space to voice your lived experience. And with that in mind, I wonder what place does affectivity have in academic scholarship? Can a piece of academic writing still be academic if one is subjective? And why, if one leans into the subjective, does it become labeled as “self-indulgent?”

SPN is indulgent in the way art is indulgent. It comes with a request and requirement to lean into and immerse oneself into ones’ topic at hand. Both challenge the researcher to honestly approach, creatively synthesize, and critically analyze the research. Both show its methods not in hopes that someone can replicate an experience, but to model that one can share their experience. And both at its best can inspire others to do the same. Both ask the researcher not only to love the research question at hand, but also to carry a self-love and awareness in their approach. While many research paradigms criticize researcher bias, SPN and artistic research reframes the bias as a strength that illuminates the topic at hand. Both methods do not ask of the research the same questions as other methodologies, and it definitively will not provide the same answers if looked through the other research lenses. While both SPN and artistic research are being developed and have undiscovered possibilities as research methodologies, they undoubtedly have a new way of offering and engaging the academic world.
I write you from one researcher to another despite our differences and fields and/or approaches. I write to remind you that within the heart of all researchers is the love of inquiry. Whether the question looks like, “How is that…?” “What happens when…?” or “Who are you?” And when the research question grows cold and unapproachable how do we as researchers adapt? Why do we adapt? I believe this is because the intrinsic nature of research is to not only to love a question but also remind ourselves why we want to study something with originality and enhance knowledge. Isn’t part of research process to extend an invitation to others to participate in what you’ve found? Research is not a self-contained experience. In its very nature research is embedded in its surroundings.

The artist Robert Rauschenberg, said, “You begin with the possibilities of the materials.” What if we looked at our methodologies as materials? And with that be curious about their commonalities, respective of their capacities, and inquisitive surrounding their integration. I believe that with this inclusive approach research and education has great potential. With respective understanding integrative research can be the best it can be and hope to aspire to, revolutionary. I carry courage in the belief that we as researchers can help educate and bring awareness to others. I believe that as researchers, those of us who love inquiry can show that acceptance and integration between methodologies can inspire both others and ourselves. This can contribute to the interdependent collective that contribute to our survival and shape our future.

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PART VI: DEVELOPMENT, DISCUSSION, and IMPLICATIONS

6.1. Development

Dear you,

As we reach the end our time together, I’m writing you directly again. In this interdisciplinary project I hoped to illuminate the multidimensional complexities found in adoptee identity formation. As a transnational and transracial Korean adoptee I used my lived experience as a primary resource for this research project.

Through narrative and an epistolary approach I shared experiences through stories, vignettes, and anecdotes. Using visual artistic research I was able to synthesize the composition of this experience and visually show existential meaning making, all while focusing on the adoptive identity factor and representing the philosophical backbone of my experience, loss.

At the essence of adoptive development is the “self-in-context” question, “Who am I as an adoptee?” In terms of this project, the question extended to, “How has my lineage of loss shaped who I am?” “What relationships have helped me reclaim facets of my adoptive identity?” Ultimately, through mentoring relationships I was able to connect to myself and ask, “How has my acknowledgement of choice defined my gains?” It was through this process that I was able to assert, “Who I am…”

Through visually artistic research I was able to elaborate non-verbally on the existential predicament of the adoptee experience. Communicating this through an aesthetic means was integral to this process. Being able to share this experience not only
with the academic community, but the general public through an art opening brings a level of awareness and inclusion with unknown possibilities.

6.2. Discussion

Uncovering the history of adoption, and specifically the sociocultural and political ties and symbiosis of Korea and the United States, is intriguing as this relationship continues to unfold today. In 1997, the South Korean government established the Overseas Korean Foundation. Their mission was to acknowledge Korean adoptees on a global level. Adoptees were now given special recognition and encouraged to return to the motherland. In 1998, President Kim Dae Jung made “an unprecedented public apology” to Korean adoptee community.\(^6^8\) He legally recognized adoptees and “legitized” a place for us within the Korean community. Like my adoptive family who created a “place” for me, it is curious how the “fit” will be addressed, understood, and practiced. Currently, the Korean government has granted Korean adoptees accessibility to return to the country and acquire dual citizenship. Birth right trips or “return home” trips to explore Korean culture are now accessible. While the government may sanction and provide space, it is curious to see how the native Korean community responds to the adoptee community. And it’s curious to see how we as adoptees respond to the Korean community. We’ve been provided a place, but will we feel a “fit?”

The Korean adoptee research specifically pointed to the need of the “lived experience.” Simultaneously, the cohort of Korean adoptees that I belong to are now adults, and with that comes a new demographic to understand and explore. As such, we

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\(^6^8\) Volkman, *Cultures of Transnational Adoption*, 62.
have begun to discover what our identities look like for ourselves as a collective. Rather than appropriating or subscribing to white, Asian, American, or Korean culture we have begun to construct and define our own transcultural experience. We have begun to integrate ourselves to create Korean Adoptee culture.

A primary resource that Korean Adoptees have used to unite has been through social media. It is through the Internet that “KADs” (the online acronym for Korean adoptees) have been able to connect and share past experiences in real time. The online world creates a way for adoptees to organize conferences, and meet up groups have been ways for adoptees to create communities that connect across the globe.

In the spirit of this facet of the Korean adoptee experience, I have started my own blog. It is called “Thank You Korea... (adventures being asian).” I attempt to use humor and stories to open up conversations complex questions surrounding race, nationality, and the transcultural experience. For example, it is where I can anecdotally talk about living in a white dominant state and having a little girl excitedly call me “Mulan” (in reference to the Chinese Disney heroine).

It’s my understanding that adoptees, such as myself are looking for connection with other adoptees, in ways we have not been able to with others. United through this means of communication we are looking to share experiences in our questions around “otherness” and “ambiguity.” We are in the midst of asking questions, finding “answers” in our unknown, and defining what our culture means to us.
6.3. Implications

Adoption identity at large is complex and holds multidimensionality. Within it are “taboo” topics that have found meaning in their silence or non-conversation. This is why I choose to use an interdisciplinary research approach to access these controversial concepts. Adoption identity comes with the ever-evolving question, “Who am I?” The methods I chose, both Scholarly Personal Narrative and visual artistic research provided a means to creatively and existentially answer the question. I supported my exploration by informing this research with both quantitative and qualitative findings. This is a pilot interdisciplinary study. Further SPN, visual artistic research, and interdisciplinary integration are needed to develop the methodologies and address biases and strengthen weaknesses.

As a human subject research study coordinator, I have seen firsthand how recruitment is a necessary but ever challenging piece of the research puzzle. Regardless of the methodology, human subject research relies on participants. My hope is by naming my own truths, ironies, and struggles that other adoptees will be encouraged to be courageous and share their own. Without participation, without others’ voices in whatever form: surveys, interviews, stories, etc., there is no research. Without research, there is less creativity, connection, innovation, and understanding.

The educational theorist Paulo Friere said,

Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and
women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.

Using an academic platform to share stories and meaning making experiences provides opportunities to bring a critical light to silenced, untold, and overshadowed topics and concepts. These topics are often the ones that we care and are curious about but lack accessible ways to approach. Acknowledging that scholarship can be affective and interdisciplinary means providing opportunities to illuminate ideas and phenomena that may be best approached and answered through alternative measures. Acceptance and encouragement of creative approaches can liberate the scholar, transform the academy, and revolutionize what culture means.

With much awareness and appreciation I thank you for your time.

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(Korean Transcultural Adoptee, Visual Artist/Metalsmith, Pluralistic Researcher, & Interdisciplinary and Social Awareness Advocate)
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