

**“It’s a complicated thing”: A biographical-narrative  
exploration of the experiences and identities of adult  
intercountry adoptees in Australia**

**Elizabeth Seong Goode**

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## **Statement of Originality/Authorship**

I hereby certify that the work embodied in the thesis is my own work, conducted under normal supervision. The thesis contains no material which has been accepted, or is being examined, for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material written by another person, except where due reference has been made.

I also hereby declare that the work embodied in this thesis contains published papers, of which I am the sole author:

1. Goode, E. (2015). Autoethnography from ‘in-between’: An account of the cultural identity construction of a Korean-Australian adoptee. *Studia Sociologica*, VII(2), 120–138.
2. Goode, E. (2018). The dilemma of voice in biographical narratives: Confronting complexity in the ‘unexpected stories’ of intercountry adoptees. *Communication Research and Practice*, 4(1), 83–98.

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Elizabeth Goode

**For Simon and Louie**

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## **Abstract**

Since the late 1960s, more than 10,000 infants and children have been adopted from overseas by Australian parents (Rosenwald, 2009a). Many of these adoptees are now adults in their twenties, thirties and forties. Most were adopted from Asian countries by ‘white’ parents, and came of age in a sociocultural milieu shaped by assimilationist discourses and simplistic understandings of what it means to be an intercountry adoptee. These adults are now in a position to offer nuanced reflections on their experiences, identities and relationships from childhood through to early and middle adulthood. As a postgraduate researcher, this has also been an intensely personal project, for I myself was adopted to Australia from South Korea in the mid-1980s.

Drawing on biographical-narrative and autoethnographic data, the research explores and explains how a sample of adult intercountry adoptees make sense of being transnationally, and in most cases also transracially and transculturally, adopted. It also examines the extent to which they feel a sense of belonging to personally-salient people and places, and how their identifications and senses of self have changed over their lifetimes. This original research exposes the complexity and diversity across these intercountry adoptees’ lives by focusing in-depth on *their* sensemaking about matters of adoption, family, identity and belonging.

Nine individuals born in Asian countries and adopted to Australian parents in the 1970s, 80s and early 90s participated in biographical-narrative interviews, sharing their life stories and perspectives on self and belonging over multiple interactions with the researcher. I also contributed autoethnographic data to the study, drawing on journal entries, personal emails, and memories. My autoethnographic voice extends and supplements the varied insights interviewees provided, especially regarding aspects of experience that I was able to contribute a unique or deepened perspective on.

Importantly, this inquiry has yielded rich, complex and contrasting accounts that centre around themes of familial and cultural non/belonging. It specifically highlights the significance of family relationships in adoptees’ evolving perceptions of self and adoption, as well as the importance of connections with other adoptees. The diversity and indeterminacy of participants’ cultural identifications in adulthood, plus the intersectional and multifaceted nature of their identities, is also foregrounded. This thesis thereby illuminates that constructing identity as an intercountry, transracial adoptee is a lifelong, multi-dimensional, and highly personal experience that entails intricate interplay between individual sensemaking and wider sociocultural ideas about family, adoption, ‘race’ and belonging.

## List of Abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
AIFS	Australian Institute of Family Studies
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
DHA	Department of Home Affairs
DPMC	Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet
DSS	Department of Social Services
HCCH	Hague Conference on Private International Law
HREC	Human Research Ethics Committee
HREOC	Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission
HRSCFHS	House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services
ICA	Inter-Country Adoption
PARC	Post Adoption Research Centre
SCARC	Senate Community Affairs References Committee
UK	United Kingdom
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
US	United States of America

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## CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

### Introducing intercountry adoption

This research project investigates the lives, sensemaking and identities of Australian intercountry adoptees<sup>1</sup>. Adoption is understood in this context as a legal and social process involving the irreversible transfer of parental rights and responsibilities from a child's biological parents to one or more adoptive parents (Groza & McCreery Bunkers 2014:45; Waggenspack 1998:61). In the case of intercountry adoption, which involves the placement of a child with parents who are not citizens of the child's birth country, it is *also* a form of child migration that constitutes a 'social recruitment' across national and familial borders<sup>2</sup> (Leinaweaver 2014:13; see also Murphy, Pinto & Cuthbert 2010). Overwhelmingly, the most common form of intercountry adoption is plenary adoption, which involves 'the complete dissolution of the child's original kinship ties' and the associated transformation of the child's identity (Ouellette 2009:69). This process includes a complete cancellation and re-establishment of the child's name, birth documentation, citizenship and kinship ties, without legal arrangements in place to encourage or facilitate an ongoing relationship between the child and their biological parents or their birthplace. Through these processes, biological parentage is entirely separated from the social and legal act of parenting (Fisher 2003:337), and the adopted child 'becomes a complete stranger to its birth parents and family' (Ouellette 2003:1). Plenary adoption contrasts with simple adoption, which 'gives the child an *additional* family without entirely erasing the original one' (Ouellette 2009:69, emphasis added).

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<sup>1</sup> I have used the term 'intercountry' adoption/adoptee most frequently in this thesis. This reflects the terminology most commonly used: in the literature (Ballard, Goodno, Cochran & Milbrandt 2015; Selman 2012; Willing, Fronek & Cuthbert 2012); by Australian governments and government agencies (e.g. Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet [DPMC] 2014; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services [HRSCFHS] 2005); and in international law (HCCH 2013; United Nations 1989). However, terms such as 'international' and 'transnational' are also used at various points, and should be read as synonymous with 'intercountry'. The term 'transracial' is also used. This is an overlapping, but not synonymous term. Most intercountry adoption is also transracial, involving children and parents who do not share the same racial background. However, intercountry adoption is not always or necessarily transracial. Additionally, domestic adoptees might also be transracially adopted.

<sup>2</sup> The terminology used to differentiate between birth and adoptive cultures, nations and families is contentious. 'Biological' and 'birth' are most commonly used to describe the people and family a child is born to, and *following the lead of the research participants* I have used these terms interchangeably in this thesis. I have also sometimes used the term 'first family' to reflect the chronological ordering of the adoption process. Additionally, while I recognise that the use of the label 'adoptive' is also contentious in that some may feel it implies an inferior, secondary (or less 'real') type of relationship, I have used 'adoptive' to avoid confusion about which relatives, country or culture I am referring to. This term therefore serves a clarificatory, rather than value-laden, purpose in this thesis. Finally, I acknowledge that some adoptees do not consider particular relatives with whom they have no social relationship, or a fractured social relationship, as 'family'. I have however used this term (along with 'relatives') with the caveat that not all adoptees would identify with the emotion, closeness or personal significance it implies.

The modern practice of intercountry adoption is widely considered to have commenced at the close of the Second World War, when changes to immigration policy allowed US citizens to adopt internationally (Briggs & Marre 2009). Since then, it is estimated that over 1 million infants and children have been relocated through intercountry adoption (Selman 2012). This number includes more than 10,000 adoptees sent to Australia from the late 1960s onwards (Rosenwald 2009a:198). Until the mid-1970s, the cross-border movement of children for adoption was driven primarily by humanitarian concerns for children in conflict-ravaged countries. In particular, the Korean<sup>3</sup> and Vietnam Wars were key flashpoints for advancing intercountry adoption in nations outside of Europe (Willing et al. 2012). Many of the ‘orphans’ adopted from Korea in the immediate post-war period were mixed-race children fathered by American soldiers stationed in Korea. Several decades later, when the Vietnam War ended in 1975, over 2,000 children were flown out of Saigon to various countries across the world, including Australia; this sudden and controversial ‘rescue mission’, led by the US, was known as Operation Babylift (Briggs & Marre 2009; see also Chapter 2).

In the years following Operation Babylift, the practice of intercountry adoption became less propelled by the humanitarian desire to ‘rescue’ children from imminent danger. Instead, it became more strongly driven by demand among infertile couples in the west, where the number of infants available for domestic adoption had begun to fall in response to a range of social reforms and contraceptive technologies (Lovelock 2000). Meanwhile, in countries sending children for adoption, grossly inadequate welfare systems and a complex interplay of social, cultural and legal factors rendered intercountry adoption a profitable and relatively expedient ‘solution’ for illegitimate and abandoned children (E. Kim 2007; Lovelock 2000). This has contributed towards what some have described as a market-driven environment (Cartwright 2003; Young 2012) that from the mid-1970s became less oriented towards ‘finding families for children’ and more concerned with ‘finding children for families’ (Lovelock 2000:8). In this new global landscape, intercountry adoptions rose to a peak of over 45,000 adoptions per year in 2004 (Selman 2012).

Selman (2002, 2009) reports that between 1980 and 2004, the countries receiving the highest number of intercountry adoptees were North American (the US and Canada), European (Spain, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, Germany, Switzerland, Denmark, Belgium, and Finland), and Australia. Meanwhile, between 1980 and 1989 South Korea, India, Colombia, Brazil and Sri Lanka sent the highest numbers of children overseas for adoption; by 1998,

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<sup>3</sup> I have used both ‘Korea’ and ‘South Korea’ to refer to the Republic of Korea.

however, Russia and China were the top two sending countries, and Romania and Ethiopia were among the top ten (Selman 2009).

Importantly, the patterns of these movements – *from* Asia, Latin America, Eastern Europe and Africa *to* North America, Europe and Australasia – indicate that the transnational relocation of children for the purposes of international adoption is not merely random or ideologically benign. Rather, it occurs within particular histories of imperialism and structures of power that have skewed these cross-border transfers into an almost unidirectional flow from Global South to Global North and into, rather than from or within, the west<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, as most intercountry adoptees are *not* ‘white’<sup>5</sup>, but are raised by ‘white’ parents (Laybourn 2017), the movements that occur in intercountry adoption are usually *transcultural* and *transracial* as well as transnational. This is an atypical kind of migration; it is most often undertaken alone in one’s early years, and involves the complete replacement of country, culture and family. As Dorow identifies, intercountry adoptees are ‘wedged in the false dichotomy of forced and voluntary migration . . . the child is emigrated “for her own good”, but not through her own choice’ (2006:6). This solo emigration results in dramatic and irrevocable shifts in the lives and identities of transnationally adopted persons – these transformations underpin my own story, as well as those of the other individuals who participated in this inquiry.

## **A personal/political project**

Because these multiple frames of reference exist – from the personal to the political, and from every-day common sense to theoretical and philosophical – I do not feel one will ever come across answers that are unquestionably right or wrong. Rather, we must listen to all to keep searching for predominant themes in order to build strategies and understandings that make life that little bit less bittersweet, turbulent or tense for all. (Cherot 2009:122)

This research is both intensely personal and inescapably political. It speaks about my life as a Korean adoptee who arrived in Australia in 1984 at the age of four months, and, from their experiential perspectives, the lives of nine other participants from South Korea, Vietnam and Sri Lanka. Moreover, although this was not the intended or primary goal of the study, the research also raises issues that remain relevant to the conceptualisation, practice and politicisation of the adoption of children across national, cultural and racial borders.

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<sup>4</sup> The US is a notable exception as both a receiving and a sending country in international adoption (Cuthbert 2012).

<sup>5</sup> The term ‘race’ and associated descriptors such as ‘white’ or ‘Asian’ are often enclosed in quotation marks in this thesis. This is intended to indicate that the meaning of ‘race’ is not a fixed or innate biological reality, but a shifting and contested social construction around which hierarchies of value and power are built. I acknowledge that ‘race’ is ‘one of the most problematic legacies of the Enlightenment’ (Müller-Wille 2014:598), and open to multiple interpretations from divergent ideological standpoints (Vidal-Ortiz 2004:180). (See also Part 1 of Chapter 3.)

When I consider what being an intercountry adoptee feels like to me I am reminded of a character in the animated sitcom *Futurama*. Her name is Leela. She pilots a thirty-first century spaceship, and unlike her ragtag crewmates appears to be sensible, robust, resilient and capable. However, she is unlike her crewmates in other respects too; she has one giant eye in the middle of her forehead – a trait that no one else in the known *Futurama* universe shares – and was abandoned at an ‘orphanarium’ as an infant. No one knows where she came from or what alien species she is descended from, and her gigantic single eye renders this an obvious and unavoidable part of her personal history. There are moments of vulnerability, sorrow, uncertainty and self-doubt that occasionally but tellingly peek through Leela’s strong outer shell. At various plot points in an otherwise trivial cartoon series she seems to ask some deeply personal and painful questions about who she is, where she came from, why she was abandoned, and with whom she belongs. Leela is, of course, a fictional character. Yet her inescapable conspicuousness, her strong façade that hides diminished self-confidence, her mysterious background, and her tarnished state as an abandoned ‘foundling’, resonate. I too have always felt like an alien of unknown and tainted origins – not that you would know it.

It is difficult to answer precisely why I decided to embark on this project. Initially I wanted merely to engage with a topic that held both personal and scholarly significance. And as far as I could discern, the only extra-ordinary aspect of my biography was that I was adopted from overseas as an infant. Intercountry adoption was therefore a space I felt I might have some authority in, not only as a researcher but also as a person who *lives* as an intercountry adoptee. However, as the research developed and progressed I realised that the personal significance of this project extended far deeper than my own life story. And so, I discovered that I wanted to know what others who began their lives in similar circumstances had to say about *their* experiences and identities; how they differed from me and from each other, how they were the same, and what – if anything – that meant. Perhaps I could learn more about myself in the process of learning more about others? Naïvely, I did not realise how challenging this type of inquiring would be. Subsequently, as with many doctoral projects, there are very personal aspects that both precipitated and infused the original research this thesis presents.

There are also political aspects. Intercountry adoption is an emotionally-charged space that is filled with competing voices espousing divergent ideologies, experiences and ‘solutions’ to the problem of relinquished (or trafficked, forcibly removed, coercively taken, unwanted, or abandoned) infants and children in mostly non-western countries. While the political dimensions to this project were not motivating factors for its genesis, I recognise now that I cannot avoid speaking into spaces characterised by longstanding configurations of power, and narratives that

seek to define, support or problematise the practice of adoption across borders. Thus, the politics of intercountry adoption – encompassing struggles for discursive, ideological, bureaucratic, and legislative power – frame the aims of this inquiry.

## **Research aims**

The goal of this research was to examine the life stories of intercountry adoptees who were born in Asia and adopted to Australia in the 1970s, 80s or early 90s. In particular, this comprehensive study considers: What narratives do participants tell about their lives? How do they make sense of being a transracial, intercountry adoptee? Where and with whom do they feel they belong? What circumstances, interactions or events have precipitated change in their identities and feelings of belonging or non-belonging? These questions have allowed for an expansive and nuanced exploration of the ways participants perceive themselves, their relationships, and their identities.

There has also been a tacit, personal aim underscoring the project, for I am acutely aware of how I am frequently (mis)perceived when I reveal that I am an intercountry adoptee. Non-adoptees tend to draw upon a range of entrenched societal narratives that simplify, circumscribe or pathologise my identity and experiences. This occurs because adoption is both legally and socially constructed<sup>6</sup> (Logan 2013:38). On the one hand, contemporary western perceptions of adoption have been infused by discourses<sup>7</sup> that emphasise psychological pathology and damage (Howell 2006:85–109), or the stigma of being a ‘second rate’ choice (Baden 2016; Leon 2002). On the other hand, adoption (and intercountry adoption in particular) may be understood as a kind of modern-day fairytale that ‘creates children for childless couples, parents for orphaned children, and a solution for unwanted pregnancies for birth parents’ (Baden 2016:11). This ‘feel-good’ narrative, of abandoned children from overseas who are ‘saved’ by their adoptive parents, has

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<sup>6</sup> Anthropological accounts evince that in many traditional societies adoption is not framed or experienced in the same way as it is in the contemporary western world. Terrell and Modell observe that: ‘Oceanic societies – Hawaii among them – are well known in anthropological literature for the frequency and apparent casualness of adoption’ (1994:156). Ouellette similarly notes that: ‘In most traditional societies, re-settling a child does not result in the loss of its original identity, nor simulate biological filiation between adopters and adoptee. Above all, it creates a bond between the adult partners of exchange’ (2003:3).

<sup>7</sup> A Foucauldian understanding of ‘discourse’ is deployed throughout this thesis. From this perspective, discourse encompasses not just language, but also ‘systems of thought’ that shape practices, values, attitudes, beliefs and ways of thinking (Kerin 2012 in Fforde, Bamblett, Lovett, Gorrington & Fogarty 2013:162). This understanding involves the recognition that discourses are sites of struggle over meaning, value and significance. Widely-held ways of thinking about topics such as ‘Australianness’, ‘adoption’ and ‘Asian’ are formed, circulated, maintained and challenged through discursive practices, creating ‘terms of reference’ by which groups and individuals may conceive of and position themselves and others. These dominant discourses are variously known as ‘master narratives’, ‘cultural texts’, or ‘culturally available subject positions’ (Clifton & Van De Mieroop 2016:2) – hegemonic ways of understanding topics, experiences and identities.

been embraced with fervor in receiving countries such as Australia and the US<sup>8</sup> (see Chapter 2; Fronek 2009; Fronek & Tilse 2010). Intercountry and transracial adoptees are also sometimes positioned as ‘diversity mascots’, ‘cultural ambassadors’ (E. Kim 2007:515), or ‘rainbow kids’ who symbolise the triumph of multiculturalism (Volkman 2003:32,41). Additionally, they may encounter presumptions about who their ‘real’ family is, expectations that they should be ‘grateful’ about their adoption, or sentiments that they are not *really* ‘black’/‘Asian’/‘Latino’/‘Australian’/‘American’, etc. (Baden 2016). These assumptions and perspectives are common but simplistic conceptualisations that, in my personal and academic experience, do not encapsulate *adoptees’* much more complex, and highly personal, views, involvements and reflections.

An extra aim therefore arose, which was to explore the range of complexity and diversity in a sample of Australian intercountry adoptees’ lives and identities. Consequently, the research has endeavoured to go *behind* the curtain of binary and simplistic narratives that have long circulated in the west about adoption, identity and belonging. For, as Vietnamese Australian adoptee Indigo Willing asserts: ‘Our lives are more complicated than stereotypical stories of going from “war waifs” to “success stories”, and of simplified tales of being “rescued” and going on towards fairytale endings’ (2015:4).

## **The contributions and limits of this research**

As various researchers have noted (Goode 2018; Murphy et al., 2010:155–156; Reynolds, Ponterotto & Lecker 2016; Trenka, Oparah & Shin 2006; Willing et al. 2012:465), intercountry adoption discourse has most commonly featured the perspectives of psychologists, social workers and adoptive parents. Meanwhile, the voices of adult adoptees have only just begun to gain influence in the past fifteen years – and even then, mostly within the US and Europe. A recent review of the literature related to Australian intercountry adoptees found that:

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<sup>8</sup> Latty, a domestic adoptee and writer, offers a poignant perspective on this fairytale narrative:

[This] summer, when a five-year-old girl named Danielle had her adoption finalized in a Michigan courtroom, nine Disney princesses showed up to celebrate her, and a video of the joyous occasion went viral . . . As the [judge’s] gavel crashed into its sounding block and a smiling, sweet-faced Danielle wobbled almost imperceptibly with the weight and force of it, I realized I’d been crying . . .

What’s troubling to me is the particular brand of magic that Danielle’s story conjures for the rest of us. There is no denying this video tugs at the heartstrings, but I believe it went viral for a very specific reason. With its fairy tale imagery and language, this video, and other sentimental representations of adoption, offer us the opportunity to further cement a narrative that we, in American society, have constructed over the last century and seem to need to believe in our individual and collective conscience: Adoption is a happy ending. Adoption is a win-win. Adoption is happily ever after. (2016, online)



Literature addressing any uncomfortable truths concerning intercountry adoption, including public perceptions and debate, and a focus on highlighting the significant gaps in research knowledge seems necessary. *How Australian intercountry adoptees have fared is relatively unclear* and key research could strengthen current practice understandings, and increase the everyday lives and wellbeing outcomes for intercountry adopted children in Australian families. (Gair 2015:24, emphasis added)

Indeed, a small number of PhD and Masters theses – most clustered between 2003 and 2009 and emanating from the disciplines of sociology and anthropology – have generated much of what we know about ‘how intercountry adoptees have fared’ in Australia (Gray 2007; Heaser 2016; Rosenwald 2009b; Walton 2009b<sup>9</sup>; Williams 2003). These investigations exist alongside additional scholarly works (Elliott & McMahon 2011; Fitzhardinghe 2008; Fronek & Briggs 2018; Gair 2015; Scarvelis, Crisp & Goldingay 2015; Taft, Dreyfus, Quartly & Cuthbert 2013) and several anthologies (Armstrong & Slaytor 2001; International Social Service Australia [ISS] Australia 2017) that focus on the narratives and experiences of Australian transracial and transnational adoptees from mostly psychological, social work and narrative perspectives. These studies and publications – discussed further in Chapters 2 and 3 – reveal that there is much more scope for surfacing and examining Australian intercountry adoptees’ experiences, particularly *across* their life course, and not only in relation to ideas about ‘cultural identity’, but regarding many dimensions of their lives: familial, cultural, interpersonal and intrapersonal. In this somewhat vacuous space, this thesis advances a more nuanced understanding of Australian intercountry adoptees’ experiences by examining the valuable life narratives nine interviewees provided, and reflecting on my own as an autoethnographer. In doing so, the work presented here contributes an important, timely and original perspective, informing understandings about how intercountry adoptees who are now in their twenties, thirties and forties, conceive of and story themselves, their relationships, and how they have ‘fared’ in their pre and post-adoptive lives. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasise that the thesis illuminates the stories of particular individuals, including myself, with particular backgrounds. Specifically, the stories examined in Chapters 5, 6 and 7 have been told by individuals who were adopted in infancy from Korea, Vietnam or Sri Lanka, in the early 1970s to early 1990s, and to at least one ‘white’ parent (most commonly two)<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Walton has recently released a book based on her doctoral research (Walton 2019). However, I have maintained references to her dissertation (2009b) throughout this thesis to reflect where I originally read her research findings.

<sup>10</sup> These biographical details delineate some important boundaries in the research, as the stories and experiences of adoptees with divergent backgrounds may differ in important ways. Those who arrived in Australia at older ages, and/or from Europe, South America, Africa or other Asian countries, and/or after the early 1990s, and/or to parents who share their ethnic or racial background, may indeed tell stories that bear commonalities, but also significant differences, to those told for this inquiry. Chapter 4 more fully explains the sampling decisions made in this research, the demographic details of the interviewees, and the approach I took in integrating elements of my own story into this thesis.

## **Chapter outlines**

Chapters 2 and 3 provide an overview of the extant literature concerning intercountry adoption. Chapter 2 is divided into two parts. Part 1 focuses on the key socio-historical forces underpinning and framing three waves of adoption to Australia in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. These forces include the international regulation of intercountry adoption, and the increasingly contrite socio-political discourse concerning domestic adoption in Australia. Part 2 examines three other key areas of scholarship with relevance to this inquiry, taking both a local and global view. It discusses: influential psychological literature in intercountry adoption research; analyses emanating from a prominent collection of papers critiquing the 2005 Australian Government Inquiry into intercountry adoption; and emerging perspectives that bring to the fore ethical considerations, social justice imperatives and the individualised experiences of adult intercountry adoptees.

Chapter 3 focuses on notions of ‘cultural identity’, a concept that has become a focal point for much intercountry adoption literature over the past decade. The chapter explains the conceptualisation of ‘cultural identity’ that became central to my understanding of the identity formations of intercountry adoptees, and outlines some of the predominant themes in the literature concerned with adoptees’ identities. These themes include: dissonance and difference; (re)connecting with birth culture; and hybridity. The chapter concludes by examining how the ethics of international adoption, and the diversity of adoptee experiences and sensemaking, have begun to be foregrounded in the literature.

Chapter 4 describes the qualitative methodology employed for this research. It outlines: the epistemological underpinnings of the project; key tenets of narrative inquiry, participant sampling and recruitment; and how the methods of biographical-narrative interviewing and autoethnography were deployed for data collection. It also explains the analytical techniques used to filter, select and extract life story excerpts, referring to the advantages and limitations of the methodological approach – and specific methods – used. The ethical stances pursued throughout these iterative and reflective processes are also examined.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 present and discuss the findings of this research. Chapter 5 examines the life stories of two very different participants. The deep analysis of these discrete narratives reveals an intricate array of themes that resonate across the entire study sample, including: disconnection and belonging; the interplay between wider sociocultural discourses and individual agency in adoptee identity formation; and the multi-layered and changeable nature of identity as an adult

intercountry adoptee. Invaluably, the findings from these two stories significantly informed my analyses of the other narratives in this research, including my own.

Chapter 6 focuses on a theme that emerged very strongly – and also unexpectedly – in many participants’ accounts: the meanings and significance of family relationships. Intimate stories of searching for biological relatives, reuniting with one’s birth family, navigating tensions within adoptive families, and forming new families with partners and children, are discussed. The renderings of ‘family’ that emerge from these discussions are much more personal, dynamic and variable than simplistic, stereotypical narratives about adoption suggest. They also establish ‘family’ as a pivotal site of sensemaking about what it means to be an intercountry adoptee.

Chapter 7 examines participants’ ideas about cultural identity – both in childhood (Part 1), and as adults (Part 2). Part 1 reinforces existing findings related to adoptees’ identifications as ‘white’ in their early years. Bourdieu’s (1977) concept of habitus is mobilised as a theoretical lens for interrogating these foundation-forming senses of self. Part 2 demonstrates the diverse ways that these types of identifications may develop throughout an adoptee’s lifetime, and reveals various catalysts for change, as well as instances of continuity, in participants’ cultural identities in adulthood.

Lastly, Chapter 8 reflects on the themes and experiences surfaced in Chapters 5 to 7. It offers overarching insights into how participants in this research – including myself – have made sense of themselves and their lives as they moved into and through various stages of adulthood. This concluding chapter also provides recommendations for further research and reflects on my own story and sensemaking about intercountry adoption, which is both implicitly and explicitly woven throughout this thesis. This final chapter, and the overarching thesis more broadly, concludes that identity formation as an intercountry adoptee in Australia is *not*, as dominant narratives suggest, a simple matter of embracing the ‘gift’ of a ‘better life’ or, conversely, seeking ‘real’ family and original culture to achieve ‘real belonging’. Instead, making sense of being an intercountry adoptee is a lifelong process that may take many unanticipated turns, is intricately multi-layered, and is highly personal and variable while also deeply embedded within broader discourses of adoption, identity, ‘race’ and belonging.

## CHAPTER 2 – INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTION IN AUSTRALIA: HISTORY, PRACTICE AND SCHOLARSHIP

### Introduction

Intercountry adoption was instituted in Australia during the Vietnam War, when sympathy for the plight of orphaned and abandoned infants and children led to the private adoption of hundreds of Vietnamese and Cambodian children by Australian citizens in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Rosenwald 2009a:200). Although the Australian Government was initially reluctant to intervene in the *ad hoc* nature of these adoptions (Forket 2012b:429), the announcement of Operation Babylift by the Ford administration in the US, combined with increased public and political pressure to ‘act decently and appropriately’ in the face of human suffering and endangerment<sup>11</sup> (Forket 2012b:439), led to the evacuation of 292 Vietnamese ‘war orphans’ to Australia in April 1975. This was the beginning of government-sanctioned intercountry adoption in Australia (Fronek 2012:445).

Operation Babylift signalled the first of three waves of international adoption to Australia (Rosenwald 2009a:199). After this first peak, overseas adoptions fell to just 66 in 1979–80, before rising to a second peak of 420 in 1989–90 (Kelly 2000, online). This second wave in the 1980s and early 90s was driven largely by adoption from South Korea. These numbers then declined to less than 250 in the mid-1990s (Rosenwald 2009a:201), before peaking again at 434 in 2004–05 (AIHW 2018a:38). This included 140 adoptees from China, and was the highest recorded annual intake in Australia’s history (AIHW 2018a:41,46). Since 2007 intake numbers have steadily decreased, with only 65 intercountry adoptions occurring in 2017–2018 (AIHW 2018b).

These ebbs and flows have been underpinned by a complex interplay of social, legal, cultural and political forces in both Australia and overseas. This chapter surveys these forces, which have shaped how intercountry adoption has been conceptualised and practised in Australia from the 1970s to now. These influences continue to inform the ways that intercountry adoptees construct and perceive of their identities, and are thus of central importance to this inquiry. An overview of prominent areas of scholarship which reveal how intercountry adoption has been conceptualised in western countries, and in Australia specifically, is also provided.

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<sup>11</sup> Despite public support for the initiative, Operation Babylift has since been criticised for being ‘imbued with western chauvinism, racism and xenophobia [and] a propaganda exercise’ (Forket 2012a:194). Debate has ensued over whether it was ‘a great humanitarian gesture, a vile act of kidnap, or something in between’ (Forket 2012a:195).

Part 1 of this chapter considers the history of adoption in Australia, both domestic and intercountry. Parallels and divergences between these two modes of adoption are important, as these interrelationships are a central consideration in the extant Australian scholarship on intercountry adoption. An understanding of how domestic and intercountry adoption have developed and been understood differently in Australia is critical for a broader understanding of what it may mean to be an intercountry adoptee today. This discussion also considers international developments that have affected the availability of children for adoption to Australia, alongside international legislation that has framed intercountry adoption practice globally and locally since the early 1990s.

## **PART 1 – Intercountry adoption in Australia**

### **‘Rescue’ and ‘clean breaks’: Situating the first wave of Australian intercountry adoptees**

The advent of intercountry adoption in Australia in the 1960s and 70s was framed by particular socio-legal understandings of family and adoption. O’Halloran (2009:289–290) reports that in the early twentieth century domestic adoption in Australia would have followed an open model where children may have had access to original birth certificates and even kept their biological parent’s surname. However, legislation in the 1960s established an era of closed and secret adoptions, a model that was sanctioned by a society that retained very traditional ideas about family and motherhood (O’Halloran 2009:291). In this environment it was perceived as morally and socially necessary that children be raised within a nuclear adoptive family, rather than in the care of their biological – but unmarried, and therefore morally corrupt and economically compromised – mother. Furthermore, in the same time period new theories about maternal-child attachment (Bowlby 1952) stressed that making a ‘clean break’ as soon as possible after birth was best practice for the economic, emotional and social wellbeing of a biological mother and their child. That is, it was held to be better if mother and child ‘were separated as early and as completely as possible’ with no legal links and no further contact (Senate Community Affairs References Committee [SCARC] 2012:151).

The resultant re-positioning of the child within the adoptive family was intended to create a respectable, nuclear family unit that was ‘as if’ related by birth and shielded from the shame of illegitimacy (Murphy, Quartly & Cuthbert 2009:202). This ‘clean break’ model of adoption entirely dismissed the importance of biological families, who were considered irrelevant to the

life and wellbeing of an adopted person. In Australia, the US and other western countries, such ideologies substantiated the erasure and/or sealing of birth records, and the use of coercive, deceptive and unsympathetic tactics designed to conceal, discipline, and utterly disempower unmarried mothers<sup>12</sup>.

Despite the obvious impossibility of maintaining the façade that a transracially adopted child was born to an adoptive family, these conservative ideologies still exerted influence on the way this first wave of internationally adopted children (and, to varying extents, those who followed after) were regarded and parented. One participant in this research, who arrived in Australia from Vietnam in the early 1970s, reflected that her parents “were told in that era . . . just treat the child like your own and everything will be fine.” In other words, *failing* to acknowledge in sensitive ways that an adoption had taken place was still widely and uncritically accepted as the ‘right’ and ‘best’ thing to do, even in the context of transracial and transnational adoption.

During this time period, the incorporation of intercountry adoptees into new families in Australia was also supported by public and political discourse that positioned them as ‘orphans’<sup>13</sup> and ‘waifs’ in need of ‘rescue’ by ‘heroic’, ‘warrior like’ parents (Willing et al. 2012:465). This discourse cast intercountry adoption as a *necessary* and *altruistic* measure in the Australian public’s imaginary. This understanding of intercountry adoption – as a ‘wholly positive act of child rescue’ – remains an influential perspective in Australia (Fronek 2012:446).

The compulsion to assimilate a child into the adoptive family without regard for the potential significance of biological kin was generally mirrored by attitudes towards adoptees’ cultural backgrounds. Edmundson contends that by the early twentieth century, ‘an existing lexicon of “Australian” identity was already in place – of British subjects out of place, but re-formed and made stronger within the crucible of a new landscape’ (2009:97). The Anglo-Celtic character of ‘Australian’ identity was firmly and legally established in the 1901 Immigration Restriction Act (now known as the White Australia Policy). This Act effectively disallowed non-European

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<sup>12</sup> Yngvesson and Mahoney note that, ironically, the insistence on creating a family ‘as if’ born to one another reinforced the construction of adoptive families as contested and ‘less-than-real’:

. . . this very mimicry (the always present ‘as-if’ dimension of the adoptive family) underscores the ‘not real’, ‘incomplete’ quality of adoptive families and adoptive identities . . . In their attempts to be whole, real families, adoptive families produce the very differences that they are compelled to deny. (2000:87)

<sup>13</sup> The use of the word ‘orphan’ is contentious. Operation Babylift has been criticised as a hasty and unethical removal of children from their nation and families, undertaken in spite of the fact that some adopted children had living relatives and were placed in orphanages temporarily for their protection during the war (Fronek 2012:448). As Fronek identifies, there was ‘little attempt at determining orphan status or facilitating family reunion’ among the hundreds of babies and children flown out of Vietnam at the close of the war (2009:43), leading in most cases to a permanent loss of family and culture.

immigration to Australia (Goode 2015), and was built upon a belief in the superiority of British culture and white bodies. It was concomitantly assumed that any migrants should assimilate completely into the ‘Australian way of life’; in other words, ‘migrants should *shed* their cultures and languages and rapidly become *indistinguishable* from the host population’ (Department of Home Affairs [DHA] 2018, online, emphasis added).

The Immigration Restriction Act remained in force until after the Second World War. It was then dismantled incrementally until the final remnants of the policy were removed in 1973 (DHA 2018). However, despite the legislative demise of White Australia, its cultural and ideological vestiges remained, with critical implications for non-white adoptees then and now. Williams’ (2003) thesis on the identities of adults who were adopted from Vietnam in the 1970s (discussed further in Chapter 3) illuminates some of these impacts. Her study demonstrates that her participants’ biological relatives and cultural backgrounds were repeatedly ignored, dismissed and denigrated within and beyond the family home, with lasting effects on their senses of self.

Critically then, the arrival of these first intercountry adoptees in Australia was framed by discourses that stressed familial and cultural assimilation alongside particular understandings of family, adoption and the role of the (white) western world in situations of war and disaster in poorer, non-white nations. However, throughout the second wave of intercountry adoptions, which peaked in the late 1980s and was driven largely by adoptions from South Korea, several notable social and legal changes took place that changed the way adoption was understood locally and globally.

### **The second wave: Adoption from South Korea, and changing attitudes towards the adoption of Australian children**

Adoption from Vietnam to Australia did not continue past Operation Babylift, as no bilateral program was established between Australia and the new Vietnamese government in the post-war period (Quartly, Swain & Cuthbert 2013:110; Williams 2003:14). Thus, annual intercountry adoptions fell from the initial burst of close to 300 in 1975 to just 66 in 1979–80 (Kelly 2000). Around this time, however, various social and political developments in Australia and overseas ushered in a new era of Australian intercountry adoption. Rosenwald (2009a:201) points to the dismantling of the White Australia Policy as a significant domestic factor that enabled adoption agreements with an array of nations from the late 1970s onwards. During this period, formal

adoption programs were established with a range of mostly Asian countries<sup>14</sup>, including South Korea, Sri Lanka, India, Thailand, the Philippines, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Bangladesh and Indonesia (Rosenwald 2009a:201). Programs were also opened with South American countries such as Colombia, Bolivia, Peru and Brazil, European nations such as Poland and Romania, and the African country of Mauritius (Rosenwald 2009a:201). While some of these programs have since closed and others have opened<sup>15</sup>, Australian intercountry adoption was firmly established in these years as an institutionalised practice managed by the states and territories.

South Korea was by far the most prolific sending country during the second wave of adoption to Australia, and ebbs and flows in its program account for most of the increases and decreases in Australia's adoptee intake from the late 1970s to the early 2000s (Rosenwald 2009a:201). Borne out of post-war poverty in the 1950s and 60s and intolerance towards mixed-race children in an ethno-nationalist Korean society, the practice of sending children abroad for international adoption evolved in South Korea to become 'a surrogate social welfare system for full-Korean children' (E. Kim 2007:502). This was supported by entrenched patriarchal ideologies that profoundly stigmatised and disadvantaged any child without a legitimate Korean father. For example, until legislative changes in 2008, the family registry (*hojuk*) served as the system through which legal and social identities were granted in Korea, functioning similarly to a birth certificate as required documentation for issuing passports, bank accounts, identity cards and other official indicators of identity and livelihood (Walton 2009b:214). Importantly, the *hojuk* defined one's identity in relation to the *hoju*, or male head of the household. Under this system, those without legitimate Korean fathers were dislocated from mainstream society, becoming 'a person with the barest of social identities' who 'lacks the basic requirements of social personhood . . . family lineage and genealogical history'<sup>16</sup> (E. Kim 2007:521). In combination with other

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<sup>14</sup> Rosenwald (2009a:202) notes that over 80 per cent of intercountry adoptions to Australia between 1970 and 2008 were from Asian countries.

<sup>15</sup> While some closures have been due to social or political changes in countries of origin, other programs have been closed over ethical and legal concerns related to exploitation and child trafficking. The Ethiopian program that operated between 1992 and 2012 is one example (Department of Social Services [DSS] 2019).

<sup>16</sup> Some argue that focusing too strongly on this particular legal and cultural aspect of adoption in Korea simplifies the myriad of reasons why Korean children may have been relinquished (e.g. Brian 2007:67–68). I tend to concur with Brian's assertion that relying solely on these explanations risks 'perpetuating a manufactured polarity between the supposed limitations of non-Western, "traditional" society and the freedoms of modern Western liberal democracy' (2007:68). This may indeed result in the construction of Korea as a 'nonpolitical, cultural "other"' (2007:67) and in an emphasis on the 'nobleness of allowing children to be adopted internationally' (2007:68).

Instead of being a one-dimensional phenomenon, intercountry adoption from Korea is instead 'intimately tied to . . . rapid industrialization, urbanization, and political volatility' (Brian 2007:68) and, as Kim has argued, 'U.S. and Western capitalist modernity, cold war imperialism in Asia, the white heteronormative bourgeois nuclear family ideal, and the long-standing imperialist desire to "save" the world' (2009:856). Nonetheless, with a detailed examination of the history of Korean adoption beyond the scope of this thesis, the *gendered* socio-legal space within which the legal orphaning of children has taken place in Korea – and in different ways around the world – is of enduring significance.



factors, including a ‘grossly under-funded social welfare system’ (E. Kim 2007:502), the number of intercountry adoptions from Korea surged during the 1980s, driving increases in adoptions to Australia, the US, and countries in Europe. Rosenwald’s (2009a:202) detailed demographic research has identified that between 1970 and July 2008, a total of 3,434 Korean children were adopted by Australian families<sup>17,18</sup>.

This surge in adoption from Korea took place alongside significant social changes in Australia – changes that would substantially influence how *domestic* adoption was conceptualised and practised from the 1970s onwards. For example: attitudes towards single mothers and children born outside of marriage became more accepting; social welfare for single mothers was introduced with the Supporting Mothers Benefit in 1973; women were participating more actively in the workforce and better able to support themselves and their children; and childcare, contraception and legalised abortion became more readily available (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] 1998, online; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW] 2018a:1; Forket 2012a:14). Such developments placed greater emphasis on women’s abilities to make choices about reproduction and child-rearing, redefining the legal framework around ‘family’ in Australia (Murphy et al. 2009:202). Combined with the decline of the secretive and coercive practices that had characterised adoption in the 1950s and 60s, these factors underpinned an increase in the number of unmarried Australian women keeping their children, and a decrease in the number of Australian infants available for adoption (Marshall & McDonald 2001:105–106; O’Halloran 2009:292).

Concurrent to these social changes, mothers who had been separated from their children by adoption in the 1950s and 60s began to agitate for recognition and further reforms to domestic adoption. The years between 1969 and 1982 saw the establishment of various support and activist groups for birth mothers and adoptees (Cuthbert & Quartly 2012; Marshall & McDonald 2001), and three national adoption conferences (Murphy et al. 2009). Subsequently, between 1984 and 1994, legislation opening access to adoption records was passed in all states and territories (O’Halloran 2009:293). Thus, a renewed era of ‘openness’ was instituted into the practice of domestic adoption in Australia, allowing for the provision of information and varying degrees of continued contact between birth and adoptive families (O’Halloran 2009:299–300).

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<sup>17</sup> It is estimated that over 200,000 Korean children have been adopted worldwide since 1954; around 150,000 of those were adopted to the US (Kim 2009).

<sup>18</sup> During the same timeframe the next *nine* most prolific countries of origin each sent between 919 (Sri Lankan) and 182 (Chilean) adoptees to Australia (Rosenwald 2009a).

Significantly, this openness – advocated for on ethical and social justice grounds – was *not* connected with the contemporaneous practice of intercountry adoption. The ‘closed’ nature of most adoption from overseas continued to be unchallenged at policy, legislative and diplomatic levels<sup>19</sup>. And, while domestic adoption in Australia declined steadily from the mid-1970s, intercountry adoption boomed. The notion of ‘rescue’ as a justification for intercountry adoption still dominated throughout this period; however, as Fronek asserts, this discourse shifted to emphasise ‘rescue from cultural rejection and institutionalization’ rather than rescue from war or disaster (2009:43). Thus, it can be argued that the ethical principles underpinning the overhaul of domestic adoption in Australia were not extended to the consideration of children born overseas, or their biological families<sup>20</sup>.

Nonetheless, patterns of intercountry adoption were soon to change, driven largely by social, economic and political developments in sending countries, as well as the establishment of several international legal frameworks. Most notably, a decline in the number of children available for adoption from South Korea can be traced to negative publicity during the 1988 Seoul Olympics. The Olympics were a symbol of South Korea’s new identity as ‘wealthy, progressive and democratic’ (Youde 2014:432). However, during the Olympics Korea’s adoption programs were criticised as a ‘national shame’ (Kendall 2005:178) whereby its ‘greatest natural resource’ was being exported as part of a business that earned up to \$20 million per year (Kim 2003:64)<sup>21</sup>. Between the late 80s and early 90s international regulation of intercountry adoption was reshaped by two key pieces of legislation: the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the 1993 Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption (hereafter ‘the Hague Convention’). Significantly, these Conventions heralded an important shift away from earlier assimilationist discourses towards an acknowledgement of the importance of ‘birth family and culture’.

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<sup>19</sup> International adoptees’ access to their personal information has since emerged as an issue of contention among adult adoptees and in the literature (see Walton 2012). This circumstance is complicated by laws and policies in sending countries; for example, abandoning a child is illegal in China, which has precluded many parents from leaving identifying information with their child (Volkman 2003:33).

<sup>20</sup> These issues and themes are discussed later in this chapter. See in particular the section: ‘Perspectives on the 2005 Inquiry into Overseas Adoption in Australia’.

<sup>21</sup> Korea has since made a series of policy decisions which, overall, has resulted in decreased numbers of Korean children available for international adoption, and an increase in Korean domestic adoption (Youde 2014:433–434). Korea ceased to be the dominant country of origin in Australian intercountry adoption in 2003–04, when it was overtaken by China (AIHW 2018a:46).

## **‘In the best interests of the child’: International regulation of intercountry adoption**

The UNCRC was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989. It establishes principles for upholding the human rights of children, and outlines children’s rights with respect to participation, provision and protection (Worotyneć 2006). The UNCRC introduced two notable tenets that would eventually infuse intercountry adoption discourse and practice at global and local levels. First, it advanced the principle of ‘the best interests of the child’ as the cornerstone of intercountry adoption regulation and conduct. Article 21 states: ‘Parties that recognize and/or permit the system of adoption shall ensure that the best interests of the child shall be the paramount consideration’ (United Nations 1989, online). Additionally, Article 20 stipulates that in situations where a child is ‘temporarily or permanently deprived of his or her family environment’, signatory states must pay ‘due regard . . . to the desirability of continuity in a child’s upbringing and to the child’s ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic background’ when considering alternative care arrangements (United Nations 1989, online). Given the separations that typically occur in intercountry adoption, adoption across national borders was accordingly positioned in Article 21 as a *last resort* for alternative care, to be considered ‘if the child cannot be placed in a foster or an adoptive family or cannot in any suitable manner be cared for in the child’s country of origin’ (United Nations 1989, online). In the early 1990s this respect for maintaining connections with a child’s heritage sat uncomfortably alongside the global expansion of intercountry adoption, which had become increasingly reflective of a ‘market in babies’ (Quartly et al. 2013).

In 1993 the second critical international framework for the conduct of intercountry adoption, the Hague Convention, was established. The Hague Convention was designed to ‘add substantive safeguards and procedures’ to Article 21 of the UNCRC (HCCH 2013:1). It was a response to the ‘serious and complex human and legal problems’ associated with intercountry adoption, in particular child abduction, sale and trafficking, and ‘improper financial gain’ from the adoption of children<sup>22</sup> (HCCH 2013:1,2). The Hague Convention entered into force in Australia in December 1998.

There are various tensions and ambiguities in both the UNCRC and the Hague Convention. A

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<sup>22</sup> International adoption was, and remains, a ‘means of attracting substantial sums of hard currency’ for governments, agencies and individuals, while providing an immediate solution to complicated social welfare problems (Lovelock 2000:942).

number of sources have argued that the Hague Convention elevates the status of intercountry adoption above and beyond what was intended in the UNCRC, which appears to position intercountry adoption as a last resort after *all* suitable options for care in a child's country of origin are considered (see Dickens 2009:602; Fronek & Cuthbert 2012:215; Lovelock 2000:938; Worotyneć 2006:12). The Hague Convention instead endorses intercountry adoption as a superior option to foster or other suitable care in a child's country of origin *despite* the 'continuity . . . to the child's ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic background' (United Nations 1989, online) that remaining in one's country of birth would support. This has created tension regarding the merits of intercountry adoption vis-à-vis local solutions, and under what circumstances adoption internationally may be considered 'in the best interests of the child'. Numerous sources (e.g. Cuthbert, Murphy & Quartly 2009; Fronek 2012; Murphy et al. 2009; Worotyneć 2006) have noted that the catchcry of 'the best interests of the child' has been mobilised to support competing priorities and ideologies – that, for example, it is in a child's best interests to 'maintain biological links above all else', or conversely, that it is in a child's best interests to execute 'early, decisive intervention' through 'permanent placement' with adoptive parents (HRSCFHS 2005:viii,126,129). Fronek and Cuthbert (2012) argue that a middle-class, western interpretation of the 'best interests of the child' has led to the marginalisation of the rights of families and communities in sending countries, and an oversimplification of complex issues. They assert that the tendency to view adoption through an 'individualistic/reformist . . . and monocultural' lens obscures 'holistic, culturally appropriate, intersectoral approaches' that aim for the *prevention*, rather than continuation, of intercountry adoption (Fronek & Cuthbert 2012:218,220).

Meanwhile, Bartholet has lamented such cautions, stating: 'the current tendency to glorify group identity and to emphasize the importance of ethnic and cultural roots combines with nationalism to make international adoption newly suspect in this country as well as in the world at large' (1993:100). Clearly, 'the best interests of the child' – and how this concept intersects with the prioritisation of original biological, national and cultural connections *or* permanent placement in a family outside of one's country of origin – is poorly defined and open to interpretation<sup>23</sup>.

Nonetheless, several sources have recognised that the UNCRC and the Hague Convention, along with the contemporaneous celebration of multiculturalism that has emerged in many western societies, have had enduring effects on the way that intercountry adoptees' cultural backgrounds are thought about and addressed at governmental, institutional and familial levels (Gray 2007;

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<sup>23</sup> Lovelock (2000) has further argued that the regulatory potential of the Hague Convention is diminished by a lack of clarity and accountability. She identifies a number of issues related to ambiguous definitions and an absence of enforcement mechanisms.

Homans 2007; E. Kim 2007; Volkman 2003; Yngvesson 2003, 2007). While assimilationist approaches to culture and identity were privileged in earlier eras, the early 1990s ushered in a new era of adoption policy and practice wherein social workers and adoptive parents began to seek to pay ‘due regard’ to adoptees’ ‘ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic’ backgrounds (United Nations 1989, online).

This more developed way of thinking about adoption has been connected to ‘biologicistic essentialism’, or the treatment of ‘all cultures as if they were inborn essences’ (Homans 2002:260). Some have argued that this notion too is a restrictive and archaic way of approaching intercountry adoptees’ backgrounds – one which does not take into account the more complex and dynamic lived experience of growing up in an adoptive family and country (Gray 2007; Homans 2002; Wall 2012). Several sources indicate that adoptees tend not to encounter a ‘real’, ‘essentialist’ version of their ‘birth culture’, but instead employ an array of individualised strategies for exploring what their country and culture of birth *might* and *can* mean for them as internationally adopted persons (Gray 2007; Walton 2009b; Yngvesson 2003). In this newer era of policy and practice, international adoption has also been implicated in multicultural discourse and invoked as ‘a means of making “rainbow” families’ and, by extension, a ‘multicultural, racially diverse nation’ (Murphy et al. 2010:143)<sup>24</sup>.

Critically, therefore, the UNCRC and Hague Convention are at the heart of a notable shift away from the assimilationist discourses that had infused the practice of adoption in previous decades (see the discussion on ‘rescue’ and ‘clean breaks’ earlier in this chapter) and towards an acknowledgement of the importance of ‘birth family and culture’. However, whether such acknowledgements may be tokenistic and superficial remains an issue of contention (Quiroz 2012). Within the context of this original research project it is also critical to note that many adoptees who are now in adulthood are *not* products of this ‘newer’ era; in general, their (and my own) upbringing was instead infused with the perception that a ‘clean break’ from first families and cultures was an unproblematic by-product of a ‘better life’. Nevertheless, current international frameworks have reignited debates over the ethics of intercountry adoption, while foregrounding ‘cultural identity’ as a site of struggle and contestation for adoptees and their families.

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<sup>24</sup> However, Murphy et al. (2010) argue that the extent to which this celebratory vision of multiculturalism-through-adoption is achieved is tenuous. Their arguments are considered in further detail in Part 2.

## **The third wave: China and the decline of intercountry adoption in the new millennium**

The third wave of intercountry adoptees, including many Chinese adoptees, entered Australia in this new discursive environment in the early 2000s. China and Australia signed a bilateral adoption agreement in 1999, and adoptions from China to Australia subsequently increased from 15 in 2000–01, to a peak of 140 in 2004–05 (AIHW 2018a:46). The availability of Chinese infants for overseas adoption was initially driven by China’s One Child Policy alongside an entrenched cultural preference for boys, meaning that around 98 percent of ‘adoptable’ children were girls (Miller-Loessi & Kilic 2001:246). However, Chinese-Australian adoptions soon began to rapidly decline, falling to 63 in 2008–09, and to zero in 2017–18 (AIHW 2018a:46). This marked decrease was initially driven by a tightening of the Chinese Government’s regulations around who could adopt Chinese children (Belluck & Yardley 2006), and the introduction of programs focused on encouraging the adoption of children with special needs (Selman 2012). By 2017–18, Taiwan was the principal sending country of children to Australia, representing 32 per cent of the 65 intercountry adoptions to Australia that year (AIHW 2018a:16).

These figures reveal that the era of large-scale adoption from overseas seems to be – at least for now – over. As mentioned earlier in relation to South Korea, this decline may be partially attributed to social and policy changes in sending countries, underscored by international reputational pressures (Youde 2014). However, fluctuations may also be informed by the scholarly and political discourses surrounding the practice in receiving countries. Literature indicates that scholars in Australia have been decidedly critical of how intercountry adoption has been practised and portrayed by its advocates.

## **Inquiries, apology and ‘anti adoption culture’**

The advocacy and reform to domestic adoption policy and legislation that took place in the 1970s and 1980s had effects that spread well beyond members of the adoption triangle<sup>25</sup> and the health and welfare sectors. Between 1995 and 2005 a number of Parliamentary Inquiries drew wider public attention to the injustice and devastation associated with the removal of children from their original families and cultures. The first of these Inquiries examined the forcible removal of Indigenous children from their families – known as the Stolen Generations – and culminated in

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<sup>25</sup> The ‘adoption triangle’ traditionally includes adoptees, biological parents and adoptive parents (Quartly 2012:415).

the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's (HREOC) 1997 report: *Bringing Them Home*. This report documented, through personal testimony and historical record, the 'grief and loss' and 'multiple and disabling effects' of a myriad of practices designed to assimilate Indigenous people into British-Australian culture<sup>26</sup> (HREOC 1997, online). A submission from Link-Up (NSW), an organisation formed to assist removed Indigenous people in reuniting with their families, provided testimony of the far-reaching effects of the practices that produced the Stolen Generations:

We may go home, but we cannot relive our childhoods. We may reunite with our mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, aunties, uncles, communities, but we cannot relive the 20, 30, 40 years that we spent without their love and care, and they cannot undo the grief and mourning they felt when we were separated from them. We can go home to ourselves as Aboriginals, but this does not erase the attacks inflicted on our hearts, minds, bodies and souls . . . (Link-Up (NSW) in HREOC 1997, online)

In the years following the release of *Bringing Them Home*, a further series of Commonwealth Inquiries were held into the separation and mistreatment of children and their mothers. Two such Inquiries concerned the 6,000–7,500 unaccompanied children brought to Australia as part of child migration schemes from Britain and Malta during the twentieth century (known as the 'Lost Innocents'), and those affected by Australia's past child welfare practices (the 'Forgotten Australians'). Two reports were subsequently released: *Lost Innocents: Righting the Record – Report on Child Migration* (SCARC 2001) and *Forgotten Australians: A Report on Australians who Experienced Institutional or Out-of-home Care as Children* (SCARC 2004). Between 1995 and 2005 Inquiries were also conducted at a state level into the forced adoption practices of earlier decades (e.g. Joint Select Committee 1999; Standing Committee on Social Issues 2000). In 2010 the Australian Senate began a National Inquiry into these practices, and published the *Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices* report in 2012. These reports highlighted the deleterious effects of abusive and unjust practices, including the denial of access to family records and/or contact with relatives. National Apologies were issued to the Stolen Generations in 2008, Lost Innocents and Forgotten Australians in 2009, and to victims of forced adoption in 2013.

In 2005, an Inquiry into intercountry adoption was held, and *Overseas Adoption in Australia: Report on the Inquiry into Adoption of Children from Overseas* (HRSCFHS 2005) was tabled. By the time of this report, a notable shift in public, practitioner and bureaucratic attitudes towards *domestic* adoption had occurred. Some argue that an 'anti-adoption culture' had developed

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<sup>26</sup> The Inquiry found that these practices amounted to genocide, which was declared a crime against humanity by the UN General Assembly in December 1946 (HREOC 1997, online).

(Gehrmann 2005:15–16; HRSCFHS 2005:1), wherein adoption had become a ‘dirty word’ (Cuthbert, Spark & Murphy 2010:432–434) and was seen as the ‘poor relation of child protection’ (HRSCFHS 2005:4). So while intercountry adoptions to Australia reached peaks in the late 1980s and the mid-2000s, domestic adoption has declined markedly since the 1970s. Over 9,000 Australian infants and children were adopted domestically in 1971–72 (HRSCFHS 2005, p.vii); the annual rate fell to just 1,336 in 1982–83, and to 178 in 1997–98 (Kelly 2000). In 1999–2000, intercountry overtook domestic as the dominant form of adoption in Australia, and in 2003–04 over 70 percent of adoptions in Australia were from overseas<sup>27</sup> (AIHW 2018b).

Having outlined the historical context for this research, this chapter now progresses in Part 2 to consider some of the prominent themes in contemporary scholarship concerning intercountry adoption. This discussion is by no means exhaustive or fully comprehensive, as the publication of volumes such as *The Intercountry Adoption Debate: Dialogues Across Disciplines* (Ballard et al. 2015) demonstrates. Nonetheless, this information contextualises and supports the novelty of this project’s later findings. Part 2 first provides an overview of the psychological research concerning intercountry adoption. Adoption discourse and policy has been profoundly influenced by this body of work; Robert Ballard, an adoptee and scholar born in Vietnam and raised in the US, describes psychology, counselling and social work as ‘the core and foundation’ of intercountry adoption research (2015b:5). Psychological perspectives have infused societal, familial and individual understandings of adoption over many decades, and undoubtedly also frame the stories told in this project. Next, the focus shifts to specifically consider Australian scholarship on intercountry adoption. Much of this literature was generated by the *History of Adoption Project*, a four-year national research project led by Monash University and funded by the Australian Research Council (History of Adoption Project 2013). Most prominently, the project examined the discourses evident in the Australian Government’s 2005 Inquiry into Overseas Adoption and provided insights into prevailing attitudes towards intercountry adoption in Australia in the late 1990s and early 2000s – a time when many of the participants in this research were entering adulthood. Finally, the chapter considers an emerging body of global work that foregrounds adoptee voices and postcolonial social justice perspectives. This literature shifts the emphasis away from the perspectives of adoption practitioners and parents, towards the historically overlooked, but vitally important, experiences and insights of adult adoptees and their birth

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<sup>27</sup> These trends have since reversed. In 2011–12, intercountry adoptions fell to 46 percent of the total number of annual adoptions in Australia, declining further to 20 percent in 2017–18 (AIHW 2018b). However, this reversal has been driven by a decline in intercountry adoptions, and an increase in *known* child domestic adoptions – that is, adoptions by step-parents, other relatives or foster carers who have an existing relationship with the child. Domestic adoptions where the child is not known by their adoptive parents prior to the adoption have remained very low, at just 32 cases, or 10 percent of all adoptions, in 2017–18 (AIHW 2018a:vi).



families. Together, the three areas of scholarship discussed in Part 2 provide crucial insights regarding the varied discourses surrounding and informing participants' interactions, experiences and identities.

## **PART 2 – Surveying the intercountry adoption literature**

### **Adjustment and damage: Psychological discourse in intercountry adoption**

The preponderance of literature from the disciplines of psychology and social work in adoption research reveals a strong academic focus on the wellbeing and psychosocial 'adjustment' of adoptees – commonly operationalised in terms of emotional, relational or behavioural issues (Grotevant & McDermott 2014; Mohanty & Newhill 2006). Studies in this area have been prompted by concerns around physically and psychologically damaging practices in orphanages and other institutions, coping with physical difference and a lack of belonging in adoptive families and nations (Juffer & van Ijzendoorn 2007), and the losses, whether biological or socially constructed, associated with adoption (Leon 2002). Such investigations tend to implicitly or explicitly focus on whether adoptees are 'normal' or 'deviant' in relation to the wider population; the extent of their 'recovery' from early adversity; and the processes and factors underpinning adoptees' experiences and 'adjustment' (Palacios & Brodzinsky 2010). Methodological approaches are frequently quantitative and comparative, contrasting the mental health and behavioural outcomes of intercountry and/or transracial adoptees with: other immigrant groups of a similar ethnic background (Lee, Yun, Yoo & Park Nelson 2010); other migrants generally (Rosenwald 2009b); non-adopted persons (Behle & Pinquart 2016; Feeney, Passmore & Peterson 2007; Juffer & van Ijzendoorn 2005, 2007); adoptees who are the same 'race' as their adoptive parents (Hamilton, Samek, Keyes, McGue & Iacono 2015); and the general population in particular sociocultural contexts, most notably Sweden (Hjern & Allebeck 2002; Lindblad, Hjern & Vinnerljung 2003).

The results of such studies can be conflicting, as well as locally and historically specific. Some studies tout the 'success' of international adoption, finding that, despite the potential for a number of complexities and adversities in their life trajectories and experiences, adopted persons 'do live normal and happy lives that are no different than any other child and parent, adopted or not' (Younes & Klein 2014:81). One meta-analysis found no difference in the self-esteem of transracial, intercountry and same-race adoptees compared to non-adopted persons (Juffer & van Ijzendoorn 2007). However, a meta-analysis by the same authors found that adoptees are overrepresented in mental health services compared to non-adopted peers (Juffer & van

Ijzendoorn 2005). This finding is reflective of earlier studies that have highlighted the propensity for psychological and mental health challenges among adoptees (Wierzbicki 1993; Ingersoll 1997). Another meta-analysis found ‘a twice-as-high risk’ among adoptees compared to non-adoptees for psychiatric conditions such as anxiety, depression and personality disorders (Behle & Pinquart 2016:293). Meanwhile, research in Sweden has highlighted that intercountry adoptees are ‘an extremely high-risk group for suicide death’ in comparison to other migrant groups (Hjern & Allebeck 2002:427), and that they tend to suffer more psychiatric issues and are more likely to receive social welfare than their non-adopted peers (Lindblad et al. 2003). These findings in relation to suicide have been supported in several studies in the US, which have found higher rates of attempted suicide among adopted adolescents and young adults (Keyes, Malone, Sharma, Iacono & McGue 2013; Slap, Goodman & Huang 2001).

An overarching assessment of this literature finds that while differences in the mental health and wellbeing of adoptees and non-adoptees do exist, disparities ‘are mainly found at the extreme ends of functioning’ where ‘severe psychological symptoms’ are present (Behle & Pinquart 2016:293; see also Haugaard 1998). Thus, some argue that many adopted persons do not experience mental health issues related to their adoption (Grotevant & McDermott 2014; Palacios & Brodzinsky 2010). Other research has suggested that the clinical overrepresentation of adoptees can be explained by parents of adopted children having a lower threshold for referral to mental health services (Miller et al. 2000). Palacios and Brodzinsky (2010) also posit that the racial homogeneity of some societies, such as countries in Scandinavia, contribute to results reported in those contexts.

Notwithstanding these sometimes conflicting interpretations, it is important to note how the psychological discourse surrounding adoption has affected wider societal understandings of adoption. Perhaps most significantly, a preoccupation in the literature with the ‘adjustment’ of potentially ‘damaged’ children can position an adopted person as forever a ‘relinquished baby’ (Lifton 2002:209), prone to suffering from emotional and behavioural deficiencies that are symptomatic of an ‘adopted child syndrome’ (Kirschner 1990). The most enduring perspective in this area was advanced by American psychologist Nancy Verrier (1993), who coined the term the ‘primal wound’ to describe an irrevocable sense of abandonment and loss caused by postnatal separation from one’s biological mother. According to Verrier:

Many doctors and psychologists now understand that bonding doesn’t begin at birth, but is a continuum of physiological, psychological, and spiritual events which begin in utero and continue throughout the postnatal bonding period. When this natural evolution is interrupted by a postnatal separation from the biological mother, the resultant experience of abandonment and

loss is indelibly imprinted upon the unconscious minds of these children, causing that which I call the 'primal wound'. (1993:1)

The notion of the 'primal wound' remains powerful, resonant and yet contentious among adoptees themselves and within the psychological and counselling literature. There is no doubt that it resonates strongly for some adopted persons. For example, a participant in this original project, Julie (whose story is told in detail in Chapter 5), had written previously:

There is no doubt in my mind and after reading *The Primal Wound* and watching documentaries like *In Utero*, that it is true – we do bond in utero with our mothers and we feel disconnected if we never hear her voice or feel her around us again. I couldn't really come to allow myself to trust my new mother (my adoptive mum) and I see now as an adult how hard this must have been for her. In my child mind, if mother can disappear than I'd better learn to be self-reliant and not trust any other mother. I know my adoptive mum tried to show me she loved me but it's just I couldn't psychologically let her in.

Similarly, Prema Malhotra, who was born in India and adopted by an Indian family who then moved to the US, reflected in her autoethnographic essay:

As an adoptee, coping with the grief and loss resulting from the separation of my natural mother, the desire to search for my origins, and integrating what being an adoptee means to me has been pivotal in making sense of my life . . . I feel that I have a working and comforting understanding of *why* things happened, but the grief of not being able to locate my natural mother continues, a grief over a woman who gave me life, one whom I never met but with whom I still have a connection. I remember someone once asked how I could grieve over a woman who I never met, but I am not sure grief ever needs to be justified. (2013:2,11, emphasis in original).

The issue of contention, then, is not *whether* adoptees can feel a deep grief or loss stemming from severed connections, but rather, whether it is a *pre-determined* state of being – an inevitable condition that adoptees universally suffer. While scholars from the last few decades have increasingly rejected this deterministic stance (e.g. Gray 2007; Grotevant 1997; Leon 2002), viewing the mental health of adoptees as an individual problem rooted in the loss of biological ties has had enduring effects on popular perceptions of adoptees. On the one hand, although adoption has been cast as a 'lucky' and wholly positive form of 'child rescue' enabled by sacrificial generosity (as much of the Australian literature on intercountry adoption points out), broadly, it can also connote a stigmatised status as a 'second rate' person, characterised by rejection and questionable relationships. Waggenpack, for example, recognises that:

Adoption is an emotion-packed word capable of provoking uneasy responses, for in the public's mind, terms associated with adoption are generally negative: orphan, foundling, illegitimate, bastard, unwanted. Thus, adopted children may be confronted with others' perceptions that

question the validity of their own existence, such as ‘Who are your real parents?’ and ‘You aren’t a real kid – you’re adopted.’ (1998:60–61)<sup>28</sup>

The characterisation of adoptees as ‘damaged’ has filtered into public discourse and created a powerful stereotype that can shape interactions and identities. In her examination of intercountry adoption from a Norwegian perspective, Howell argues that ‘politicians, social workers, bureaucrats, administrators working in adoption agencies, and adoptive parents, are all consumers of Psychology’, and that psychological knowledge ‘becomes increasingly reified and de-nuanced knowledge in the hands of the practitioners’ (2006:90). Thus, as psychological studies continue to focus on the ‘maladjustment’ of adoptees, an infantilising and pathologising discourse is more likely to be created and perpetuated among practitioners, policy-makers and the public at large.

Demonstrating this diffusion of ideas about adoption, a participant in Gray’s doctoral study of intercountry adoptees in Australia noted her discomfort over the negative assumptions contained in pamphlets distributed by the NSW Post-Adoption Resource Centre (PARC):

Amara . . . spoke about a pamphlet she had received from PARC which upset her greatly. She said, ‘it had lots of negative stuff about adoption...something like adoptees feeling like a fraud on a family tree...and feeling that if the person who gave birth to you didn’t love you, how is anyone else going too’. She went on to say that in her experience ‘it doesn’t matter whether you are adopted or not...things happen in families...you could be unhappy in your birth family...to be angry about the whole thing is so very sad. I couldn’t be angry with my birth mother.’ (Gray 2007:141)

In a similar vein, several participants in this original study lamented the eagerness of mental health professionals to ‘pin their problems’ on being adopted. For example, Alice mentioned:

I’ve been sent to counsellors before and been referred to a psychologist, because obviously they want to do that before they give you medication, but I found that both of them, as soon as I said I’m adopted, they just latch on to that and won’t let go, because obviously it’s the lazy, simple answer for why I have anxiety and depression. So that’s made me quite distrusting of any kind of mental health service, and made me not, like I just prefer to take the pills than go and talk to those idiots . . . (Alice, 32)

It is worth re-stating that these perspectives are not presented here to contend that adoption does *not* contribute to grief, loss, or issues related to wellbeing. This remains a very impactful and

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<sup>28</sup> See also Baden’s (2016) paper, “‘Do you know your real parents?’ and other adoption microaggressions’ for a useful overview of the diminishing, hurtful and naive ways in which adoptees, adoptive parents, and birth parents can be spoken to and about in contemporary western societies. Ballard’s (2015a) overview of (primarily North American) communication research on the subject of adoption also makes the argument that adoption is more likely to be portrayed negatively in news stories and mass media reports. He asserts that this coverage ‘perpetuates negative stigmas of adoption and constrains the linguistic and communicative resources adoptive parents, professionals, and adoptees have’ to explain and explore their experiences (2015a:385).

deeply personal aspect of many adoptees' experiences, and one that is marginalised by 'fairytale' narratives that depict adoption *only* as a lucky circumstance. Rather, it is important to note that the notion of an inescapably 'damaged' adoptee is a powerful construction that has diffused into institutional paraphernalia, media discourse, and interactions with practitioners, strangers, friends, and even family. Individuals may fervently reject these constructions, feel ambivalent about them, or *indeed* recognise concepts such as the 'primal wound' as being strongly applicable to their own experiences and sensemaking about adoption. Importantly, as Passmore argues, it is vital to consider that:

... adoptees are *not a homogenous group* ... Rather than looking at ways adoptees differ from non-adoptees, I think we need to focus more on why it is that some adoptees fare really well on a range of psychosocial variables, while others experience more difficulties and challenges. When working with adoptees, it's important not to *over-pathologise* and see every problem as the result of the adoption experience, but it's also important not to *under-pathologise* and miss connections between adoption experiences and personal problems and issues when these do exist. (2007:9, emphasis added)

Experiences of adoption are, therefore, culturally situated, socially regulated and discursively formed, while also being shaped by individual circumstances, dispositions and sensemaking processes. As such, even amongst the modest sample of adoptee participants in this research, the range and variation of responses towards their adoptions evidences Passmore's (2007) claims.

The psychological and counselling literature is now moving towards more nuanced perspectives that explore how adoption is located within particular social and cultural contexts, and acknowledges that adoptees' experiences are heterogeneous, dynamic, socially situated and also agential. For example, Baden, Gibbons, Wilson and McGinnis' (2015) recent commentary suggests that, rather than focusing on individual psychological needs of adoption triad members<sup>29</sup>, a 'social ecology' approach would yield more holistic and subtle accounts of multifarious issues that may impact adoptees' wellbeing. They entreat researchers and practitioners to consider how issues of power and stigma shape the experiences of adoptees, adoptive parents and birth parents, arguing that a social ecology perspective would 'incorporate the way in which historical, political and social forces impact the lives of adoption triad members, and consequently their mental health' (Baden et al. 2015:83). Notwithstanding considerations of loss and grief embedded in adoption for many, throughout this original project I have endeavoured to maintain awareness of the historically, socially and culturally constructed nature of adoption, especially in regard to the

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<sup>29</sup> The 'adoption triad' refers to adoptees, adoptive parents and birth families (Willing et al. 2012).

diverse ways the individuals involved feel, experience, and think about *their* highly personal adoption narratives.

The local socio-cultural context framing participants' life narratives is therefore vitally significant. As mentioned earlier, the discourses surrounding adoption in Australia specifically have been the focus of a substantial body of analytical work concerned with the Australian Government's 2005 Inquiry into Overseas Adoption. Key themes in this body of scholarship are discussed below.

### **Perspectives on the 2005 Inquiry into Overseas Adoption in Australia**

As the preceding discussion attests, the adoption of children in twentieth and twenty-first century Australia has always been a politicised phenomenon. While historically less visible in the shadow of public revelations about the Stolen Generations and the children and mothers affected by forced adoption, intercountry adoption was advanced further in to public consciousness with the 2005 Federal Inquiry into Overseas Adoption in Australia. The resultant report (HRSCFHS 2005) emphasised a number of points that underpinned its findings and recommendations: that children who were candidates for international adoption 'have a low life expectancy, remain institutionalised or live on the street' (p.10); that prospective adoptive parents were frequently subject to distressing and unnecessary 'delays and hostility' symptomatic of a 'dominant anti-adoption culture' in government departments responsible for adoption (pp.10,11); that concerns with unscrupulous, unethical, or psychologically damaging practices were unfounded within contemporaneous social and regulatory frameworks in Australia and internationally (pp.4–6,19–22); and that adoptive parents hold 'overwhelming enthusiasm' and 'great love and pride' for their children and for the institution of adoption as a successful solution to poverty and neglect (pp.viii,16–17). In sum, therefore, various measures aimed at streamlining and reframing intercountry adoption were recommended, and it was declared that:

The committee has come out unequivocally in support of intercountry adoptions as a legitimate way to give a loving family environment to children from overseas who may have been abandoned or given up for adoption. Intercountry adoptions can, without doubt, be in 'the best interest' of children. (HRSCFHS 2005:ix)

However, while the report argued that intercountry adoption is a viable and successful solution to the legitimate needs of children born into deprived circumstances overseas, academic scholarship has been decidedly critical of the voices, ideologies and narratives privileged in the Inquiry.

Murphy, Quartly and Cuthbert argue that the Inquiry ‘opened an unashamedly pro-adoption discursive space’ (2009:204) within which ‘the unquestionably good intentions of adoptive parents and prospective adoptive parents are presented quite uncritically as being timeless, disinterested, and free of ideology or the influence of any factors other than the desire to provide a loving [family environment]’ (2009:210). The authors further contend that the Inquiry reproduced a conservative moral framework within which the hierarchies of class and race that had underpinned outdated adoption practices were re-inscribed into intercountry adoption policy. They assert that through the content and themes of the final report and the attention placed upon particular types of submissions, white, middle-class, heterosexual adoptive mothers were positioned as ‘good prospective parents’ (2009:217), while other types of parents, including single people, same-sex couples, and poor or non-western birth mothers, were excluded from ideals of family and parenthood. Thus, conservative values and hierarchies of class and race were ‘quietly dominant’ in the report (2009:216), and the notion of ‘the best interests of the child’ was subtly appropriated ‘in the service of a broader moral project seeking to draw lines around the family and marriage, and vigorously to regulate participation in these institutions’ (2009:218).

Murphy, Pinto and Cuthbert (2010) provide further insight into the politicised and ideology-laden nature of intercountry adoption discourse throughout the early 2000s by examining the submissions and hearings of the Inquiry. The researchers identify a pervasive emphasis on the ‘nation building’ benefits associated with intercountry adoption. Pronatalist ideologies built upon the ideal of a respectable, middle-class family were invoked, positioning intercountry adoption as a valid way of adding ‘productive’ citizens to the nation while enabling the formation of stable family units (Murphy et al. 2010:149–150). This discourse was accompanied by persistent assertions that bolstering intercountry adoption schemes would fulfill Australia’s ‘responsibility to “rescue” third world children’ (Murphy et al. 2010:142) and ‘[cement] its status as a “good global citizen”’ (Murphy et al. 2010:147). In these ways, the needs and interests of Australia as a nation and adoptive parents as private citizens were aligned, blurred, and ultimately conflated, in a strongly pro-adoption discourse that portrayed intercountry adoption as a “Win-win-win”: a win for children, a win for childless people, and a win for the Australia nation’ (Murphy et al. 2010:142). Murphy et al. (2010:155) argue that this portrayal obscured how the *needs of adoptive parents* (rather than merely the ‘best interests of the child’) were central in driving adoption discourse and policy<sup>30</sup>. Thus, the ideological pillar of humanitarianism that is often explicitly

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<sup>30</sup> See also also Fronek (2009) and Fronek and Tilse (2010) for an analysis of how proponents of intercountry adoption have purposefully worked to represent it as a ‘wholly positive practice that offers an ideal social welfare solution that meets the needs of all concerned’ (Fronek & Tilse 2010:448). Fronek and Tilse argue that within such discourse, any attempts to raise less simplistic perspectives are labelled ‘antiadoption’ and obstructive to the noble and altruistic goal of ‘orphan rescue’ (2010:454–455).

interwoven in such pro-adoption discourse is, the authors contend, ‘a highly selective form of humanitarian activism’ that overlooks the systemic and structural factors implicated in the abandonment of children to orphanages and adoption (Murphy et al. 2010:155).

Murphy et al.’s (2010) paper also points to the fallacy of simplistic assertions made during the Inquiry that intercountry adoption contributes to a more multicultural and inclusive Australian society. The researchers contend that despite being touted as a way of introducing other cultures into Australia, intercountry adoption was ultimately espoused as an ‘alternative to immigration’ (Murphy et al. 2010:154) and ‘understood as a way for mainly heterosexual, middle class white couples – exemplars of the dominant cultural group – to “train” young, foreign-born children to be productive Australian citizens’ (Murphy et al. 2010:156). Hence, such ‘migrants’ would be unproblematically absorbed into the Australian cultural landscape, *reproducing* rather than challenging Anglo-Australian culture. As one participant in the Inquiry noted: ‘It takes one or more generations before immigrant children truly reflect Australian accents and culture [,] but with adopted children it happens as they grow up’ (cited in Murphy et al. 2010:154). This standpoint, Murphy et al. (2010:153) argue, rests upon assumptions that children are best adopted at very young ages, when they are *tabula rasa* (clean slate) in terms of culture and identity (see also Telfer 2003). Paradoxically then, children adopted from overseas ‘will fit seamlessly into an already-formed Australian nation in ways that other migrants simply cannot’ (Murphy et al. 2010:154), while simultaneously being celebrated as conduits for a more multicultural and diverse society. This ultimately echoes, rather than challenges, assimilationist perspectives of earlier eras. The authors also noted that the voices of those most likely to critique such arguments, including birth families and adoptees themselves, were ‘barely heard’ in the Inquiry (Murphy et al. 2010:155).

In a further example of the critical stance taken by Australian adoption researchers in relation to the 2005 Inquiry, Cuthbert et al. examine the divergent histories of domestic and intercountry adoption (ICA) in Australia and argue that: ‘It is as if in the Australian context, we are looking at two entirely different ideas of adoption’ (2010:428). As recognised earlier in this chapter, since the late 1970s domestic adoption has increasingly been regarded with suspicion, ambivalence and disfavour, while intercountry adoption has become characterised by demand that outstrips supply, and media coverage that has decried the costs and delays involved in adopting from overseas (Cuthbert et al. 2010:428). This inconsistency is encapsulated in the following musing from a senior government official in 2008: ‘How can adoption be *so bad* for Australian children, and *so good* for children born overseas?’ (cited in Cuthbert et al. 2010:427, emphasis in original). Cuthbert et al.’s analysis of this contradiction identifies several ‘sleights of hand’ evident in the



*Overseas Adoption in Australia* report that work to ‘confuse and conflate’ aspects of domestic and intercountry adoption in Australia (2010:440) and produce a narrative around intercountry adoption that supports its continuation and expansion. The most notable of these ‘sleights of hand’ concerns the experiences of birth mothers and the adoption reforms enacted in Australia since the 1970s. Cuthbert et al. report that a number of Australian women whose babies were adopted between 1945 and 1975 tried to insert their voices into the 2005 Inquiry, calling attention to the “‘myths and lies’ of abandoned babies and unfit mothers’ that once perpetuated unethical domestic adoption practices in Australia (2010:440). The response of the committee, however, was to express regret for these women’s experiences, while maintaining that ‘[t]he troubling aspect of [an anti-adoption] approach is that the past society attitudes and practices that brought it about *are no more*’ (HRSCFHS 2005:5, emphasis added). Women were, the committee noted, now required to receive counselling before placing a child for adoption, could access financial support as single parents, were not subject to the same level of stigma, and could maintain contact with their child after an adoption (HRSCFHS 2005:5). As Cuthbert et al. identify, however:

This catalogue invites readers to forget, overlook or simply not inquire into the circumstances faced by many relinquishing mothers in ICA . . . It invites readers to assume that policies and practices in ICA have been subject to the same reforms that have transformed domestic adoption in many jurisdictions in Australia . . . [Yet] ICA departs from current ‘best practice’ in domestic adoption in several key particulars, especially with regard to its capacities for openness, for contact and for information for the children adopted. (2010:442,447)

There is, they conclude, therefore a concerning ‘double standard’ of best practice for children and their families depending on the location of their birth – in Australia or overseas (Cuthbert et al. 2010:434)<sup>31</sup>. Furthermore, Cuthbert et al. position the general *lack* of openness in intercountry adoption as a largely unacknowledged *driver* of its popularity vis-à-vis domestic adoption. They argue that for many prospective adoptive parents, the perception of post-reform domestic adoption as involving older, ‘damaged’ children and potentially burdensome and intrusive contact with birth families, renders it considerably less appealing than a ‘closed, autonomous and final’ adoption from overseas (Cuthbert et al. 2010:436). Concomitant with such perceptions:

seemingly old or outdated adoption narratives of the ‘salvation’ and ‘redemption’ of children in need by worthy and deserving adoptive parents can be rehearsed, largely unchallenged by the counter-claims of birth families whose ‘abandonment’ of their children disqualify them to speak or whose geographical distance renders their voices inaudible. (Cuthbert et al. 2010:436)

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<sup>31</sup> These sentiments are echoed to an extent in the American context. Yngvesson and Mahoney (2000) note that domestic transracial adoption discourse in the US is imbued with concerns about the importance of openness, ‘race matching’, and ‘cultural genocide’. In intercountry adoption discourse, however, ‘difference’ is approached as something to be embraced. Thus, they argue that: ‘Tensions surrounding issues of difference in domestic adoption is mirrored in curious ways in the *celebration* of difference in intercountry adoption’ (Yngvesson & Mahoney 2000:83, emphasis in original).

In sum, the small but consistent body of work critiquing the politicisation of intercountry adoption in Australia and its culmination in the 2005 Inquiry into Overseas Adoption, challenges the simplistic narratives of rescue and humanitarianism that shaped the Inquiry. Scholars in this area have sought to interrogate the gendered, raced and classed ideologies and interests that have driven ‘pro-adoption’ discourse in Australia, ultimately highlighting the ways in which white, western, middle-class parents are positioned as superior and deserving parents for non-white, ‘abandoned’, and ‘needy’ children from abroad. While the experiences and concerns of first mothers and adult adoptees have prompted widespread reforms to the practice of adoption *within* Australia and other western countries, very little attention has been given to equally troubling experiences of disadvantage among women and communities abroad<sup>32</sup>.

Yet, it must be noted that the enthusiastic expansion of intercountry adoption endorsed by the Inquiry has seemingly not come to fruition, as evidenced by the decline in overseas adoptions to Australia since 2007 (and an increase in the proportion of special needs children among those eligible for adoption). As discussed previously, this decline has been partly due to efforts in sending countries such as China and Korea to promote domestic adoption, and to reduce or phase out the adoption of healthy infants by overseas families. Nonetheless, a subsequent report released in 2014 on intercountry adoption in Australia, while less effusive towards the practice, still indicated support for its continuation (see Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet [DPMC] 2014). This report noted that although some submissions expressed concern over how the ‘best interests of the child’ aligned with streamlining intercountry adoption to Australia:

Greater efficiency in the [intercountry adoption process], so long as it does not come at the expense of thoroughness, may remove some of the frustrations experienced by prospective adoptive parents, while also reducing the amount of time spent by children in institutions. Australia’s approach to adoption recognises that children who cannot be brought up with their family are entitled to grow up in a permanent, secure and loving family environment. A more efficient intercountry adoption system would be better able to provide children with this environment in a timely fashion. (DPMC 2014:viii)

It appears the processes involved in the adoption of children from overseas by Australians, and the scale on which this occurs, remains uncertain. Existing scholarship has provided valuable insights as to *why* it is a contested area of social policy and practice. The literature has highlighted that ‘rescue’ narratives, and the contrasting ways ‘Australian’ (white, middle-class) and

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<sup>32</sup> This is supported by Willing et al.’s review of the sociological literature concerning intercountry adoption, which found that birth families and communities ‘remain almost invisible’ in the body of work they surveyed (2012:465). The authors argue that ‘their very “invisibility” is an enabling feature of intercountry adoption’, and symptomatic of the ‘global and gendered inequalities in power which arguably give rise to intercountry adoption in the first place’ (2012:473).

‘overseas’ (non-white, poor) mothers and children are valued and understood, constitute particularly potent tropes in the Australian political and public imaginary. As an increasingly influential counterpoint to these simplistic renderings, a body of work examining the ethics of adoption and seeking to advance a social justice perspective in adoption policies and practices, has emerged.

## **Ethics, social justice and adult adoptee voices**

A variety of literature has focused on the politics, ethics and legality of intercountry adoption (e.g. Bergquist 2009; Cartwright 2003; Cherot 2006; Hübinette 2006; Kim 2009; Lovelock 2000; Marre & Briggs 2009; Lee 2018; Misca 2014; O’Halloran 2009; Saunders 2007; Smolin 2004, 2007; Wall 2012; Yang 2009; Youde 2014). These studies and commentaries have highlighted the deeply contested and socio-politically complex nature of intercountry (and transracial) adoption. Importantly, this scholarship has provided critiques of the ‘rescue’ narratives and ‘colourblind’ discourses that have permeated intercountry adoption practice and policy since its modern inception – narratives that insist that adoption is a positive phenomenon driven by love and altruism, wherein issues of ‘race’, ‘difference’ and power are not present or do not matter – and has offered alternative viewpoints drawing on empirical data, historical analysis and postcolonial sociological theory (e.g. Samuels 2009; Quiroz 2007). These developments have opened a space for adult adoptees themselves, along with practitioners and other stakeholders in the field of intercountry adoption, to give voice to more diverse and multifaceted perspectives. Hübinette, an adoptee born in South Korea and raised in Sweden, draws parallels between the modern practice of intercountry adoption and mass forced migrations of earlier eras, arguing that such adoptions are part of a ‘long Western tradition of transporting nonwhite populations intercontinentally’ through slavery, ‘rescue’, trafficking and ‘civilizing’ projects (2006:143). Although acknowledging the ‘widely divergent purposes for which the enslaved and the adopted have been forcibly made migrants’ (2006:143), Hübinette draws attention to the market-driven, racially stratified and paternalistic nature of both types of migratory movements, which he contends are underpinned by Western colonialism, the desire to ‘uplift’, ‘civilize’ and ‘assimilate’ non-Western children, and the patriarchal agenda of regulating women’s reproduction in developing nations (2006:147).

In a similarly critical vein, Cherot (2006), an adoptee from Vietnam, positions intercountry adoption as a ‘Foucauldian biopolitical project’ whereby adoptees are managed and controlled by states and institutions under the hegemonic guise of humanitarianism and the privileging of white, nuclear families. She asserts that through autobiographical storytelling told within and beyond

adoptive communities, adoptees can claim agency, construct community, and assert new, hybrid identities that resist the dominant discourses and practices at play in the institution of intercountry adoption (Cherot 2006). Critical commentaries such as these draw attention to the racially stratified character of intercountry adoption, steeped in relations of economic and political power between wealthy nations with European ancestry and poorer nations<sup>33</sup> in Asia, Africa or Latin America. Park Nelson, a Korean American adoptee and researcher, recognises the complex interplay of power and privilege in intercountry adoption, and especially the critical role of adult adoptees in contemporary adoption discourse, asserting that:

I neither support nor condemn the practice of transracial and transnational adoption but believe strongly that power differentials between parents and children, institutions and individuals, white people and people of color, rich and poor nations are great enough that the potential for abuse is enormous. I also believe that adult adoptees have an important role to play in challenging these abuses and that an unsentimental critique of the current practice of transnational adoption is a critical first step. (2006:90)

Meanwhile, Australian researchers Fronek, Cuthbert and Willing propose that the “ethics” of intercountry adoption is overwhelmingly utilitarian where the end justifies the means’ (2015:359). They contend that the practice should be conceptualised from a social justice lens that considers the phenomenon from a holistic, rather than narrow and individualistic, viewpoint<sup>34</sup>. They assert that: ‘By failing fully to consider the whole picture concerning intercountry adoption, important issues are obscured and disempowered people remain disempowered’ (Fronek et al. 2015:348). The narrow vision embraced in much popular intercountry adoption discourse is reflected in the propensity to view ‘adoptable’ children as ‘alone’ without any connections, biological or otherwise, prior to their adoption. This disregards the *root causes* of adoption (such as poverty and poor education), and overlooks the absence of alternative solutions or adequate relinquishment or reunification processes. From a perspective that foregrounds the desires and needs of the privileged, including adoptive parents, declining rates of intercountry adoption continue to be framed negatively, resulting in millions of ‘unparented orphans’ in need of

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<sup>33</sup> South Korea is a notable exception to the label ‘poorer’ in contemporary intercountry adoption. Selman (2002), for example, notes that in 1997 Korea’s Gross National Product (GNP) of USD \$10,550 was substantially above those of other sending countries, who all recorded GNP’s below \$5,000. In 2018, Korea’s per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was reported as USD \$31,363, compared to Italy at \$34,318, the United Kingdom at \$42,491, and Australia at \$57,305 (The World Bank 2019).

<sup>34</sup> See also Fronek and Cuthbert (2012), whose paper advances a similar perspective.

families<sup>35</sup> (Fronek et al. 2015:358–359). In contrast, alternative discourses refer to ‘separated’ children (Smolin & Smolin 2012) and consider birth parents ‘at risk’ of losing their children to international adoption due to poverty, inadequate social welfare, oppressive social structures, corruption or poor education (Fronek & Cuthbert 2012). While Fronek et al. are clear about *not* arguing that ‘intercountry adoption is itself problematic’ (2015:360), they do however identify that contemporary discourse and policy often discounts a broader, more complex and critical view that accounts for the rights and experiences of first families and communities. They posit that rather than focusing on facilitatory mechanisms for intercountry adoption, more holistic strategies are needed that aim for ‘the *prevention* of family breakdown’ (Fronek et al. 2015:360, emphasis added). These authors advocate approaches to intercountry adoption that do not prioritise individualistic renderings of ‘the best interests of the child’, but which seek interventions at *societal, community and individual* levels through intersectoral collaborations. The perspectives, experiences and desires of birth parents are crucial to these interventions. More recent research by Högbäck has generated similar claims, illuminating how the powerful image of an ‘abandoned’ and ‘needy’ child in western adoption discourse obscures a more complex picture in which ‘impoverished and distressed birth mothers’ are given little or no support to parent the children they love and desire to remain in a relationship with (2019:279).

Moreover, from an adult adoptee perspective Walton (2012) has argued that the international legislative frameworks that regulate adoption practice fail to consider adoption as a *life-long experience*. She argues that adoptees are persistently depicted ‘as dependent children whose needs must be advocated by others’ (Walton 2012:447), and that adoption is considered as a bounded episode without consequence beyond an immediate post-placement period. Accordingly, the rights and interests of adoptees are not considered past the point at which they are deemed ‘adoptable children’ and placed with a seemingly suitable family, leading to considerable frustration and emotional turmoil when, as *adults*, they cannot access accurate information about their birth, their relatives, or the reasons for their adoption. From this perspective, the ‘best interests’ of the adopted person are not being met in a system that fails to acknowledge the long-term consequences of intercountry adoption and the way that adoptees’ needs may change throughout their lifetimes (Walton 2012:448,451). Heaser, another adult adoptee, similarly

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<sup>35</sup> Some argue that this is an erroneous assumption built upon conflicting definitions of ‘orphan’. Graff (2008), for example, identifies that among the 132 million ‘orphans’ reported by UNICEF in 2006, only 10 percent (13 million) had lost *both* their parents, and most were not alone in orphanages, but living with extended relatives. Moreover, 95 percent were aged over five. Hence, as Graff argues:

UNICEF’s ‘millions of orphans’ are not healthy babies doomed to institutional misery unless Westerners adopt and save them. Rather, they are mostly older children living with extended families who need financial support. (2008:61–62)

contends that regulatory frameworks for the practice of intercountry adoption are rarely implemented with ‘the voices of adult intercountry adoptees in mind’ (2016:48). Like Walton, she advocates a shift away from the ‘*best interests of the child*’ and towards the ‘*best interests of the adoptee*’ (Heaser 2016:48, emphasis in original). These perspectives reflect an understanding that the needs of adoptees are more complex and long-term than simply creating a new family (Welbourne 2002:270).

These emerging voices in intercountry adoption research are complemented by a range of adoptee anthologies, memoirs, blogs and multimedia projects that increasingly foreground the complicated, personal and diverse perspectives of adult intercountry and transracial adoptees (Armstrong & Slaytor 2001; ISS Australia 2017; Morey & Morey 2018; Trenka et al. 2006; Trenka 2003, 2009 – see also adoptee-written blogs such as J. Kim’s (2007) *Harlow’s Monkey* and Reed’s (2018a, 2018b) *A Critical Discourse*). Together, these accounts provide a markedly more intricate and ambivalent picture of intercountry adoption than that advanced in official discourse such as the Overseas Adoption in Australia Report (HRSCFHS 2005). This dissertation seeks to add further nuance to this space by foregrounding the diverse voices and experiences of adult Australian intercountry adoptees.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has surveyed key points and issues that punctuate the forty-plus-year history of intercountry adoption in Australia. It has pointed to the complex but specific ways that sociocultural and legal ideas about family, nation and adoption have infused adoption policy and practice over these decades. The first intercountry adoptees to arrive in Australia in the 1960s and 70s were understood to have been ‘rescued’ and in need of a ‘clean break’ from their first families and cultures, and were subject to assimilationist discourses that disregarded the value of biological and original cultural connections. Over the next thirty years notable shifts occurred in policy and practice concerning domestic and intercountry adoption; the former moved towards a more ‘open’ model and declined sharply, while the latter expanded and experienced peak periods in the late 1980s and mid-2000s. During these years, the discourse of ‘rescue’ that infused intercountry adoption in its early years shifted to accommodate narratives about cultural marginalisation and institutionalisation in less advantaged countries. In the 1990s, the UNCRC and the Hague Convention instigated enhanced recognition of the value and importance of links with original families and cultures; however, the efficacy of these international frameworks remains contentious.

Psychological literature has exerted substantial influence over the ways adoptees are perceived in western societies. Themes of ‘adjustment’ and ‘damage’ have become controversial, leading to tendencies to infantilise, pathologise and stigmatise adoptees on the one hand, while also giving voice to deep, painful and previously unheard experiences of loss and grief on the other.

Advocates for a ‘social ecology’ framework for considering adoption effects have recently surfaced, inviting consideration of the complex interplay of social, cultural, biological, legal and individualised factors implicated in the experiences of intercountry adoptees. In the Australian context, a body of scholarship focused on the 2005 Inquiry into Overseas Adoption in Australia has highlighted the emergence of contrasting perspectives concerning domestic and intercountry adoption, and argued that conservative ideologies remain entrenched in the discourse surrounding the adoption of children from overseas. More recently, work examining ethical and social justice issues in intercountry adoption has emerged, recognising the voices of adult adoptees and their first communities and families in more urgent and concerted ways than ever before. A more holistic social justice perspective, which works towards *preventative* measures that *protect* and *empower* families and communities in countries that send children overseas for adoption, has been proposed as a way forward.

Overall, this chapter has highlighted that intercountry adoption takes place within a constant struggle for ideological and discursive hegemony – a struggle that has historically been dominated by ‘white’, middle-class citizens in western nations. It follows then that the practice of adoption from overseas is not neutral, benign or ‘beyond’ politics or culture, but part of a complicated interplay of emotions, interests, structures and worldviews, wherein the ‘best interests of the child’ are *not* universally self-evident. Chapter 3 continues to examine salient issues and recurring discourses at the core of this project’s intentions, explaining the key concept of ‘cultural identity’ before surveying literature to contextualise this important facet of the intercountry adoption experience.

## **CHAPTER 3 – THE ‘CULTURAL IDENTITIES’ OF AUSTRALIAN INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTEES**

### **Introduction**

The study of personal identity development has been advanced in the field of psychology since Erikson's (1950, 1968) work in the mid-twentieth century (Schwartz, Zamboanga, Weisskirch & Wang 2009; Wurgaft 1995). However, it was in the 1980s and 1990s that identity formation became a topic of considerable scholarly interest in disciplines such as cultural studies, communication, sociology and migration studies, leading to what Stuart Hall described as a 'veritable discursive explosion' (1996a:1) around identity within and beyond academia. Now, as Paul Gilroy succinctly states: 'We live in a world where identity matters' (1997:301).

Identity has also become a preoccupation in intercountry adoption research. This is unsurprising considering the questions about allegiance, belonging and self-concept that adoption, and particularly adoption across national, cultural and racial lines, precipitates. With this in mind, Part 1 of this chapter outlines the theoretical understanding of cultural identity that underpins this research. Cultural identity is often conflated with the concepts of 'race' and ethnicity. While these terms are indeed closely related and overlapping, there are also subtle distinctions between them that are important to clarify at the outset of this discussion. After explaining these distinctions, the concept of belonging is identified as a central aspect of cultural identity. Part 1 concludes by expounding the contribution of postmodern perspectives to the way belonging is theorised and studied, both within this inquiry, and in identity research more broadly. This conceptual discussion frames the extant scholarship concerning intercountry adoptees' identities, which is surveyed in Part 2.

### **PART 1 – Mapping the conceptual terrain**

#### **'Race' and ethnicity**

Cultural identity is often used synonymously with racial or ethnic identity in intercountry adoption research. There is indeed considerable overlap between these terms, as particular cultures are often equated with particular ethnicities and particular 'races'. However, the boundaries are often blurry and contentious. The concept of 'race' has roots in European colonialism and now-discredited scientific ideas about innate biological distinctions between



groups of people (Dein 2006). Goldberg explains the etymology of the word 'race', linking it to European exploration and imperialism from the late fifteenth century onwards:

The French term *race* and the German *Rasse* derive from the Italian *razza* and the Spanish *raza*, general terms that came to reflect the discovery and experience of groups of beings very different from, indeed strange to the European eye and self. From its inception, then, race has referred to those perceived, indeed, constituted as other. (1993:62)

When the scientific study of 'race' emerged in the nineteenth century, it was thought that the physical diversity observed between human populations could be explained by the existence of 'fixed and separate races, rooted in biological difference and a product of divergent heritages' (Mason 2000:6). 'Race' thus came to be understood as a 'permanent, inevitable, and extrahistorical principle of differentiation' (Gilroy 2000:57) that served to divide and categorise groups of people on the basis of inherited physical characteristics such as skin, hair and eye colour, facial structure, build, and so on. Imperialist and Euro-centric ideologies, in combination with these 'scientific' ideas about biological distinctions between different 'races', constructed the 'white race' as the norm against which other populations were compared and in turn positioned as pathological (Dein 2006). Hence from its inception 'race' has subsumed not only notions of difference and 'otherness', but also of inherent superiority and inferiority (Willing & Fronek 2014).

Modern genetics has since discredited the notion of 'race' as an innate biological property (Dein 2006; Hall 1996b; Jameson 2007). In scholarly discourse it is now widely theorised as a social construction rather than a biological reality (Smedley & Smedley 2005). That is, racial categories and the meanings assigned to them are created, sustained, contested and transformed through *social interactions* at both macro (institutional) and micro (interpersonal) levels. Yet despite this theoretical shift, essentialist and hierarchical understandings of the concept of 'race' have persisted in contemporary societies (Dein 2006). 'Race' remains a "“readable” code of difference" that shapes the way social interactions are approached, negotiated and understood (Luke & Luke 1999:236), and the perceived differences and characteristics ascribed to various 'races' are deeply implicated in exclusionary and discriminatory ideologies and practices (Dein 2006; Gunaratnam 2003; Hall 2000). Within this context 'whiteness' continues to be positioned as an invisible default – 'an unmarked and socially privileged category of race' (Willing & Fronek 2014:1132) – in many western societies. For example, in these contexts 'blackness' may be associated with negative and antisocial qualities (Hall 2000; Howarth 2006), and 'Asianness' may evoke notions of 'foreignness' and 'Otherness' (Tan 2006:67). Importantly therefore, 'race' is also associated with hierarchical claims to belonging within nations, and is intricately tied to notions of national identity – that is, who can claim to be American, Australian, Korean, etc.

The traditional understanding of ‘race’ as a categorisation based on shared *physical* attributes has also become intertwined with the concept of ethnicity, which references membership in a group with a distinctive *culture, heritage* and *history*<sup>36</sup> (see Fong 2004:5). For, as Tigervall and HübINETTE observe,

such ‘ethnic’ variables as language, culture and religion almost always seem to fall back upon a certain body, which is decoded and read as belonging to a certain race, which in its turn is linked to a certain ethnicity. (2010:494)

Similarly, Hall argued that rather than being separate concepts, ‘race’ and ethnicity cohere in discriminatory attitudes and practices based on perceived racial differences:

racism privileges markers like skin colour, but those signifiers have always also been used, by discursive extension, to connote social and cultural differences . . . Biological racism and cultural differentialism . . . constitute not two different systems, but racism’s two registers. (2000:223)

Both ‘race’ and ethnicity, then, are relevant to the formation of cultural identity in contexts of migration and/or perceived racial differences. A ‘different’ physical appearance leads to assumptions about *who* one is and *where* one belongs, and these assumptions in turn shape social encounters that may destabilise, contradict or confirm one’s subjective understanding of their identity. Experiences and perceptions of belonging are thus of central importance to the way that intercountry adoptees – along with other migrant or diasporic peoples – build their identities over time. This critical facet of cultural identity is explained next.

## **Cultural identity and belonging**

Various sources (Grimson 2010; Hall 1996b; E. Kim 2007; Lustig & Koester 2010) position a sense of *belonging* as a key facet of an individual’s cultural identity. Belonging is a perception of connection with, and recognition by, other social groups and their members (Bradford, Burrell & Mabry 2004; Hodgins, Moloney & Winskel 2016). It is therefore a collectively-oriented psychological construct and a key aspect of cultural identity. There is an affective – rather than purely cognitive – dimension to belonging, as it involves emotional attachments and a feeling of being ‘at home’ with and among others (Yuval-Davis 2006, 2011). These feelings are also engendered through a perceived sense of: legitimacy in a group; congruence in relation to personal values; and ‘mutuality of acceptance’, whereby ‘an individual both claims and accepts a

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<sup>36</sup> In other words, ethnicity is primarily a ‘cultural marker . . . defined psychologically and historically’ (Orbe & Harris 2015:9), while ‘race’ is based on physiological rather than behavioural or cultural characteristics (Scherman 2010:128–129).

membership identity as their own, and also feels accepted and valued in that identity by relevant others' (Hodgins et al. 2016:347). The sense of acceptance, recognition and legitimacy gained through belonging has been found to increase positive feelings about oneself and result in greater self-esteem<sup>37</sup> (Bradford et al. 2004).

Importantly, belongingness is built upon *both* inclusion and exclusion (Bradford et al. 2004). For, as Yuval-Davis (2011) points out, belonging and identity involves thinking of a dichotomy of 'us' and 'them' separated by imaginary boundary lines that render belonging more or less tenable for particular peoples. This, she contends, is constitutive of a 'politics of belonging' which involves 'not only the maintenance and reproduction of the boundaries of the community of belonging by the hegemonic political powers but also their contestation and challenge by other political agents' (Yuval-Davis 2006:205). The politics of belonging are evident in, for example, discourses of 'Australianness' and shifting ideas in the public imaginary – manifested in media representations, cultural artefacts, symbols and practices, everyday social exchanges, and immigration and citizenship law and policy – about who does and does not count as authentically and acceptably Australian. Culture and cultural identity therefore sit at 'the intersection of language, meaning and power' (Barker & Galasinski 2001:3), where different ways of understanding and being in the world compete for hegemony.

Belonging to ethnic, racial or national groups is often emphasised as a central aspect of one's cultural identity. However, cultural identities need not be *reduced* to ethnic, national or racial identities; the more expansive concept is one of the core reasons why this research focuses on 'cultural identity' rather than merely on 'ethnicity' or 'race'. For belonging – and therefore cultural identities – can also be felt in relation to groups built around: sociocultural categorisations such as class, ethnicity, gender, religion, age, sexuality, and political leaning (Walton & Fisette 2013; Yuval-Davis, Anthias & Kofman 2005); localised groups built around school, church and teams; collectives related to personal interests and hobbies; and family and friendship groups (Walton & Fisette 2013). Loci of identity and belonging can therefore be local, national or global, and may involve physical nearness, or be similar to Benedict Anderson's (1983) notion of the nation as an 'imagined community', where those who never meet face to face may still consider themselves as part of a collective<sup>38</sup>.

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<sup>37</sup> However, as Yuval-Davis (2011:4) recognises, belonging is not only about positive feelings; it also involves a sense of safety and emotional engagement within a community that can in turn allow for the expression of emotions such as anger, resentment, indignation and shame.

<sup>38</sup> In recent decades it has also become possible to derive a sense of belonging from participation and/or membership in online communities where activities and communications take place via websites, forums, social network sites and games (Cho 2011; Diminescu 2008; Pietersen, Coetzee, Byczkowska-Owczarek, Elliker & Ackerman 2018).

It is important to note that while some scholars link belonging and cultural identity to sharing ‘traditions, heritage, language, and similar norms of appropriate behavior’ (Fong 2004:6) or the ‘worldview, value system, attitudes, and beliefs of a group’ (Adler 2002, online), a focus on *shared behaviours, traditions, attitudes and language* can be problematic for intercountry adoptees. It can be difficult for intercountry adoptees to claim that they embody or practise the ‘culture’ of their country of birth; yet, they may at various times and in various ways *nonetheless* identify as ‘Korean’, ‘Vietnamese’, ‘Sri Lankan’ or ‘Chinese’ etc. For example, in my early twenties I saw myself as Korean and claimed this identity, despite not being familiar with Korean traditions, history language, or norms of behavior or etiquette. Similarly, Korean American adoptee Janine Bishop has asserted:

Even though I may seem very American . . . *I want to be distinctly Korean*. I know I’m not in terms of having all the Korean traditions, but I don’t want people to see me and say, ‘Because she grew up in a Caucasian family, and because she is very Americanized, she’s white.’ That’s not what I want anymore. (1996 in Lee 2003:711, emphasis added)

Insights such as these compel recognition that for intercountry adoptees, claiming belonging to a cultural group does not necessarily align with ‘having all the . . . traditions’. Yet individual adoptees may claim a cultural identity – a sense of belonging to a cultural group – that aligns in some way with their country of birth.

An understanding of cultural identity in this context therefore needs to foreground *a felt sense of belonging* rather than merely an integration of shared aspects of ‘culture’ (while remaining attentive to how commonalities or differences in cultural practices, beliefs, values, language, etc. might also contribute to an individual’s sense of belonging or identity). This research mobilises an understanding of cultural identity that focuses less on shared values, behaviours, attitudes, language and practices, and more so on personal and often affective (yet also socially and historically situated) notions of identification and belonging. This thesis subsequently positions cultural identity as a social identity: ‘that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his [or her] knowledge of his [or her] membership of a social group (or groups), together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership’ (Tajfel 1981:255). This conception leaves space for those who have had very little exposure to the culture of their birth country to potentially claim some feeling of belonging to that collectivity, and to integrate it in various ways with their identities.

Having clarified how notions of ‘race’, ethnicity and belonging have been applied in this research, the discussion turns to an examination of the work of Stuart Hall and other postmodern scholars

who, since the early 1990s, have enduringly transformed the theoretical terrain of identity research. Postmodern insights related to identity construction have had a profound impact on how adoption scholars now perceive adoptees' experiences of belonging, and thus, how adoptees build, transform and maintain their identities.

### **Globalisation, diaspora and postmodernism: Problematising essentialist conceptions of cultural identity**

In a series of seminal essays, Stuart Hall (1990, 1994, 1996a, 1996b), identified two dominant models of thinking about cultural identity. The traditional approach, aligned with modernist and Enlightenment thought and rooted in an essentialist<sup>39</sup> ontology, conceives of identity as a stable and intrinsic attribute – an 'essence' of people who share a common history and heritage (Hall 1990, 1994). According to this understanding, cultural identity is characterised as a fixed mode of belonging to a unified group defined by ethnicity, 'race' or nationality. Moreover, one's 'true' identity can only be 'uncovered' by 'rediscovering' the group or culture from which one or one's ancestors originated (Hall 1990:223).

However, subsequent views from anthropological, sociological and cultural studies perspectives have challenged this understanding of identity (Appadurai 1996; Hall 1996b; Papastergiadis 2000). Critically, technological developments – principally the emergence of the Internet, satellite technology and mobile telephony – have facilitated unprecedented levels of everyday interconnectivity between individuals and populations who would otherwise have remained spatially and temporally distant. Simultaneously, global migration patterns have increasingly become characterised by turbulence, fluidity and multidirectionality, further allowing for the mixing, melding and circulation of cultures and people (Papastergiadis 2000). Various scholars have situated these phenomena under the umbrella term 'globalisation' (Giddens 1990; Hall 1996b; Harvey 1989; McGrew 1996), arguing that in these postmodern conditions time and space have become compressed (Harvey 1989:240) due to 'an intensification in the levels of interaction, interconnectedness, or interdependence between the states and societies which constitute the modern world community' (McGrew 1996:472–473).

Meanwhile, migration scholars have also reexamined their conceptual frameworks and research

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<sup>39</sup> As Werbner explains, to essentialise is 'to impute a fundamental, basic, absolutely necessary constitutive quality to a person, social category, ethnic group, religious community, or a nation' (1997:228). An essentialist understanding of cultural identity assumes an intrinsic and unchanging link between one's ethnic or racial background and one's identity.

foci. While much prior research concerning migrants had examined patterns of assimilation and acculturation across generations and within particular socio-historical and national contexts (Alba & Nee 1997; Gans 1992; Portes & Zhou 1993; Rumbaut 1994), from the early 1990s migration scholars instead investigated and analysed ‘transnational diasporas’ (Lie 1995; Wahlbeck 2002). This renewed interest in the concept of diaspora, a term originally used to refer to the expulsion and dispersal of the Jewish people from their homeland (Ang 2003; Keown, Murphy & Procter 2009), has led to a ‘dispersion of the meanings of the term in semantic, conceptual and disciplinary space’ (Brubaker 2005:1). While some scholars still associate diaspora with its classical features of enforced exile, collective suffering and a strong desire to return to a lost homeland (Cohen 1997; Lee 2006; Safran 1991), definitions have been expanded to include ‘almost any group living outside its country of origin, be it Italians outside Italy, Africans in the Caribbean, North America or Western Europe, Cubans in Miami and Madrid, Koreans in Japan, or Chinese all over the world’ (Ang 2003:142).

This global mobility and interconnectedness has led to claims that cultures and identities have become ‘deterritorialised’, meaning that groups of people who were once able to demarcate their identities on the basis of a shared locality are ‘no longer tightly territorialised, spatially bounded, historically unselfconscious or culturally homogenous’ (Appadurai 1996:48). Hence place, in particular place defined by *national* borders, has receded in importance as a marker of identity and belonging. Instead, the contemporary world is one in which people are freer than ever to move, communicate, and form bonds of belonging to *multiple* groups and places around the world, both virtual and physical. Many individuals, and principally migrants, may now feel a sense of belonging to communities that are not bound by a common geographical location (Papastergiadis 2000). This understanding of identity does not preclude strong attachments to places of origin or to groups of people with whom one shares national citizenship or an ethnic or cultural history. However, the enhanced ability of the everyday person to connect and communicate over vast distances has nonetheless involved a weakening of ‘traditional coordinates of personal identity’ such as family, religion, politics, race and class, and a proliferation of the points of affiliation available to groups and individuals (Melucci 1997:61).

Various postmodern<sup>40</sup> perspectives have also permeated the theoretical discourse around

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<sup>40</sup> The term ‘postmodern’ is polysemic and used differently across academic and popular discourse. For example, it may refer to: ‘a relatively specific social and cultural condition that serves as a context for human development’ (Schachter 2005:139; also known as postmodernity, the historical period following modernity); an artistic and aesthetic movement or style that developed in reaction to ‘elitist’ modernist cultural production (Thompson 2004:6–7); or a ‘set of related theories of knowledge’ (Schachter 2005:139) influenced by the writings of French theorists such as Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Michel Foucault and Jean Baudrillard. The term ‘postmodern’ is invoked here in this latter usage, referring to a particular theoretical orientation towards knowledge and its construction.

contemporary identity formation (Bauman 1992; Bhabha 1990, 1994; Hall & du Gay 1996; Sarup 1996). Central to these views is ‘the epistemological claim that reality cannot be objectively apprehended or represented and that all reality, and especially social reality, is, in essence, socially constructed’ (Schachter 2005:145–146). Accordingly, rather than being tied to an essential characteristic such as racial or ethnic heritage, identity is constructed relationally; it is ‘a consequence of a *process of interaction* between people, institutions and practices’ (Sarup 1996:11, emphasis added). As Hall asserts:

Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’ . . . It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere ‘recovery’ of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. (1990:225)

Consequently, identities are socioculturally and historically situated, and coming to terms with one’s identity/ies involves ongoing processes of *positioning* oneself in relation to the discourses operating in one’s social environments. As a result of the work of Hall and others, essentialist claims emphasising cultural heritage as *the* source of one’s identity are now understood to impose ‘an imaginary coherence’ on diasporic experiences and contemporary identity formation (Hall 1990:224). Cultural identity should therefore be considered as *processual* and *multifaceted* – an ongoing and dynamic process, not static or fixed to a single place or community of origin, but ‘open, contradictory, unfinished and fragmented’ (Hall 1994:125).

However, as noted previously, this is not to say that attachments to places or cultures of origin cannot be deeply felt. Nor does it exclude the possibility of individuals seeking and experiencing a sense of coherence and stability in their identifications. As Walton argues in her thesis about Korean adoptee identity formations, ‘a focus on fluid identities often leaves our understanding of identity, floating at a high altitude in thick theoretical air without providing evidence of ways that identity is also grounded and made sense of in concrete ways’ (2009b:51). Nonetheless, a postmodern viewpoint acknowledges the contextual and socially contingent nature of identification, opening up a theoretical and conceptual space that embraces a much broader range of possibilities for identity formation. This is significant because the discourse surrounding adoptees’ identities is so often infused with essentialist ideas about ‘belonging’ and ‘heritage’ on the one hand, or by claims of exclusive belonging in the adoptive nation on the other, which can constrain and limit how intercountry adoptees’ identities can be understood – both by themselves and others. Cerulo argues that although postmodern theorists continue to examine how and why

essentialist identities remain part of everyday perceptions and interactions, they do so by deconstructing ‘established identity categories and their accompanying rhetoric in an effort to explore the full range of “being”’ (1997:391). In other words, postmodern perspectives allow for an adaptable and complex range of ‘being’ to be explored and articulated.

Having described the conceptual terrain that underpins the understanding of cultural identity evoked in this thesis, this chapter now proceeds to examine existing scholarship concerning the cultural identities of intercountry adoptees. The scholarship presented in Part 2 draws upon and is framed by the conceptual material discussed in Part 1. Several notable themes are discussed, including: experiencing and seeking to resolve difference and dissonance; efforts to (re)connect<sup>41</sup> with one’s culture of birth; and notions of hybridity and diversity.

## **PART 2 – Intercountry adoptees and cultural identity**

### **Difference and dissonance**

Scholarship highlights that transracial, intercountry adoptees who join their adoptive families in infancy or early childhood overwhelmingly identify with their adoptive parents’ ‘race’ and ethnicity throughout their childhoods. A significant study of over 450 domestic and internationally adopted adults, conducted by the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute in the US, reported that 78 percent of Korean American informants ‘considered themselves to be or wanted to be White as children’ (McGinnis, Smith, Ryan & Howard 2009:5). Similarly, Baden, Treweeke and Ahluwalia’s (2012) research found that by the time intercountry adoptees in the US reach adolescence and early adulthood, approximately two-thirds see themselves as ‘white’. Research in an Australian context has also supported these findings (Walton 2009b:183–185; Williams 2003:69–73).

However, research also suggests that in adolescence or early adulthood intercountry adoptees tend to recognise their divergent racial and cultural backgrounds, and subsequently seek to acknowledge, explore or invest in this aspect of their identity. According to Baden et al. (2012), this is often prompted by a growing sense of dissonance; it becomes increasingly evident to the

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<sup>41</sup> (Re) is used here to indicate that children adopted at very young ages do not come with an *a priori* culture that is ‘lost and waiting to be re-awakened’ (Williams 2003:119). Yet, enculturation does start from birth (Baden, Treweeke & Ahluwalia 2012), and those who are adopted at older ages may indeed bring learned cultural knowledge and behaviours to their adoptive homes. The extent to which learning about one’s culture of birth could be considered *reconnection* is therefore contested and variable.



adoptee that others view them differently (as ‘foreign’ or ‘Asian’) to how they view themselves (as ethnoculturally ‘white’). McGinnis et al.’s (2009) finding that racial and ethnic identity increased in importance in young adulthood for over 80 percent of their internationally adopted respondents aligns with these observations. Meier’s earlier study also noted that: ‘from childhood to adulthood many Korean adoptees follow a similar developmental trajectory of denial, self-awareness, and emerging cultural consciousness about their Korean heritage’ (1999:16). Experiences of dissonance appear to be central to these shifts.

It follows then that *social interactions*, particularly during school years or after leaving home in early adulthood, tend to be critical to the formation of intercountry adoptees’ cultural identities. Walton, for example, comments in her doctoral dissertation that:

the Korean adoptees that I interviewed said that they *felt* white and did not see themselves as Korean. Their ethnic identity only became an issue when it was *made* an issue and this usually arose during social interactions that pointed out their ‘difference; based on phenotype. (2009b:56–57, emphasis in original)

Studies such as Yngvesson and Mahoney’s interrogation of Swedish and American adoptee narratives highlight the pervasive and inescapable discomfort that this produces:

All the narratives we examine describe experiences of dissonance over a lifetime for adoptees who grew up in societies/families where they felt biologically, racially or culturally out of place. This sense of displacement is described by some as continuous, unrelenting. (2000:82)

Others have pointed to how mundane, everyday encounters can produce feelings of dissonance and difference. These everyday interactions are perhaps most commonly represented by the question: ‘Where are you from?’ Several notable studies provide useful analyses of the significance of this seemingly innocuous query. Walton argues that when intercountry adoptees are asked, ‘Where are you from?’ in their adoptive countries, this is a moment of objectification that disrupts their embodied white subjectivities and instead represents them as ‘other’. A Korean-Canadian participant in Walton’s study related: ‘I always feel like I’m wearing a Halloween costume that I can never take off. I’m just stuck with it. The zipper is broken . . . [The mask] is melted onto my face . . .’ (Interviewee in Walton 2009b:187). Heaser (2016) posits that this question is a source of discomfort and resentment, a racialising reminder (for her participants) of always being seen as *from Korea* rather than simply ‘Australian’ (Heaser 2016:141–142). Heaser further describes participants’ experiences of being ‘bullied for being Asian’ (2016:143), arguing that for some of them this had lasting effects on feelings of belonging and self-esteem.

Themes of marginalisation and difference are also central in Williams' (2003) Master's dissertation on the experiences of Vietnamese adoptees (one of the first in-depth studies of intercountry adoptees' experiences in Australia). In the preface to her thesis, Williams, herself adopted from Vietnam, reflected:

In my first five years with [my adoptive family], 'assimilating' into my new environment, my memory tells me that I was raised to feel no different in terms of racial or cultural identity. In short I felt the 'same' as my family. However, once I entered the schoolyard and then wider society, I began to regularly interpret from others in society that I was 'different'. I was 'not quite white' and, after experiencing racism, I felt inferior because of it. (2003:iii)

Drawing on narrative interview data, Williams examined how thirteen Vietnamese adoptees in Australia, France, the US and the UK had navigated issues of difference and identity throughout their childhoods and into adulthood. She traced their exposure and feelings towards Vietnam and Vietnamese people, identifying a number of unifying themes. Williams found that in the family home, participants were raised to be the 'same' as their adoptive parents, which they equated with 'whiteness' and being 'normal'. Very few participants were exposed to racial or cultural diversity, or introduced to Vietnamese people or culture. Furthermore, in the stories their adoptive parents related about their pre-adoptive pasts, Vietnam was 'symbolised through stories about the misfortunate, immorality and savagery of its people' and their birth mothers were cast as 'incapable, immoral or deceased' (Williams 2003:77,74). Therefore, participants were raised to acquire their adoptive parents' racial and cultural identities, and to view their Vietnamese background as an inferior and shameful part of their history. Importantly, Williams found that in adulthood, participants began to *invest* in their 'difference' by moving to multicultural areas, exploring the meaning of their Vietnamese heritage<sup>42</sup> and seeking connections with non-white people. Among these connections, links with other adopted Vietnamese emerged as particularly impactful, allowing adoptees to access 'an environment of understanding and belonging' (Williams 2003:133) which was not available via associations with 'white' friends or family, or 'authentic' Vietnamese people.

Numerous scholars recognise that discourses and practices around international adoption have changed significantly since the 'founding waves' of adoption from Korea in the 1950s, and Vietnam in the 1970s (Gray 2007; Shiao & Tuan 2008; Tuan 2008; Williams 2003). However, the reappearance of themes of dissonance and difference in the life stories of adoptees who arrived in the 1980s and 1990s, evidenced by Walton's (2009b) and Heaser's (2016) studies, suggests these

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<sup>42</sup> The cultural lineage of intercountry adoptees has become known as 'birth culture' (Volkman 2003:42).

issues may persist for later generations of intercountry adoptees, now in their twenties and thirties. In short, therefore, the racial and cultural backgrounds of intercountry adoptees *matter*.

### **Seeking to (re)connect with ‘birth culture’**

A range of scholarship has considered how adoptees seek to explore and form links with their ‘birth culture’. Baden et al. (2012) suggest that a new construct is needed to describe the identity and cultural adaptation processes of intercountry adoptees. They argue that intercountry adoptees go through a process they call ‘reculturation’, or ‘reclaiming’ their birth culture:

After a lifetime of being perceived as not truly representing their ethnic group and through growing awareness of their minority status, their experiences of racism, and their own identity issues around their adoption and heritage, many [transracial international adoptees] go through a process in which they may actively or passively seek to more thoroughly identify with their birth culture . . . Reculturation is a process . . . through which adoptees develop their relationship to their birth and adoptive cultures via reculturative activities and experiences . . . (Baden et al. 2012:389–390)

Baden et al. (2012:393–394) maintain that these ‘reculturative activities and experiences’ include three main approaches found across narratives, anecdotes and interview data reported in the literature: education, such as learning about the history and language of one’s birth country; experiences, such as interacting with those who ‘represent’ one’s birth culture or participating in short tours of one’s birth country; and immersion, choosing lived experiences such as moving to one’s country of birth to work and live, or choosing to socialise and live among those who share one’s ethnic heritage. They further posit that several outcomes may occur from engaging in one or all of these activities: recognising the limitations of identifying with one’s birth and adoptive cultures and instead identifying primarily with ‘adoptive culture’; fully reclaiming one’s birth culture and becoming competent in the language and attendant cultural practices; identifying as ‘bicultural’ in a similar way to co-ethnics in one’s adoptive country (e.g. identifying as Chinese-Australian); continuing to assimilate into one’s adoptive country and to occupy ‘honorary white status’ despite exploring the culture of their birth country; and combining aspects of the aforementioned outcomes (Baden et al. 2012:394–395). Baden et al.’s (2012) research thereby highlights the varied pathways through which adoptees may seek to orient themselves in relation to their ‘birth culture’, and the diverse outcomes that may result from these processes of exploration and dis/identification.

Other researchers have applied different conceptual lenses to adoptees’ attempts to (re)connect with their country and birth culture. Offering anthropological and phenomenological insights,

Walton (2009b) considered how Korean adoptees seek to make sense of a ‘Korean identity’ within the context of entrenched ethno-nationalist narratives that conflate Korean blood with ‘being Korean’. Drawing on her own and others’ experiences of visiting Korea and encountering the Korean government’s attempts to welcome them as ‘overseas Koreans’ who were ‘returning home’, Walton argued that:

When Korean adoptees come back to Korea and try to begin to understand Korea and what a Korean identity could mean for them, the push to automatically acquire a Korean identity – as if it were as easy as putting on [the traditional dress] *hanbok* – is overwhelming . . . The premise seems to be that all Korean adoptees have to do is tap into their Korean blood that supposedly runs through all people considered to ‘be Korean’ and their Korean identity will suddenly awaken from its latent state, bursting to the surface. (2009b:234)

This particular kind of essentialist, ethno-nationalist identification is problematic for adoptees. For, as many scholars acknowledge (Baden et al. 2012; Hübinette 2004; Kim 2003; Manzi, Ferrari, Rosnati & Benet-Martinez 2014; Miller-Loessi & Kilic 2001; Westhues & Cohen 1998; Yang 2009), adoptees are *not* like other migrants who have access to intergenerational cultural experience. Some of Walton’s (2009b) interviewees explained that despite having their adoptive parents’ encouragement, their exposure to Korean culture was not *lived*, but rather, restricted to information, restaurants, culture camps, music and festivals. Moreover, activities were often focused on ‘material culture rather than cultural values and practices’, and the ‘intricate layers of Korean culture in everyday life’ were not present (2009b:240). As result, inculcation in their ‘birth culture’ was only superficial<sup>43</sup>. This created difficulties for a number of her interviewees who were confronted with expectations that they would ‘be Korean’ when they attempted to (re)connect with Korea:

An undeniable aspect of my experience in Korea is that of feeling and being excluded, yet again . . . Every day happens to be an awkward moment . . . We look the part, and if we keep our mouths shut we can fake it, but inevitably we are so far out of our domain it’s scary. (Interviewee in Walton 2009b:242).

Walton subsequently explored how the Korean adoptees in her study sought to make their *own* meanings around a Korean identity. Through consuming the food, experiencing the sights, smells

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<sup>43</sup> The extent to which adoptive parents can, should, and do provide their internationally adopted children with access to their birth culture, and with what effect, is contentious. While it is outside the scope of this thesis to consider this literature in detail, useful material is found in Lee’s (2003) paper categorising the various orientations that adoptive parents may take with respect to their child’s birth culture. More recent insights on how adoptees experience their parents’ efforts to connect them with their birth cultures can be found in McGinnis et al. (2009), and Randolph and Holtzman (2010). Volkman (2003) and Wall (2012) further discuss (from an adoptive parent perspective) the pressure on adoptive parents to maintain connections with ‘birth culture’. Meanwhile, Willing and Fronek (2014), Riggs and Due (2015) and Quiroz (2012) provide critical analyses of how intersecting axes of privilege, ‘race’ and normative western ideologies affect the perceptions and practices of adoptive parents.

and sounds, and buying items such as clothing and souvenirs, her participants reported they were able to ‘find a sense of understanding about what a Korean identity *could* mean’ (2009b:259, emphasis added), substantiating their connection to the country and its culture in a lived, personal and agential way that went beyond disembodied facts and second-hand knowledge.

Kim (2003) and Yngvesson’s (2003) studies support the notion that adoptees may not only experience dissonance and difference in their adoptive countries, but also in their countries of birth. During a Korean government-sponsored homeland tour in 2001 and a Korean adoptee gathering in 1999, Kim (2003) observed that participants expressed resistance and ‘disidentification’ towards the official state narrative about who adoptees are (‘Korean’), and their belonging to their ‘homeland’ (Korea). She found that such ‘stagings of identity’ propelled adoptees to instead re-imagine belonging and kinship *among themselves*, forming a distinct global community of Korean adoptees (Kim 2003:59,77). Meanwhile, drawing on ethnographic data derived from joining twelve Swedish families on a ‘roots trip’ to Chile, Yngvesson found that such return journeys may propel ‘an opening rather than an experience of closure’, revealing ‘the precariousness of [who] “I am”’ (2003:9). The adoptees in her study were not ‘completed’ by returning to their ‘roots’, but instead confronted the interruptions and transformations underpinning their lives in visceral and intimate ways.

Research exists therefore to challenge the falsity that intercountry adoptees will experience automatic belonging and likely find their ‘true’ selves in their countries and cultures of birth. Some researchers have proposed Homi Bhabha’s (1990, 1994) concept of hybridity and the ‘third space’ as a theoretical and conceptual alternative to these narrow, essentialist ways of considering the identities of intercountry adoptees. This is discussed next, along with research that foregrounds the heterogeneity of intercountry adoptee perspectives and experiences.

## **Hybridity and the diverse experiences of intercountry adoptees**

In an essay about internationally adopted Koreans, Hübinette asks:

If both Western and Korean interpretations and images of adopted Koreans appear to have their obvious shortcomings, what constitutes the identity and community of adopted Koreans?  
(2004:22)

A potential answer, he suggests, lies in Homi Bhabha’s (1990, 1994) concept of hybridity and the ‘third space’. Within such interstitial, ‘in-between’ spaces (Bhabha 1994, 1996), a continual process of *negotiation* and *contestation* between cultures – rather than a harmonious and

unproblematic fusion of cultures – occurs (Lo 2000). Hybrid identities thereby generate *new* cultural forms (Davis 2010), enabling ‘the emergence of an “interstitial” agency that refuses binary representation’ (Bhabha 1996:58). Hence, as Hübinette describes, hybridity is ‘the space where culture has no unity, purity or fixity, and where primordial notions of race and nation have been replaced by a floating and hybrid existence’ (2004:23).

Several adoption researchers, myself included (Goode 2015; see also Ballard 2013; Gehrmann 2010; Heaser 2016; Williams 2003), have deployed hybridity to explain a sense of not-quite-belonging in adoptive or birth cultures. These works tend to have a pained, yet also hopeful, resilient and defiant tenor. They suggest that mobilising the concept of hybridity is a way to resist restrictive, essentialist modes of belonging while also positioning adoptees as an agential group with the capacity to name their *own* narratives, rather than having them named for them (Oparah, Shin & Trenka 2006:14). Ballard, for example, suggests that dichotomous narratives that pull adopted persons in seemingly incompatible directions can ‘be reconciled within a third space where tropes of difference, loss, burden, and not fitting in are *commonplace*’ (2013:246, emphasis added). Thus, he posits that hybridity is an affirming and empowering positionality, wherein adoptees who have felt displaced, marginalised or uncomfortable can realise: ‘no longer am I alone’ (Ballard 2013:250).

Gray’s (2007) doctoral dissertation foregrounds the ‘hybrid’ ways in which Australian intercountry adoptees form and make sense of their identities. Using interview data with Australians aged 14 to 34 and adopted from Vietnam, South Korea, Sri Lanka and Malaysia, Gray describes how some participants constructed their identities by drawing upon multiple affiliations to various ‘youth cultures’, ‘family units’ and ‘local community groups’ (2007:72), as well as numerous ‘socially and personally ascribed racial or “ethnic” categories’ (2007:12). Their identities, she argues, were therefore not defined by singular notions of being ‘victims’ who suffered a ‘loss of identity’ through separation from their essentialised birth cultures, but developed through ‘strategies of resilience and strength’ that they used to flexibly shape their identities (Gray 2007:229,233). Gray notes that these ‘contemporary modes of hybrid belonging’ seemed much more pronounced in the younger group of adoptees, aged 21 and under when they were interviewed (2007:211). Participants in this group, who grew up in the 1990s, had experienced a ‘newer’ approach to adoption and had typically been able to visit Korea and experience a range of cultures and sub-cultures in an arguably more accepting and cosmopolitan sociocultural milieu than their predecessors (Gray 2007:106,117). Gray emphasises that an array of social and personal supports are needed to assist adoptees in feeling a sense of belonging to local, national and transnational or global communities. She decentres the discursive emphasis on

adoptive parents' responsibilities to foster a 'healthy and positive cultural identity' (2007:227) in their children, instead suggesting that a healthy identity is related to:

a sense of belonging within supportive peer groups, appropriate school programmes which target bullying in all its forms, knowledge and access to a diverse range of sub-culture styles, opportunities for transnational pursuits, as well as a supportive family who, amongst other things, encourage knowledge and acceptance of, and access to, a diversity of peoples and cultures including the birth cultures of family members. (Gray 2007:222)

Gray asserts that the presence of *all* of these supports cultivates the social and cultural capital necessary to see intercountry adoption not as a source of loss or disempowerment, but as a position in which one feels that they have 'choices and opportunities' (2007:229).

While hybridity offers a useful theoretical lens for explicating the identities of intercountry adoptees, some scholars have advocated for alternative conceptual lenses. Walton (2009b:49–54), for example, asserts that a celebratory conceptualisation of hybridity tends to overlook how adoptees seek to situate (rather than continually remake) their identities. She notes that hybridity can be construed as supporting rather than transcending binary and essentialist identities through its insistence on a 'third space' that *depends* on boundaries to be meaningful. Walton further suggests that 'engaging with the *meanings* attributed to boundaries can foster more nuanced insight about the process through which cultures are understood' (2009b:49, emphasis in original). She reasons that it is productive to consider adoptees' identities as 'existing on a kind of bounded edge . . . that is socially and culturally constructed as it is simultaneously shaped by and gives shape to what it means to be Korean and Canadian, Australian, or Norwegian and so on' (Walton 2009b:51). Kim (2000) has also expressed reservations about the use of hybridity as a descriptor for intercountry adoptees' identities. Making a similar point to Walton, she contends that 'the valorization of hybridity in recent theoretical discourses obscures the actual processes of self-negotiation among individuals "between" cultures' (Kim 2000:65). Sometimes, she argues, adoptees form stable identities that they consider culturally authentic, and at other times they embrace the fluidity and multiplicity that is 'celebrated' in hybridity discourse (Kim 2000). Hybridity, then, remains a contested concept, albeit one that is increasingly invoked in intercountry adoption literature, and which points in valuable ways to the newness, multiplicity, fluidity and potential empowerment of intercountry adoptees as they move into and through adulthood.

Further complexifying the study of identity formation among intercountry adoptees, several researchers also suggest that forming a healthy sense of 'cultural identity' is intertwined with personal and societal conceptualisations of *adoption* itself. McGinnis et al. postulate that a strong

racial/ethnic identity ‘is an important predictor of comfort with that identity, which in turn is *intricately interwoven with comfort with adoption*’ (2009:45, emphasis added). In a similar vein, Grotevant has argued that for adoptees, identity formation ‘involves “coming to terms” with oneself in the context of the family and culture into which one has been adopted’ (1997:4). The questions that intercountry adoptees might ask in the process of ‘coming to terms’ with – making meaning about – their history and status as an adopted person include: ‘Who am I as an adopted person?’ and ‘What does being adopted mean to me, and how does this fit into my understanding of my self, relationships, family, and culture?’ (Grotevant & Von Korff 2011:586). These questions may also involve making sense of the ethics of international adoption, and the impact of disempowering systems and sociocultural norms (Grotevant & Von Korff 2011:588). Clearly, these issues and concerns are complex and do not occur in isolation; hence, cultural identity in the context of intercountry adoption is multilayered, with much potential for variation in feelings, perceptions and experiences.

In order to create a space in which more holistic understandings of intercountry adoptees’ life(long) experiences can be advanced, the range and scope of these experiences must be acknowledged. Alongside the themes discussed previously– difference and dissonance, (re)connecting with one’s birth culture, and hybridity – an increasing awareness of the astounding diversity of experiences, perspectives, emotions and perceptions among intercountry adoptees is emerging. For, while adoptees do indeed have ‘shared histories and shared experiences’ (Walton 2009b:216), their experiences are also ‘fractured, diverse and deterritorialized’ (Kim 2003:61).

Empirical evidence for the diversity of meaning-making in relation to intercountry adoption is increasingly surfacing in the literature (Gray 2007; Kim, Suyemoto & Turner 2010; Lindgren & Zetterqvist Nelson 2014; Walton 2009a). Lindgren and Zetterqvist Nelson’s (2014) study examined narratives generated by 22 Swedish intercountry adoptees in relation to ‘background’, ‘origin’ and ‘roots’. They discerned that their participants attributed varying significance to collective (wide) aspects of their birth country, such as nation and culture, and to personal (narrow) sites and people in their birth country, such as a relative or orphanage. The authors therefore argue for a need to ‘discuss what is common, without losing sight of the individual’, acknowledging that ‘intercountry adoption is a complex web of relations and . . . it is an open question what it will mean to the individual’ (2014:552). Meanwhile, Kim et al. (2010) explored how experiencing a sense of belonging and/or exclusion from White European Americans and Korean Americans affected the racial and ethnic identities of Korean transracial adoptees in America. They identified both individual and relational aspects of identity construction, finding that some participants negotiated identity ‘with disregard or separation from social meanings’



while others appeared more strongly affected by relational and socially-mediated discourses and experiences (Kim et al. 2010:184). The research demonstrates that there is a persistent tension between individual and social meaning-making in these findings, pointing to the vastly different ways in which intercountry adoptees may make sense of their own highly personal – yet inescapably situated – life stories.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has considered some of the key conceptual and empirical themes relevant to intercountry adoptees' 'cultural identities'. It commenced by explicating the terms 'race' and ethnicity, before drawing on a variety of postmodern perspectives to clarify the conceptual understanding of cultural identity that underpins this original project. Part 1 established that cultural identity: is a social identity; relates to a sense of belonging; and is dynamic and multifaceted. Part 2 considered some of the major threads apparent in the body of work that discusses intercountry adoptees' cultural, ethnic and/or racial identities. The extant literature demonstrates that, although intercountry adoptees overwhelmingly tend to identify with the 'race' and culture of their adoptive parents during childhood, their adolescence or early adulthood brings with it racialising social interactions that can destabilise – however briefly – their self-concepts. These experiences of dissonance and difference underscore many adoptees' efforts to (re)connect with their countries of birth, wherein they may use a variety of strategies that can be at odds with the ways official discourses in their birth and adoptive countries position their identities and notions of belonging. The concept of hybridity, which has been mobilised to highlight the flexible and expansive possibilities for adoptee identity, was also examined. Finally, the diversity apparent in meaning-making about identity as an adopted person was foregrounded as a guiding consideration for this research. The next chapter explains the methodology that was applied to further illuminate this diversity.

## CHAPTER 4 – METHODOLOGY

### A qualitative, inter-subjective project

This project sits within a qualitative, interpretive paradigm. Generally, research that aligns with this perspective rejects the positivist assertion that ‘objects in the world have meaning prior to, and independently of, any consciousness of them’ (Crotty 1998:77). Instead, qualitative studies privilege the subjective point of view of social actors (Bryman 1984), seeking to examine and articulate ‘personal stories and the ways in which they intersect’ (Glesne & Peshkin 1992:1). As such, qualitative data yields motifs, themes, interpretations and distinctions concerned with complex and contextualised social phenomena (Neuman 2006:157). This in turn enables rich, detailed accounts of behaviours, experiences, relationships and situations.

Qualitative research tends to be oriented towards a relativist ontology (Crotty 1998). Ontology is concerned with ‘what exists, or with the fundamental nature of reality’ (Neuman 2011:92). A relativist ontology describes reality as ‘relative to our specific cultural and social frames of reference . . . the product of people engaging with each other’ (King & Horrocks 2010:9). Therefore, from a relativist standpoint, ‘reality’ is subjective and open to interpretation, which underpins facilitating a deep, detailed examination of social life that embraces and explores idiosyncrasies and complexities (Myers 2000).

Epistemology, on the other hand, is concerned with *how* we form knowledge about reality and social life. Put simply, it is a theory of knowledge concerned with ‘*how we know what we know*’ (Crotty 1998:8, emphasis in original). Epistemology is central to research endeavours, as it provides a philosophical justification for the kinds of knowledge that are possible and how the adequacy and legitimacy of such knowledge may be judged (Maynard 1994 in Crotty 1998:8). In the qualitative paradigm, epistemologies are frequently espoused as either *constructionist* or *constructivist*. Crotty argues that the former is appropriate for explicating ‘the collective generation [and transmission] of meaning’, while the latter is best applied to ‘the meaning-making activity of the individual mind’ (1998:58). He further explains this core difference between constructionism and constructivism in his assertion that:

Constructivism . . . points up the unique experience of each of us. It suggests that each one’s way of making sense of the world is as valid and worthy of respect as any other . . . On the other hand, social constructionism emphasises the hold our culture has on us: it shapes the way in which we see things (even the way we feel things!) and gives us a quite definite view of the world. (1998:58)

McNamee notes that this distinction can be seen as a competing focus on the ‘internal, cognitive processes of individuals’ on the one hand, or upon ‘discourse and the joint (social) activities that transpire between people’ on the other (2004:37). Constructivism and constructionism are therefore sometimes viewed as occupying opposite ends of a spectrum that traverses individual/intrapersonal and social/interpersonal meaning-making (Smith & Sparkes 2008).

However, locating constructivism and constructionism as *opposing* stances on a spectrum of individual and social meaning-making is an oversimplification (McNamee 2004). There are numerous recognised strands and classifications within each umbrella term, such as Piagetian constructivism (Piaget 1969), Vygotskian social constructivism (Vygotsky 1978), radical constructivism (von Glaserfeld 1993), Guba and Lincoln’s (1994) social constructivism, ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ constructionism (Lee 2012), and social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann 1966). Furthermore, each recognised strand has seemingly innumerable interpretations and applications in the literature<sup>44</sup> (Smith & Sparkes 2008).

In order to make sense of this convoluted landscape, Smith and Sparkes (2008) provide a useful account of constructivist/constructionist perspectives in narrative research, outlining a typology for theorising narrative identity that draws, to varying degrees, on constructivist and constructionist principles. Their framework includes five approaches: psychosocial, inter-subjective, storied, dialogic, and performative. These perspectives range from ‘a “thick individual” *and* “thin social relational” emphasis at one end, and a “thin individual” *and* “thick social relational” focus at the other’ (Smith & Sparkes 2008:7, emphasis in original).

The *inter-subjective* perspective resonates most strongly with the philosophical aims underpinning this inquiry. Smith and Sparkes (2008) align an inter-subjective approach to identity with Mead’s (1934) symbolic interactionism, and Ezzy (1998) and Bruner’s (1986, 1990, 2002) theorisations about identity and narrative. Common to these approaches are balanced considerations of individual/private and social/relational sensemaking, where they ‘meet midway’ in the ongoing construction of identities (Smith & Sparkes 2008:16). An individual is therefore both ‘a source of identity *and* a carrier of culture’ (Smith & Sparkes 2008:14, emphasis added), rather than being

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<sup>44</sup> Some sources also use the terms constructionism and constructivism interchangeably, or without clarification about which type or subset of constructionist/constructivist philosophy is being referred to (Elliot 2005; Gray 2014; Hollingsworth & Dybdahl 2007; Snape & Spencer 2003).

predominantly one or the other<sup>45</sup>.

Thus, instead of embracing a ‘constructivist’ or ‘constructionist’ epistemology, this research adheres to an *inter-subjective* perspective, recognising the mutual and co-existing impacts of individual and social contexts on meaning-making and identity (Fox 2001:30). Individual and societal determinism is thereby avoided (Moen 2006:4), generating a space for inquiry that values the unique interpretive processes of the researcher and participants, *along with* the sociocultural discourses that frame and inform them. These interpretive processes are expressed through narrative.

## Narrative inquiry

Telling the stories of our lives is so basic to our nature that we are largely unaware of its importance. We think in story form, and bring meaning to our lives through stories. People everywhere are telling stories about some pieces of their lives to friends and strangers alike. (Atkinson 2002:121)

Narrative research has risen in popularity in the social sciences since the mid-1980s (Bochner 2012; King & Horrocks 2010). With roots in literary studies, hermeneutics and phenomenology, contemporary narrative research now spans a diverse range of disciplines, including education, psychology, anthropology, communication, creative arts, history and linguistics<sup>46</sup> (Connelly & Clandinin 1990; King & Horrocks 2010; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber 1998). Researchers across these disciplines construct, use and analyse narrative materials in wide ranging forms, including diaries, autobiographies, letters, everyday conversations, interviews, ethnographic fieldnotes, visual images, film, poetry, personal possessions, and documents such as newsletters or archival records (Bloor & Wood 2006; Clandinin & Huber 2010; Connelly & Clandinin 1990; Lieblich et al. 1998; Plummer 2001). More recently, ‘digital storytelling forms’ such as email,

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<sup>45</sup> This perspective can be most clearly contrasted with the strongly individualistic *psychosocial* perspective, which bears many similarities to the constructivist stance outlined above, and the strongly social *performative* perspective. This latter approach, which argues that identity is performed or ‘done’ within interactions and relationships (Smith & Sparkes 2008), has gained considerable currency in contemporary narrative research, espoused by scholars such as Gergen (1999, 2001), Bamberg (2006), Wetherell (1998), Georgakopoulou (2006a, 2006b) and Mishler (1999).

<sup>46</sup> There is considerable variation in the methodologies, philosophies, and analytical foci employed by narrative researchers. While it is outside the scope of this project to fully explore the variations of narrative inquiry, Smith and Sparkes’ (2008) typology regarding narrative identity, and Gregg (2011) and Helsig’s (2010) commentaries on ‘big’ and ‘small’ story narrative research, provide useful introductions to key tensions and debates in the broader contemporary landscape of narrative research.

online journals, blogs, discussion forums and social network sites have also been recognised as rich sources of narratives<sup>47</sup> (Page 2010; Thompson 2012).

Narrative inquirers study human experience and its interpretation in stories (Clandinin & Rosiek 2007:37). Narrative research developed in response to positivism's inability to describe the richness and complexity of lived experience (Byrne 2017; Riessman 1993). At the heart of narrative approaches are the assumptions that 'humans are storytellers' and stories 'give meaning and structure to our lives' (Lannamann & McNamee 2011:383). Stories unify and organise experience, bringing causality, temporality, continuity, characters and themes to otherwise disconnected events and circumstances (Ezzy 1998; King & Horrocks 2010). Hence, it is *through storytelling* that human experience is made meaningful (Lannamann & McNamee 2011; Lieblich et al. 1998).

Storytelling is thereby 'a process of sensemaking' through which human beings come to understand themselves and their life worlds (Brinkerhoff 2009:39). Identities are constructed and articulated through stories – both those that we tell ourselves, and those that we tell others. Identity is, as Shamir and Eilam argue, 'a story created, told, revised and retold throughout life' (2005:402). As such, narrative inquiry is frequently espoused as highly suitable for research concerning identity formation (Brinkerhoff 2009; Chaitin 2004; James 2007; Riessman 1993). Moreover, a balance between both social and individual frames of meaning can be sought, because:

Beginning with a respect for ordinary lived experience, the focus of narrative inquiry is not only a valorizing of individuals' experience but also an exploration of the social, cultural, and institutional narratives within which individuals' experiences were constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted – but in a way that begins and ends that inquiry in the storied lives of the people involved. (Clandinin & Rosiek 2007:42)

From an inter-subjective perspective, it is therefore argued that this kind of phenomenologically contextualised narrative research is a highly suitable approach for facilitating sensemaking about self, others, past, present and future.

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<sup>47</sup> The terms 'narrative' and 'story' are often used interchangeably in both academic and popular discourse. However, some scholars point out that these concepts are not one and the same (Clandinin & Connelly 1998; Frank 2000; Riessman 2008; Riessman & Speedy 2007; Riley & Hawe 2005). Riessman and Speedy note that while 'everyone has his or her story . . . [missing] for the narrative scholar is analytic attention to how the facts got assembled *that way*' (2007:429, emphasis in original). Meanwhile, Clandinin and Connelly (1998) argue that the phenomenon is 'story' while the inquiry is 'narrative'. The 'narrative' in narrative inquiry therefore indicates an analytic dimension to a story, whereby stories do not stand unexamined but require 'excavation or interpretation' in the pursuit of meaning (Riessman & Speedy 2007:429). However, as Riessman (2008) does, I will at times in this thesis refer interchangeably to 'narratives' and 'stories'. For, narratives emerge from stories, and participants in this research (including myself as autoethnographer) have told stories examined as narrative data.

## *Narratives and ‘truth’*

The telling of stories rests firmly upon interpretive endeavours shaped by attendant sociocultural and temporal contexts. Eastmond positions these interpretive processes across four ‘levels’ of socioculturally-situated experience and analysis:

[Analytically], we need to distinguish between *life as lived*, the flow of events that touch on a person’s life; *life as experienced*, how the person perceives and ascribes meaning to what happens, drawing on previous experience and cultural repertoires; and *life as told*, how experience is framed and articulated in a particular context and to a particular audience (Bruner 1986) . . . We need to add a fourth level, *life as text*, the researcher’s interpretation and representation of the story. The nature of the enquiry as well as the personal experience and cultural assumptions of the researcher are all filters through which the story is sifted and represented as text. (2007:249, emphasis in original)

These insights lead to the realisation that self-narratives – ‘life as told’ – are selective, edited versions of a person’s experiences crafted according to the immediate context in which they are communicated. As Josselson recognises, any narrative is ‘a particular construction of events created in a particular setting, for a particular audience, for particular purposes, to create a certain point of view’ (2011:226). In the telling of a narrative, therefore, individual preferences and decision-making intersect with sociocultural norms, expectations and discourses specific to a particular situation, time and place to produce a subjective account of one’s life experiences (Benwell & Stokoe 2006; Dhunpath 2000; Schrifin 1996).

Furthermore, these socially and temporally situated stories undergo additional interpretation and transformation when a researcher translates the teller’s story into ‘life as text’. There is consequently a process of ‘mutual storytelling’ at play in narrative methodologies, as both participant and researcher *together* construct and reconstruct research stories (Connelly & Clandinin 1990:4,5). Hence narrativised accounts are highly subjective and *multi-voiced*, produced through encounters between researchers and participants acting within particular sociocultural and institutional contexts, with specific desires and aims (Goode 2018; Moen 2006). Understood in this way, narratives are subjective constructions that ‘sit at the intersection of history, biography, and society’ (Liamputtong & Ezzy 2005:132).

It follows, then – in line with the ontological and epistemological principles outlined earlier – that the ‘findings’ presented in this research *cannot be read as Truth*. For, singular, objective Truth is not the ontological focus of this research; instead, ‘narrative truth’ is privileged over ‘historical truth’ (Polkinghorne 2007:479; Spence 1982). The primary concern has not been the verification of facts, but the generation of situated constructions of adoptees’ meaning-making about

themselves and others. Just as the study participants made instinctive, subconscious or deliberate decisions about ‘the story’ to tell in our interviews, I too have made instinctive, subconscious or deliberate decisions about how to interpret and present their stories. So the final textual presentation of the adoptees’ narratives is infused as much with *my* voice as it is with their own. Byrne further identifies a fifth level of interpretation inherent in narrative research: that of reader-response to a text, whereby they too become ‘co-collaborators in the production of a text’s meaning’ (2017:48). Consequently, these subjective, multilayered narrativisations are far from revelations of singular, objective Truth, for ‘narratives do not transparently reflect experience, rather they give meaning to it’ (Elliott 2005:24). This original project has applied two variants of narrative research, biographical-narrative interviewing and autoethnography. The following discussion describes the tenets, execution, and limitations of these valuable methods.

## **Biographical-narrative interviews**

At the outset of each interview, participants were asked to tell storied accounts of whole lives – biographies, or life stories<sup>48</sup> – rather than isolated stories of incidents. This approach follows the work of scholars such as Rosenthal (1993, 2004), McAdams (1985, 2011), Atkinson (1998, 2002), Wengraf (2001) and, in relation to intercountry and/or transracial adoptees, Park Nelson (2016), Cherot (2009) and Patel (2005). Rosenthal defines narrated life stories as ‘the biographer’s overall construction of his or her past and anticipated life, in which biographically relevant experiences are linked up in a temporally and thematically consistent pattern’ (1993:62). Hence life stories involve the subjective selection of events, relationships and actions that are personally significant and meaningful to the narrator within the context of a life course, and the weaving together of these aspects of experience into a thematically coherent narrative. This narrative can then be interpreted further to generate insights into the narrator’s situated understanding of self and others.

This project specifically utilised Rosenthal’s (2004) biographical-narrative interview. This strategy elicits a period of uninterrupted narration, followed by a questioning phase (Rosenthal

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<sup>48</sup> The difference between life *stories* and life *histories* is contentious, and definitions are inconsistent across the literature. For some, like Atkinson (2002), there is very little difference. However, other scholars use *story* to refer to the narrated life and *history* to refer to the life as experienced (Rosenthal 2004). Still others infer that *story* implies a fictional dimension or a creative telling, while *history* implies a factual account (Patel 2005; Miller 2000; Titon 1980). Goodson (2001) emphasises that a life story is told by an informant, while life histories involve another interpretive layer whereby a researcher locates the life story within a historical context. Although this research maintains that the sociocultural context of the interviewees’ stories is indeed critical, at its core the data collection undertaken involved eliciting ‘the story a person chooses to tell about the life he or she has lived’ (Atkinson 2002:125). Therefore, the term *life story* is used to describe the accounts the participants provided during their interviews.

2004). The main narration is prompted by a Single Question aimed at Inducing Narrative (SQUIN):

I would like you to tell me your life story, all the events and experiences which were important for you. Start wherever you like. Please take the time you need. I'll listen first, I won't interrupt, I'll just take some notes for afterwards. (Wengraf 2001:119)

The researcher should avoid intervening in the interviewee's subsequent narrative, and instead allow the respondent to relay events, experiences and relationships as they choose. The questioning phase that follows includes both internal narrative questions aimed at clarifying topics raised by the interviewee, and external narrative questions that allow the researcher to consider additional, unexplored themes (Goode 2018; Rosenthal 2004). A central theoretical principle underlying biographical-narrative interviewing is 'that there is a "gestalt" (a whole which is more than the sum of its parts; an order or hidden agenda) informing each person's life' (Hollway & Jefferson 1997:60).

### ***Advantages of biographical-narrative interviews***

There were several reasons for engaging in this kind of life story interview rather than a more traditionally structured or semi-structured interview. Firstly, biographical-narrative interviewing seeks to provide a space within which participants can, to a greater degree than in more structured methods, tell the story that *they* want to tell about their lives without much direction from the researcher. Previous research has highlighted that adoptees tend to be pathologised in academic, institutional and public discourse, with a focus on the 'adoptee condition' of being 'victims' who suffer lifelong identity crises (Gray 2007). However, the experiences of those who have been adopted from overseas are diverse and multifaceted; members of this social group are in fact 'more than . . . adoptees' (Walton 2009a:217), and adult adoptees have expressed dissatisfaction at being persistently 'spoken for' by adoptive parents, social workers and policy-makers (Goode 2018; Oparah et al. 2006; Walton 2012). With this in mind, the method of biographical-narrative interviewing was selected to allow participants greater agency and control over what to include, omit or emphasise in their stories.

This method thereby allowed for the *relative* importance of particular aspects of participants' identities to emerge. Specifically, it was anticipated that interviewees' choices about whether to highlight or omit mentions of their cultural or adoptive backgrounds would also reveal how significant those facets of their identities were to *them* in their overall life stories. Through the



unstructured approach of biographical-narrative interviewing, researchers are better able to ascertain:

what [participants] experienced, what meaning they gave their actions at the time, what meaning they assign today, and in what biographically constituted context they place their experiences . . . In order to be able to understand and explain the statements of an interviewee/biographer about particular topics and experiences in his/her past it is necessary to interpret them as part of the *overall context of his/her current life* and his/her resulting present and future perspective. (Rosenthal 2004:49–50, emphasis in original)

For example, it is potentially meaningful if a participant does not mention adoption or ‘race’ in their initial narrative, and only speaks about these themes after prompting from the interviewer. Upon further questioning and analysis this could reveal that in fact adoption and ‘race’ are not very important at all to certain interviewees within the context of their life story; conversely, their initial silence on a subject could expose how deeply personal or even traumatic an aspect of their life is. In these ways silence, as well as disclosure, was treated as potentially valuable research data.

Finally, biographical-narrative interviewing enables the emergence of rich, detailed data that captures the *process* of identity construction (Ghorashi 2007; Goode 2018). The undirected, open-ended format enables interviewees to maintain a ‘reflective gaze’ on their overall lives (Polkinghorne 2007:481), wherein they are allowed ‘sufficient time and space to make their own connections’ (King & Horrocks 2010:220). As respondents organise their experiences into a personally meaningful sequence, the choices and decisions they have made at particular points in their lives, and the impacts of those decisions, can also be more clearly revealed (Corbally & O’Neill 2014:35). This enables the researcher ‘to reconstruct social phenomena in the process of becoming’ (Rosenthal 2004:50). Thus, in a life story, motivations, decision-making processes and turning points become apparent, as do changes over time in terms of how a person views themselves, others, and the environments they live in and interact with. In sum, the technique of biographical-narrative interviewing was mobilised to enable deep, contextualised understandings of *how* and *why* participants came to view themselves, others, and their adoption in the ways that they did. I recruited, interviewed and listened to participants with these principles and advantages in mind.

### ***Sample size and generalisability***

Nine interviewees and myself (as autoethnographer) constitute the sample population for this narrative data collection. Yet given the project’s intent, the findings are not particularly scalable

to a larger population of Australian intercountry adoptees. Autoethnography, biographical research and other forms of qualitative inquiry drawing upon small samples are often criticised for lacking generalisability, and therefore validity (Merrill & West 2009:104). However, various reasons have supported the decision to limit participant numbers in this original study.

Erben argues that ‘the size of an interview sample should be . . . dictated by the purpose for which the research is carried out’ (1998 in Merrill & West 2009:104). This research’s fundamental concern has been to illuminate complexity and diversity (alongside common threads) in the experiences and perspectives of intercountry adoptees in Australia. While a larger study sample may have provided more examples of this diversity, it is equally telling that this sample size surfaces many divergences and contrasts. In other words, each story told for this thesis (including mine) is very unique. I argue here that this distinctiveness can be illustrated more clearly through an in-depth focus on a modest number of cases. For as Josselson contends:

The aim of narrative research is not to generalize—one cannot offer generalizations based on small samples that are not gathered to be representative. Instead, narrative research offers the possibility of exploring *nuances* and *interrelationships* among aspects of experience that the reader might apply to better understand other related situations. Narrative research explicates *layers of meaning* and the intersection of internal psychological mechanisms. (2011:238–239, emphasis added)

I consider that these nuances, interrelationships and layers of meaning – what Stahlke Wall calls the ‘small spaces where understanding has not yet reached’ (2016:7) – have been more appropriately explored through careful analysis of a small number of detailed narratives. Hence the issue is not whether the sample is adequately large enough to be representative or generalisable, but whether the life narratives collected are indeed sufficiently ‘information-rich . . . [providing] substantial material from which to weave a better understanding of important issues’ (Merrill & West 2009:104).

Although I did originally intend to interview a larger number of participants, after the first round of interviews I found myself ‘drowning’ in data, struggling to make sense of the nuances, connections and disconnections in participants’ stories. Gathering *more* data to interpret seemed unnecessary, and counterproductive to my research aims. I also began to feel a strong sense of responsibility to honour the abundant detail of those adoptees’ stories which had already been very generously and vulnerably shared. I was aware too that gathering *more* stories meant that the analysis and writing space I could apply to those already collected, would be further diminished. Creswell asserts that ‘a few individuals or a few cases’ can be sufficient for qualitative studies

such as this (2012:209), and I indeed found that ten participants (myself included) was a methodologically rigorous sample.

## **Participant recruitment**

Ethics approval was granted from the University of Newcastle's Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC)<sup>49</sup>. This approval allowed me to recruit participants aged 18 years or older who were adopted to Australia from overseas countries. As I was already a member of several adoptee Facebook groups with substantial membership bases, I identified these as a useful starting point for recruitment. I sent private messages to the administrators of three groups aimed at: Asian adoptees worldwide; intercountry adoptees worldwide; and Korean adoptees in Australia. Following approval from administrators of two groups, I posted study invitations on the group pages. These invitations introduced me as a Korean-Australian adoptee, relayed that I was seeking interviewees for research into the identities and life stories of adult Australian intercountry adoptees, and provided a copy of the HREC-approved Information Statement and Consent Form, along with instructions for contacting myself and/or the principal PhD supervisor (see Appendices). This strategy resulted in nine participants who were interviewed between September 2016 and September 2017.

Participants ranged in age from their mid-twenties to their early forties. This sample included seven females, one male, and one non-binary participant, who were all under seven months of age when they were adopted. Email interviews with two participants, Sam and Tahlee<sup>50</sup>, stretched asynchronously over extended periods of four and 12 months respectively. Other participants were interviewed twice by phone, Skype and/or in person (with the exception of Jacqui, who only participated in one interview). Some interviewees also provided consent for me to use other forms of data, such as social media posts, personal emails, articles they had written for websites or anthologies, and video recordings, which they directed me towards or provided copies of (see Table 1 below).

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<sup>49</sup> Approval was granted on 19 April 2016, reference number H-2016-0014.

<sup>50</sup> All participants were given pseudonyms; some interviewees elected to choose their own, while others elected for the researcher to allocate one.

Name	Gender	Age <sup>51</sup>	Country of birth	Year of adoption	Interview method	Other data
Adam	M	24	Sri Lanka	1992	Phone	n/a
Alice	F	32	South Korea	1984	Phone	Facebook posts
Chloe	F	28	South Korea	1988	Face-to-face/Skype	n/a
Ellen	F	32	South Korea	1984	Skype	n/a
Hannah	F	38	South Korea	1978	Face-to-face	Personal emails, blog entries and photographs
Jacqui	F	41	Vietnam	1975	Phone	Raw documentary footage
Julie	F	43	Vietnam	1973	Face-to-face/phone	Published articles on websites/in anthologies
Sam	Non-binary	31	South Korea	1985	Email	n/a
Tahlee	F	30	South Korea	1987	Email	n/a

Table 1. Summary of participants

## Conducting interviews

### *Synchronous and asynchronous interview methods*

Out of the total 15 interview sessions, four were in person, six by phone, three through Skype, and two occurred asynchronously by email. Remote interview methods such as Skype, phone and email are sometimes criticised for restricting the ability of the interviewer to build rapport (and therefore trust) with participants, challenging abilities to recognise and respond to visual or affective cues (King & Horrocks 2010; Opdenakker 2006). In turn, it is argued that the richness and nuance that is possible in face-to-face interactions is compromised in other formats (King & Horrocks 2010). However, I found that the ability to nominate an interactional format that best suited personal circumstances and preferences was immensely valuable for both myself and for the interviewees. In some cases, decisions about format were dictated by geography; where participants were not located near to my city of residence, I did not have the funds to travel to meet them face-to-face. Moreover, during the time when most of the interviews were conducted, I

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<sup>51</sup> These are participants' ages at the time of our first interview exchange.

was the primary carer for an infant, restricting the ease with which I could travel. And in some cases, participants expressed a preference for a particular mode of interviewing based on logistics and convenience (for example, it was most convenient for one participant to speak by phone during a lengthy car trip). Furthermore, I was cognisant that due to the personal nature of the interview subject matter some interviewees might prefer a format that does not rely on face-to-face interaction.

In practice, the format of the interviews did not appear to significantly affect the richness of the data obtained, and instead, may have actually enhanced it. For example, two of the more detailed life narratives were elicited in a phone conversation (with Adam) and through an email exchange (with Tahlee). It is possible that in a face-to-face format Adam and Tahlee may have felt less comfortable talking for comparable periods of uninterrupted time, as this dynamic diverges from usual conversational behavior. Similarly, Ellen spoke over Skype about very personal and emotional subject matter, such as childhood abuse, mental health, and the death of her adoptive mother. Given the highly sensitive nature of some of these disclosures, it is possible that the lack of physical proximity may have made these topics easier to speak freely about.

Nonetheless, it is important to note some differences between the synchronous (real time interaction) and asynchronous (delayed interaction) methods used in this project. In the former, interaction was spontaneous and followed a ‘flow’ that was arguably more ‘natural’ and therefore more conducive to eliciting rich and authentic data (Bampton & Cowton 2002; Opdenakker 2006). However, in an email format both interviewer and interviewee were able to reflect on their questions and answers respectively between interactions, and to craft text that communicated more precisely what they wished to say, or incorporated information that they might have forgotten or overlooked during a real-time exchange (Bampton & Cowton 2002). There were therefore both advantages and disadvantages to both modes of communication.

### ***A note on insider research***

It is important to acknowledge that my status of insider-researcher also brought with it several advantages and disadvantages. As Greene explains, as an insider-researcher ‘I hold prior knowledge and understandings of the group I wish to study, and am also a member of that group. I play two roles simultaneously: that of researcher and researched’ (2014:2). On account of being an intercountry adoptee myself, I was able to access the study population through my membership in adoptee-only Facebook groups. Although I cannot know this with certainty, it is reasonable to postulate that being an insider may also have enhanced the rapport, trust and reciprocity between

participants and myself, and thereby contributed towards the depth of data I was able to obtain (Blythe, Wilkes, Jackson & Halcomb 2013:8; Walton 2019).

However, this insider status also brought with it challenges and potential blindspots. For I was not *simply* an insider; my particular experiences placed me in various positions of similarity *and* difference with participants. For example, I: was adopted into a loving family; had limited exposure to overt racism despite an upbringing in a mostly Anglo-Australian community; have access to a file that contains some information about my birth parents and the circumstances surrounding my birth; had very little exposure to Korean culture or conversations about adoption as a child; had the desire and opportunity to spend extended time in my birth country as an adult; have commenced an unsuccessful search for my biological family; and am a member of one of the oldest, largest and most active international adoptee cohorts (Korean adoptees). Meanwhile, some of the participants in this research: experienced abuse in their adoptive homes; have fractured relationships with their adoptive families; have experienced overt racism; have no or very little information about their origins; do not strongly desire to visit their birth countries or find their birth families; were adopted from countries other than South Korea; and/or have found and reconnected with biological relatives. I was thus both an insider and outsider in a multitude of ways, a complicated status that meant that I needed to ‘be wary of projecting [my] own views onto participants, or the data analysis’ (Greene 2014:4). In other words, I had to make efforts not to *presume* to understand a participant’s intended meaning, but to seek clarification and detail, and to consider *various potential interpretations* that may or may not resonate with my own experiences, desires, or my prior understanding of what it means to be an adoptee. Recognition of these and other challenges prompted me to employ particular strategies in the data collection and analysis phases.

### ***During the interviews***

All interviews commenced with a SQUIN. However, the ‘script’ varied slightly from case to case, as I wanted to be as natural as possible and to follow participants’ prompts about their preferences. (For example, one participant expressed a preference for responding to interview questions rather than telling their life story in an extended narration; in that case the SQUIN was revised to ask a narrower question about how they might *start* their life story.) In general, however, I provided a snapshot of my background as an intercountry adoptee and a researcher,

asked participants whether they had any questions about the research<sup>52</sup>, obtained verbal consent to conduct and record the interview where applicable<sup>53</sup>, and then asked the SQUIN. Synchronous interviews generally began as follows:

*There are two interview phases. The first asks you to tell your life story in your own words. The reason for starting with your life story is that it allows you and other participants to, in the first instance, talk about what you feel has been important to you, rather than me as a researcher making assumptions or restricting what you should say.*

*And then, perhaps in a second interview if that works for you, I'm hoping to do a more traditional interview asking some follow-up questions about your life story and my specific research interests, within the context of your own words about your life.*

*So, to start, I'm wondering if you can tell me your life story; all the events and experiences that have been important to you and have contributed to where and who you are today. Please take all the time you need and start wherever you like. I'll try to just listen and not interrupt, and take a few notes. So, if that sounds alright, go ahead when you're ready.*

The interviews ranged from around 40 minutes to over two hours. Some participants provided lengthy life stories, meaning that most of the follow-up questions occurred in their second interview, while others told brief narratives, leading to further questions earlier in the interview exchange. The two email interviews conducted asynchronously began with a SQUIN similar to the one above. I also explained that the remainder of the interview would be conducted over a series of email exchanges, rather than over two discrete interview sessions.

Follow-up questions were informed by Rosenthal's (2004) principles of biographical-narrative interviewing, techniques from McAdams' (1993) life story interview, and Hollway and Jefferson's (1997, 2000) free association approach to narrative interviewing<sup>54</sup>. Rosenthal (2004) suggests focusing firstly on *internal* narrative questions regarding topics, themes and events that the interviewee surfaces in their initial life narrative, before moving to *external* narrative questions specifically relating to topics of interest to the interviewer. This provided a strategy for respecting and clarifying the stories that participants chose to tell in the first instance, *and* ensuring that topics of interest to the project could be discussed. When asking these follow up

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<sup>52</sup> All participants indicated that they were satisfied with the content of the Information Statement and had no questions at the start of the interview.

<sup>53</sup> Some participants provided signed consent forms. In other cases, in line with the approach approved by the ethics committee, I read the consent form to participants and they verbally agreed to participate and to be audio recorded for the purposes of this research.

<sup>54</sup> I was, however, principally guided by the desire to build and maintain rapport with the interviewees, and to respect any cues about comfort, discomfort or preferred topics of discussion. Thus, these principles served as a guide only and I adjusted the questions according to the 'feel' and 'flow' of each interview.

questions I drew upon Hollway and Jefferson's (2000) principles (derived from Rosenthal's work) for narrative interviewing. Specifically, where possible I sought to: use open-ended questions that allowed interviewees to draw on their own 'meaning-frames' without imposing my own interpretations or judgments<sup>55</sup>; elicit *stories* by asking about events, times or situations; avoid 'why' questions that might prompt answers disconnected from concrete experiences; and use interviewees' ordering and phrasing in follow-up questions, thereby respecting and retaining their meaning-frames (Hollway & Jefferson 2000:36). As an example of how I drew upon these collective techniques, I would ask questions such as: "You mentioned x (using a participant's own phrasing). Can you describe when you first started feeling this way, and how these feelings have changed over time?" I also drew upon McAdams' (1993) concept of 'nuclear episodes' to gain further insight into participants' life stories. McAdams argues that nuclear episodes are key events in a person's life story that are typically vivid and revealing, providing 'invaluable information about dominant themes in [one's] personal myth' (1993:259). Thus, after their initial life story narration I asked some participants to nominate and describe the high point and the low point in their lives, as well as any significant turning points or strong memories about particular events<sup>56</sup>. After each interview session was completed, audio recordings were transcribed for analysis<sup>57</sup>.

Between the first and second interviews I listened to participants' recorded interviews, read the transcripts, and began to interpret their life stories according to the themes, events and feelings they had foregrounded in their initial narratives. For email participants, these reflections occurred after they provided their initial life story, and after each subsequent set of email responses<sup>58</sup>. I also considered other sources of data that participants had provided separate to the interviews (see Table 1). Reading the interview transcripts in light of this additional data – including social media posts, published articles, and personal emails – enabled me to verify the timing and significance of particular events, and to form a clearer understanding of the perceptions and feelings that participants alluded to throughout their interviews.

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<sup>55</sup> This technique was particularly difficult to execute 'in the moment' of the interviews. Phrases used by interviewees such as "I hope that answers your question" or "I don't know if that makes sense" revealed some natural concerns over whether they were providing useful data, which I wanted to affirm and provide reassurance about. At times I felt compelled to explain my viewpoint or to be more specific with my questions so as to be less opaque, more naturally conversational, and to offer guidance to help participants feel assured that they were indeed providing very useful answers.

<sup>56</sup> In order to leave scope for more focused internal and external questions, I chose not to focus on the rest of McAdams' suggested questions, which ask interviewees to consider their earliest memory, important childhood, adolescent and adult memories, and any other important memories that stand out to them (1993:258–259).

<sup>57</sup> While the interview strategy and data analysis are described separately here, in practice they occurred as overlapping, iterative processes.

<sup>58</sup> Following the initial life story response, I asked two to three questions per email over three or four subsequent emails. This strategy avoided overloading the participants with onerous writing tasks.



The second interviews/subsequent email exchanges therefore had at least two purposes: to clarify or augment the richness of the data by asking follow-up internal and external narrative questions; and, to ‘reflect back’ meanings I had ascertained from our prior interactions. This provided participants with opportunities to agree, disagree, or reframe my interpretations. I sought to continue this ‘feedback loop’ by offering to send interviewees their transcripts for review and advising that they were free to amend, omit or add to their transcripts. Although some participants chose not to receive their transcripts and no participants opted to revise them, the opportunity to provide feedback was an important component of my interviewing strategy for ethical and methodological reasons outlined further on.

### **Analysing and ‘writing up’ interview data**

I briefly considered analysing the data according to Rosenthal’s (2004) framework for biographical research (also known as the biographic-narrative-interpretive method (BNIM); see Wengraf 2001:231–300). However, I concluded that this analytical method, while congruent with the interviewing style, was too detailed and strongly focused on the individual to suit the aims and epistemological underpinnings of this project<sup>59</sup>. Instead, I sought to not only interpret *each* case, but to also identify links, disjunctures and resonances *across* the dataset. Additionally, my doctoral supervisors and I are most familiar with more traditional styles of thematic analysis, meaning that collectively and instinctively I was drawn towards studying the participants’ responses with a view to identifying themes, sub-themes and codes within and across the various stories. Hence, after some deliberation, I fashioned my analytical approach principally around Fraser’s (2004) framework for narrative analysis, while integrating concepts discussed in Braun and Clarke’s (2006) seminal text on thematic analysis, and the concept of gestalt (Hollway & Jefferson 1997; Josselson 2011). Together, this interpretive schema guided me towards an understanding of each participant’s unique narrative and perspective, while enabling me to extract connections and disconnections between the stories (including my own).

Fraser’s (2004) framework for narrative analysis includes seven ‘phases’: 1) hearing stories and experiencing each other’s emotions; 2) transcribing the material; 3) interpreting individual transcripts; 4) scanning across different domains of experience; 5) linking ‘the personal with the political’; 6) looking for commonalities and differences among participants; and 7) writing

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<sup>59</sup> According to Wengraf (2001:234), the BNIM involves a five-step analytical process designed to ‘reconstruct’ interrelationships between past experiences (a subject’s lived life) and present sensemaking about those experiences (the story-as-told). The timeframe required to analyse nine life stories to the depth and intricacy required by this method rendered it impractical for this project.

academic narratives about personal stories. Fraser notes that these phases are ‘overlapping and un-sequential’, more like a set of ideas from which researchers may ‘modify, reorder and/or challenge’ (2004:186). The process that unfolded during my attempts to make sense of and write about participants’ life narratives was indeed an iterative and convoluted mish-mash of phases – ‘a complex, interwoven process of analysis and writing up’ (Hunter 2010:48) that was messy and uncertain (Denzin & Lincoln 1998 in Hunter 2010:48).

Fraser’s first phase, hearing<sup>60</sup> reflects my initial process of interviewing and noting impressions<sup>61</sup>. This was my ‘first stage’ analysis, during which I asked: What were my initial impressions (‘senses’) of interviewees’ life stories? And, what were the major themes that seemed to capture the ‘gestalt’ of their narratives? Concurrently, I began Fraser’s second phase, transcribing the material, which in turn informed the simultaneous phases of looking for similarities and differences amongst participants’ accounts (Fraser’s sixth phase), while interpreting individual transcripts (Fraser’s third phase) and examining other data (Fraser’s fourth phase). Here I moved beyond ‘impressions’ and began to examine and interpret the data in more granular, systematic detail. Essentially, this analytical filtering involved many sessions of reading, listening, re-reading and re-listening, while constructing a list of codes<sup>62</sup> such as ‘adoptive family breakdown’, ‘birth family meeting’, ‘experiences of racism’, and ‘significance of having a child’. I then noted instances of each code across the participants’ narratives, which enabled me to discern the most commonly expressed ideas and experiences, and to compile salient verbatim excerpts.

Simultaneously however, I was concerned with examining each account in detail to reach a preliminary interpretation of the gestalt of each life story. Josselson argues that narrative analysis includes a “‘hermeneutic circle”, in which an understanding of the whole illuminates the parts, which in turn create the whole’ (2011:226). I felt that a full understanding of participants, their lives and their perspectives could not be achieved without analysing the ‘whole’ (the gestalt) that in turn illuminated and strengthened a grasp of the ‘parts’ that I was coding. Moreover, gaining a deep understanding of each participant’s individual narrative was integral to generating second-stage interview questions designed to check, augment and refine the continuous interpretive work.

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<sup>60</sup> In this instance, ‘hearing’ applies to both verbal and written accounts.

<sup>61</sup> After each initial interview I noted three or four (rudimentary) impressions of a participant’s told life story. I also noted impressions linked to my specific research aims, and potential questions for subsequent interview sessions.

<sup>62</sup> A code is a feature of the data, either semantic or latent, that the researcher deems of interest in relation to their investigation (Braun & Clarke 2006:88). It is a more basic unit of analysis than a theme. As analysis progresses, codes may be: grouped under themes or sub-themes; reassigned as main themes or sub-themes; or discarded (Braun & Clarke 2006:88–90).

Subsequently, I refined the themes, sub-themes and presentation of participant data by engaging in iterative, interlinked processes of integrating Fraser's final four phases: scanning across different domains of experience; linking 'the personal with the political'; looking for commonalities and differences among participants; and writing academic narratives about personal stories. In scanning across domains of experience, I looked for intrapersonal, interpersonal, cultural and structural aspects of participants' narratives, including: how participants spoke about their internal perceptions and thought processes; the significant relationships and interactions evident in their stories; the ways they referred to (or omitted) broader cultural narratives about topics such as adoption and family; and how they spoke about 'race' and national and/or cultural belonging. Additionally, I sought to link 'the personal with the political' by interrogating my own interpretive frames, considering how these might differ from those of participants, and taking in to account how both the researcher and those being researched might be constrained and/or enabled in their storytelling by dominant societal narratives and discourses.

Throughout these analytical processes – and indeed as *part* of the analytical outcomes – I experimented with different ways of presenting participants' narratives. This broadly included writing short single case narratives clustered under discrete themes, extended single case narratives focusing on interviewees' whole accounts, and thematic chapters that included multiple participants' stories in relation to broad themes. I eventually settled on a combination of these writing styles for the final textual presentations in Chapters 5, 6 and 7. These chapters also integrate some of my own experiences, collated through an autoethnographic methodology.

## **Inquiring into self: Autoethnography**

### ***Autoethnography: A contested method of study***

The term 'autoethnography' was first used by cultural anthropologist David Hayano (1979) to describe the study of one's own group (Goode 2015:123; Ellis & Bochner 2000; Reed-Danahay 1997). Autoethnography is now acknowledged as a narrative approach to self-inquiry that merges the research methodology of ethnography with the genre of autobiography (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011; Spry 2001). In other words, autoethnographers use their *own personal experiences* as data (Patton 2002), producing evocative and analytical texts that describe, illuminate and critique their life world and its context.

Autoethnographic accounts can take many forms, including short stories, poetry, photographic and visual essays, novels, brief vignettes, academic articles and personal journals, and may be highly evocative and artistic, analytical and theoretical, or any combination of these. Both mundane and extraordinary experiences and phenomena are considered, such as a father's experience of stillbirth (Weaver-Hightower 2012), the journey of completing a PhD (Stanley 2015), surviving physical assault (Schoepflin 2009), and public relations practice (James 2012). Autoethnography has also been used to explore diasporic or multi-racial articulations of identity (e.g. Choi 2012; Gatson 2003; LeMaster 2013; Young 2009). However, there are only a few instances of autoethnographic scholarship by intercountry adoptees (Anchisi 2009; Ballard 2013; Goode 2015; Malhotra 2013; Pearson 2010; Walton 2019). The approach taken in this research is therefore relatively novel, blending participant-focused narrative inquiry with autoethnography in order to explore the identity constructions of intercountry adoptees in contemporary Australia.

Autoethnography is a contentious method and methodology that has ignited considerable debate in the literature (see, for example, Anderson 2006; Ellis & Bochner 2006; Foster 2014; Holt 2003). Even among qualitative researchers there is sometimes discomfort over the perceived use of 'personal experience as a privileged source of authority, uncontrollable and therefore unamenable to others' (Ang 2001:23). Reflective of this view, Delamont has labelled autoethnography an unethical form of 'self-obsession' that lacks 'analytical mileage' and is 'intellectually lazy' (2009:58,60). However, as Wall points out, the collection and analysis of data by an objective 'outsider' does not always mean that 'better' or more 'truthful' accounts are obtained:

Sparkes (2000) related a story about the use of his published autoethnography in an undergraduate class, explaining that his students do not consider his autoethnography to be research. However, when asked whether it would be research if someone else had interviewed a man named Andrew Sparkes; collected his medical records, diary excerpts, and newspaper stories; analyzed the collection, and written it up, the class says yes. Likewise, if a researcher had interviewed me about my experiences as an adoptive mother and had recorded and transcribed it, it would have legitimacy as data despite the fact that both the interview transcript and my autoethnographic text would be based on the same set of memories. (2008:45)

I argue here that criticisms of autoethnography often overlook the onto-epistemological underpinnings of the method and its analytical, ethnographic agenda. Similarly to narrative inquirers generally, autoethnographers 'enter their texts into a dialogue about what human experience might *mean*, rather than as a claim to universal knowledge' (Poulos 2013:47, emphasis in original). Epistemologically, autoethnography privileges 'proximity' and 'insiderness' (Adams, Holman Jones & Ellis 2014), and pursues resonance and verisimilitude (Ellis et al. 2011). Therefore, a key strength of autoethnography is its ability to provide rich insight into an

experience, identity or phenomenon through intimate, ‘hidden’ data that is difficult to obtain by other methods (Adams 2012; Stanley 2015). In this way autoethnography: allows for privileged and nuanced insights into sensitive issues and otherwise private thoughts and experiences (Ngunjiri, Hernandez & Chang 2010); can reveal long-term phenomena that are difficult to expose through observation or interview techniques (Béji-Bécheur, Özçağlar-Toulouse & Zouaghi 2012); and can usefully capture both the extraordinary and the mundane (Humphreys 2005). It provides, in short, a unique window into typically private, messy and complex lived experiences and personal sensemaking (Boylorn & Orbe 2013).

Importantly, the goal of autoethnography is not *just* to tell the researcher’s story, but also to facilitate further understanding and provide a critique of wider social and cultural structures and experiences (Adams et al. 2014). The personal story is thus deployed as a window into a much larger sociocultural context, providing an exploration of how the context surrounding self has influenced and shaped a particular identity, and how the self has responded, conformed to, or resisted forces innate to the context. Autoethnography thereby functions similarly to other forms of ethnography in seeking to make aspects of a particular culture or phenomenon familiar for both insiders and outsiders (Ellis et al. 2011). Connections are made between the researcher’s experiences, wider cultural narratives, theoretical perspectives, and the experiences of others, producing an analytical account of personal experience that carries sociological significance. Various sources have thereby argued for autoethnography as an analytical, ethnographic and sociological endeavour (Anderson 2006; Ngunjiri et al. 2010; Stahlke Wall 2016), which I also support.

### ***Conducting autoethnography: Data collection, analysis and writing***

I used a range of data in order to construct the autoethnographic accounts dispersed throughout the next three chapters of this thesis. I first collected a series of personal documents that I had written in my late teens and twenties. These documents included: journal entries; emails to other adoptees; posts I had made on listservs for adoptees and adoptive parents; and a transcript of an interview I had participated in for a research project on adoption<sup>63</sup>. I also drew upon my memories, considering instances and experiences that had made impressions and stayed with me to the present day. Wall (2008) notes that memory is controversial as a source of data. However, she argues that memory is an integral part of ethnographic research, as ‘fieldwork and the

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<sup>63</sup> I will not quote directly from this transcript, as that data ‘belongs’ to the research project it was provided for; however, consulting this data enabled me to verify my recollections and informed my analysis.

resulting texts cannot be separated from the memories that shape them' (Wall 2008:45). Memories include 'impressions, scenes and experiences . . . that are far too numerous to record . . . and provide a sense of the whole that the ethnographer alone carries around in his or her head' (Wall 2008:45). This applies to autoethnographic data; my memories and impressions are a critical part of making sense of my identity and belonging over a lifetime. They augment, verify, colour and refine the body of written data I have accumulated.

Alongside these sources focused on the past, I also created a journal that I used to record and track my thoughts and impressions as they were occurring during the research process. I added comments, questions, links and article excerpts to the journal whenever I: read or watched something, either in a scholarly or public source, that resonated with me or caused me to think about my experiences in different ways; remembered something new about my past; or recognised connections or disconnections between my own story and those of my interviewees. My autoethnography was therefore profoundly affected by my research activities. Anderson argues that analytic autoethnography:

involves an awareness of reciprocal influence between ethnographers and their settings and informants. It entails self-conscious introspection guided by a desire to better understand both self and others through examining one's actions and perceptions in reference to and dialogue with those of others. (2006:382)

My dual roles as researcher *and* researched intertwined and informed each other in inextricable ways. I analysed my own data using similar techniques to those I applied in the analysis of participant data. I read and re-read the texts, noting my impressions of them. I undertook a 'thematic analysis of narrative' (Ellis 2004 in Pace 2012:8) and developed codes, themes and sub-themes, while remaining attentive to the ways my ongoing engagement with other sources may have affected these processes. I sought to define the ways I had written and thought about themes that participants had raised, such as family, adoption and cultural identity. I tried to identify how my perspectives and experiences differed to those of other participants, and to consider how they did or did not relate. And I sought to examine how I may have been, and continued to be, impacted by dominant cultural narratives about adoption, family and identity.

Initially I wrote my autoethnographic contribution to this thesis as a discrete chapter moving through these various themes. However, along the way I also became cognisant of Ellis' advice that:

an autoethnography can be evaluated by considering these questions: Is there anything new in the story? Is it complex and nuanced? Will it help others better understand their context? Does the story promote dialogue? (2000 in Wall 2012:329)

This caused me to consider not only what stood out (to me) in my narrative, but also how the themes and experiences I identified might be ‘new’, ‘nuanced’, and potentially ‘help others better understand’ their own contexts and stories, and ‘promote dialogue’. Thus, I focused in on aspects of my experience that had not been mentioned by other participants, and would therefore add additional layers of complexity to what is known and understood about intercountry adoptees, and/or experiences that I shared with others, but offered contrasting feelings or insights on. Ultimately therefore, weaving my autoethnographic contributions amongst the interviewees’ accounts emerged as a more cohesive and meaningful way of integrating my personal insights into this research.

## **Addressing criticisms and limitations of narrative inquiry**

### ***‘Truth’ and validity***

Despite burgeoning support for narrative research across a wide variety of disciplines, narrative methodologies (including autoethnography) continue to be critiqued by proponents of more traditional positivist and post-positivist inquiry paradigms (Loh 2013). Such critics position the strategies, techniques, and findings of narrative (and other qualitative) methodologies as ‘unreliable, impressionistic, and not objective’ (Denzin & Lincoln 2008:16), generating ‘free fictions’ (Davis 2002:20) that fail to illuminate ‘reality’. Polkinghorne (2007) identifies that even when a participant seeks to give accurate accounts of the meanings of their experiences, there are limits, in terms of the reflective awareness of participants *and* researchers (as co-constructors of knowledge in narrative inquiry), and to the capacity of language as a vehicle for expressing complex meaning. However, he does clarify that while these threats to the quality of a narrative inquiry cannot be eliminated entirely, ‘[the] task of the researcher is to *produce articulations that lessen the distance* between what is said by participants about their experienced meaning and the experienced meaning itself’ (Polkinghorne 2007:482, emphasis added). Likewise, Riessman contends that ‘the “historical” truth of an individual’s account is not the primary issue [in qualitative research] . . . *validation*, the process through which we make claims for the trustworthiness of our interpretations, is the critical issue’ (1993:64–65, emphasis added).

The concept of validity has long been considered a cornerstone of high-quality quantitative research (Elliott 2005). Validity may be either internal or external, the former referring to whether

the study design and execution produces results that accurately reflect the reality under investigation, and the latter being a measure of how generalisable the findings are to a broader population (Elliott 2005). Some scholars argue that the term validity has limited usefulness in qualitative research and should be replaced with broadly analogous terms specific to the interpretive paradigm (Connelly & Clandinin 1990; Lincoln & Guba 1985). However, others recognise that validity remains highly relevant for qualitative inquiry, although ‘the questions posed are different ones and relate more to the validity of representation, understanding and interpretation’ than to the issue of whether study findings reflect a ‘true’ external reality (Lewis & Ritchie 2003:273).

Given these issues, it is widely agreed that quality and validity in qualitative research rests on a study’s *trustworthiness*, namely that a study’s findings and the processes that yielded them are plausible and credible (Loh 2013; Mishler 1990; Polkinghorne 2007). Trustworthiness is established through the achievement of verisimilitude (Loh 2013) and the persuasiveness of the argument the researcher makes to support the conclusions drawn (Polkinghorne 2007). Work that achieves verisimilitude resonates with the reader or audience as an authentic and realistic rendering of an experience or phenomenon: ‘it evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible, a feeling that what has been represented could be true’ (Ellis et al. 2011, online). Meanwhile, the persuasiveness of the researcher’s conclusions is established by citing supporting evidence from participants’ accounts, and by transparently considering the biases brought to bear on the data, as well as possible alternative interpretations (Polkinghorne 2007; Riessman 1993). In sum, readers must be led through a progression of plausible and clearly articulated evidence, explanation and justification, such that they may make judgements about the validity of the study and its findings (Polkinghorne 2007).

Various strategies – threaded throughout the data collection, analytical stages and writing phases – were used in the pursuit of verisimilitude and cogency in this project. Biographical-narrative interviewing, and the ‘prolonged engagement’ with participants through several or more interactions (Lincoln & Guba 1986) has arguably enabled greater depth and detail in the data offered, aiding my analysis of what mattered to participants and how they made sense of their experiences, relationships and lives. Reflexive and iterative analytical processes further contributed towards a more robust account of their narratives. For I also realised that the narratives I was telling about them were not simple windows onto the ‘truth’ of their lives, but subjective co-constructions, informed as much by *my* interpretive frames as *their* words (see Goode 2018). One of the most critical implications of this realisation, underpinned by the ontological and epistemological stances described previously, is that I bore a responsibility to



practice reflexivity consistently throughout the project. Reflexivity involves a consistent attentiveness to the potential influence of the researcher's assumptions, values and beliefs (Creswell & Miller 2000; King & Horrocks 2010). Thus, in reflexive interpretive research, 'subjectivity is not treated as a problem to be avoided, but as a resource that can be developed in ways that can augment and intensify social research' (King & Horrocks 2010:126). Hence, throughout the research I strove to note how my background differs from, and converges with, those of participants, and to be self-aware in writing about the participants' narratives. I sought to avoid framing their stories as 'Truth' and have instead attempted to continually remind readers that I am presenting my *interpretations* of participants' actual words from a particular and subjective standpoint. I have also noted where I was uncertain of their perspective, or where their experiences did not resonate with mine<sup>64</sup>. Together, the aforementioned strategies have facilitated 'thick description' (Geertz 1973) – the telling of 'deep, dense, detailed accounts' (Denzin 1989:83) – with stronger claims to veracity and verisimilitude than may have been possible otherwise.

### **Ethics, 'truth' and honouring participants' voices**

Josselson asserts that all aspects of narrative inquiry are 'touched by the ethics of the research relationship' – the relationship between researcher and researched (2007:537). Indeed numerous ethical dilemmas, questions and ambiguities surfaced throughout this inquiry. Some of these issues arose on account of tensions between my status as an adoptee – an insider – who sought to cultivate safe interpersonal relationships with interviewees built on tenets of 'dignity, privacy and wellbeing', and simultaneously, my status as a researcher with scholarly responsibility to produce rich, illuminative and incisive data (Josselson 2007:538). During the interviews I sometimes struggled with how much to ask and probe, and how much to respect participants' space and privacy, particularly around difficult topics such as complicated family relationships. Despite best intentions I do not feel that I always got that balance right, and through no fault of the participants I sometimes left an exchange wondering if I did too much 'mining' for data (Fraser 2004:184), momentarily prioritising my scholarly desire for insight over participants' comfort or wellbeing.

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<sup>64</sup> During follow-up interviews I also undertook what Lincoln and Guba (1985) have coined 'member checking': asking the participants to consider and respond to my subjective interpretation of their accounts. This provided them with opportunities to clarify meanings that may have been misunderstood, reiterate or expand upon important issues, comment on new insights that had arisen since the interview(s), and/or confirm my interpretations. Member checking is intended to affirm the validity of research findings by ensuring that, as much as is possible, the researcher is steered away from 'easy' interpretations so that careful consideration is given to respondents' intended meanings (Manning 1997:106).

I also experienced moments of uncertainty about what to ask of participants *after* their interviews. Although I offered all interviewees the option of reviewing and amending their transcripts (including email trails), I wondered if this option was not stressed strongly enough. Perhaps some interviewees would have appreciated being encouraged to participate more actively in the construction of their written narratives. On the other hand, they may have felt ‘badgered’ or overburdened by requests to engage with the interview transcripts. I also became aware that some methodologies ask participants to review or work collaboratively with the researcher on the written text that results from being interviewed (Josselson 2007:548–549). Although I considered approaching participants about whether they would like to do this, I ultimately decided that because this request was not mentioned in the original HREC approved Participant Information Statement, it would be unethical to request more of their time or energy for this unanticipated activity. However, I then became acutely conscious of the weight of knowing that I, a novice researcher, was translating people’s intimate lives for broader (albeit academic) consumption, in ways that might not fully resonate with the informants themselves. Paraphrasing Josselson (2007:549), what if participants recognised themselves in the finished thesis (or potential publications), but did not like or agree with what I had to say about them?

These anxieties prompted a greater appreciation of the ethical and political dimensions of the research. I realised that, as Byrne identifies, ‘when we as writers create a representation of the world it is value-laden’ (2017:38). As I experimented with different ways of framing, cutting, pasting and interrelating participants’ narratives – ‘writing up’ the research text – I confronted the substantial influence I wielded over the possible ways their experiences, behaviours, values and morals could be “‘read” and understood’ by both themselves and others (Sparkes 1995:159). I was not so much ‘giving voice’ to participants as I was constructing a multi-voiced text that was, inescapably, my *interpretation* of their voices (Goode 2018). Thus the text I was crafting was not only “‘about” the participants but [also] “about” the researcher’s meaning-making’ (Josselson 2007:549), and therefore carried the potential to impact participants in uncomfortable or unfavourable ways. How then could I conduct this research ethically, beyond the procedures and checks put in place by the formal ethics approval process required by my academic institution?

Josselson (2007) and Ellis et al. (2011) offer perspectives that I found invaluable when considering this question, particularly in the analytical and writing stages of the project. Josselson contends that there is ‘no self-evident implementation’ of ethical issues in narrative research (2007:537). Instead, she posits that it is most important to maintain:

an *ethical attitude* toward narrative research, a stance that involves thinking through these matters and deciding how best to honor and protect those who participate in one’s studies while

still maintaining standards for responsible scholarship. (Josselson 2007:538, emphasis in original)

It is this *attitude*, rather than a concrete set of fixed and universal actions and processes, that I strove to mobilise in the ‘grey’ areas that caused me consternation or uncertainty. I sought to: write with respect and interpretive tentativeness (Josselson 2007:553); make explicit in this final thesis that I was *interpreting* and *co-constructing* participants’ narratives rather than merely presenting their ‘realities’; and engage in sustained reflexivity. Ultimately, then, I remained cognisant that:

an ethical attitude requires that we consider the dilemmas and contingencies rampant in this work. We can never be smug about our ethics since the ice is always thin, and there is no ethically unassailable position. (Josselson 2007:560)

This perspective caused me to shift my focus from a naïve desire to ‘give voice’ to participants, to engaging in ‘socially-just acts’ of representation (Ellis et al. 2011, online). Ellis et al. posit that ‘rather than a preoccupation with accuracy, the goal [of a researcher] is to produce analytical, accessible texts that change us and the world we live in for the better’ (2011, online). It follows that the central concern of ‘socially-just’ narrative inquiry should be ‘what narratives do, what consequences they have [and] to what uses they can be put’ (Ellis & Bochner 2000:746). I felt that within the context of my interactions and subjective interpretations, acknowledging interviewees as vital contributors to stories crafted in the sustained and situated collaboration of a research relationship was the best way that I could honour participants’ accounts (Goode 2018). Thus, maintaining an ethical mindset and pursuing the ‘socially-just’ aim of producing a final research text that seeks to contribute to the betterment of others became the driver of this inquiry.

### ***The limits of my story: Autoethnography and ethics***

During this project I became increasingly and unexpectedly aware that my autoethnographic contribution was also imbued with ethical issues. This was in some ways unexpected, as the autoethnographic portion of this research was not considered under the formal ethics approval process<sup>65</sup>. For example, I included links to counselling resources in the Participant Information Statement, recognising that adoption can be an emotionally fraught and intensely personal issue

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<sup>65</sup> Ethical guidelines and processes are typically concerned with protecting ‘the welfare and rights of participants in research’, where participants are defined as: someone who actively assists a researcher in their research by providing data; a person from whom tissue has been collected; or someone who is identified or de-identified in records, databases or unpublished human research data (University of Newcastle 2019, online). In other words, ethical approval is needed in relation to *others* – not researchers themselves.

and that some participants might wish to seek additional professional support. I had not anticipated, however, that I too would be affected by introspecting on my own journey as an intercountry adoptee. It was a profoundly destabilising endeavor to engage deeply with how my own story intersected with a range of themes implicated in international adoption, including relinquishment, institutionalisation and temporary care, exportation, assimilation, loss, grief, dislocation, family, rescue, gratitude, gifts, stigma, inequality, powerlessness, damage, sacrifice and love. It was not a pleasant experience, and many times I wondered, as other autoethnographers have done: ‘at what cost am I willing to be published about such a personal topic?’<sup>66</sup> (Chatham-Carpenter 2010, online)

I was always reticent to include autoethnography in this project; I did not feel a burning need to tell my story to a public audience (cf. Chatham-Carpenter 2010). However, I committed to it on the advice of a panel of senior academics early in my candidature. While they were very supportive and professional in their assessment of my research project proposal, I suspect that if they had realised how deeply personal and complicated intercountry adoption is, and the potential for it to be entangled with shame, loss and repression, that autoethnography would not have been suggested in such a positive and encouraging way. Introspecting on the death of a loved one or on other traumatic experiences such as abuse, serious injury or illness is widely understood to be emotionally fraught. However (as the literature discussed in Chapter 2 reveals), overseas adoption discourse is more likely to be connected with themes of rescue, luck and love, and international adoptees are so often conditioned to consider themselves fortunate, resilient and unaffected. Some indeed do feel that they are all of these things – but for others, it is much more ambiguous and complex.

Ultimately, I recognised that my story *is* unique in some ways; that it *does* conform to Ellis’ suggestions that autoethnographic research should offer something ‘new . . . complex and nuanced . . . [to] help others better understand their context . . . [or] promote dialogue’ (2000 in Wall 2012:329). So I continued introspecting and writing about this especially personal topic. After coming to terms with my reticence and taking the deep dive into my journals, emails and memories, my autoethnographic contribution is somewhat restrained, woven intermittently with other narratives, rather than (as explained earlier) presented as an evocative and complete piece. Ethics was also at the heart of this presentational choice.

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<sup>66</sup> Walton (2019:17–25) discusses in more depth the unrelenting emotional vulnerability and burden – the emotional labour – of conducting auto/ethnographic research on intercountry adoption *as an intercountry adoptee*.

Tolich asserts that: ‘The word *auto* is a misnomer. The self might be the focus of research, but the self is porous, leaking to the other without due ethical consideration’ (2010:1608, emphasis in original). There are multiple others – particularly family members – implicated in my story; I cannot separate myself from their roles and influences in my life. Whether and how to write about others in an autoethnographic account is perhaps the most widely considered ethical dilemma associated with the method (Chatham-Carpenter 2010; Ellis 2007; Stahlke Wall 2016; Tolich 2010; Wall 2008). Consent can be uncertain and sometimes completely absent when writing others into autoethnographic content; this point is particularly critical because shielding others – trying to protect anonymity by using pseudonyms or other de-identifying details – is problematic. I did not consult significant others about my autoethnography; it was a very personal undertaking that I wanted to keep as private as possible. I wrestled with how much to include and with Tolich’s assertion that, as an ethical guide: ‘The author should presume that those mentioned in the text will read it’ (2010:1606). This standpoint ultimately limited the detail I felt comfortable divulging through my autoethnographic writing. Additionally, I was conscious of the rich and valuable data other participants provided, and did not wish to ‘crowd them out’ or overshadow their perspectives. Hence the autoethnographic portions of this thesis are deliberately subtle and modest.

Finally, I was excruciatingly conscious of another aspect of writing autoethnography: that I too would be foregoing some privacy, and opening myself up to vulnerability and scrutiny. While others have ultimately – though not without some pain – considered this a gift (Adams 2012; Chatham-Carpenter 2010), I am still not sure whether this applies to me. To Vickers, writing about oneself in academic texts is like ‘writing on the edge – and without a safety net’ (2002:609). This is how autoethnography felt and feels to me, and not yet with a cathartic resolution. Autoethnography has been profoundly *unsettling* to me, not least because of the privacy that I, a very private person, have had to concede. As Stahlke Wall notes, autoethnographers become vulnerable when their private thoughts, feelings and experiences are published (however narrowly), and it is pertinent to ask: ‘How much do we want and need to put ourselves out there forever and for all?’ (2016:7). Tolich further warns that writing about intensely personal or stigmatised experiences can be especially vulnerable, as an autoethnography is ‘[like] an inked tattoo’ (2010:1605). Although this dissertation is likely to only ever reach a small audience, the thought of it doing so still stings (like getting an actual tattoo). Subsequently, I invoke my right here to guard my own privacy, and I have chosen what to write about by considering Ellis’ (2000 in Wall 2012:329) criteria, ethical principles, and my personal preferences as a naturally private person who also happens to be a transnational adoptee.

## **Conclusion**

This research is built on the understanding that narrative meaning is ‘situated, transient, partial and provisional; characterized by multiple voices, perspectives, truths and meanings’ (McCormack 2004:220). I have not pursued the Truth of participants’ lives in this inquiry – an epistemologically untenable aim – but rather, have sought to offer analytical accounts of a small but diverse sample of individual lives and experiences (including my own).

With this in mind, this thesis now turns to a discussion of participants’ and my own stories across Chapters 5 to 7. The biographical-narrative and autoethnographic data presented in these chapters illuminates some of the complexities, contradictions, commonalities and uncertainties that infuse the experiences of adult intercountry adoptees in Australia. The first of these analytical chapters, Chapter 5, explores the intricacies and unanticipated themes surfaced in two interviewees’ life narratives.

## CHAPTER 5 – ENCOUNTERING COMPLEXITY AND UNEXPECTED THEMES IN INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTEE NARRATIVES

### Introduction

This chapter presents two participants' stories in detail: first Sam's, and then Julie's<sup>67</sup>. It also includes aspects of my own story and that of another participant, Ellen. Sam and Julie's narratives both contained insights that extended beyond their individual stories to inform how I made sense of the full range of narratives in this research. Their accounts offer rich examples of the complexities of intercountry adoption, surfacing themes and experiences that have been largely overlooked in intercountry adoption scholarship both in Australia and internationally. In particular, Sam's story caused me to more clearly recognise tensions between dominant discourses of identity and individual meaning-making, and focused on issues of belonging and non-belonging in ways that diverged from other participants. Julie's story, meanwhile, foregrounded the profound impact of *family relationships* on her identity, mental health and belonging as an intercountry adoptee; her narrative also prompted me to recognise the importance of this theme across the study sample. Both Julie and Sam's stories powerfully illustrate how numerous experiential threads can intertwine to produce present-day subjectivities. For these reasons, their stories are told in a lengthier format than those of other participants, allowing for a fuller grasp of the complexity and pivotal themes in their lives and evolving identities.

### Adoption and its meanings: Sam's story

Adoption stories reveal the dis-ease of being forced to [play] a hard game of identity and difference together in the context of powerful narratives that compel us to situate ourselves in one place or another. (Yngvesson & Mahoney 2000:78)

I corresponded with Sam over email throughout late 2016 and early 2017. They<sup>68</sup> provided a life story in an initial email, and answered a series of follow-up questions about various aspects of their life and identity. At the time of their interview Sam was in the midst of exploring the meaning/s that adoption held for them – a question at the very core of this research. Sam's story

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<sup>67</sup> I must again stress that this chapter presents my *interpretation* of Sam and Julie's lives and words. This interpretation is imperfect and imbued with uneven power. I bring an outsider's perspective into their private and changing experiences of identity, belonging and family (even though I am also an insider as an intercountry adoptee). I have filtered their words through my own desires, emotions and individualised sensemaking as a cisgender, Korean Australian adoptee, and translated them for broader consumption. The resulting narratives are thereby *co-constructed* rather than revealing static or objective truths.

<sup>68</sup> Sam identifies as non-binary in relation to gender and the pronouns they/them/their have been used.

raised a number of issues that infuse all of the participants' accounts – whether they explicitly identified these in their own narratives or not. Such issues and concerns included the multilayered dimensions of identity perceptions, and how dominant discourses of identity, adoption and belonging may frame and inform, but not determine, an individual's sensemaking about adoption and self.

### ***The fact and meaning of adoption***

Sam's life story was distinct from the others in that it focused more on introspections about generalised patterns of relating to others and to societal narratives about adoption and identity, and less on specific events, interactions or relationships. Illustrative of this, Sam's factual account of their life was brief. After relaying a brief chronology of their birth in South Korea, adoption to Australia, relocation in early childhood to various cities in Asia for their father's work, and return to Australia in their late teens, Sam wrote<sup>69</sup>:

But if I think about what has been important to me in terms of “who I am today and how I see myself,” then I'm not sure those facts encapsulate what is meaningful or significant. I see myself as someone who will never feel like they truly (securely?) belong anywhere, and I think I'm okay with that. I'm empathetic and very sensitive to those around me but I struggle to understand or identify my own feelings – which may have something to do with being adopted. I've struggled with depression in the past and have always had an ambivalent relationship to my body. I'd identify as queer, and/or non-binary with regard to gender. Increasingly, I've started to question how, and in what way, being adopted is related to all of these things. (Sam, 31)

Sam's sensemaking about adoption seemed linked to their feelings and perceptions about belonging and relationships, and to reflecting on the role that adoption may have played in past and present experiences. They identified a pivotal shift in their sensemaking about the ongoing relevance of adoption in their life:

I think the fact of my adoption, which was always known to me, remained simply a fact until a few years ago, when I realized that the fact of being adopted can in no way address the meaning of being adopted. I feel like the fact of being adopted is structurally tied to the past perfect – which is, I think, an important element of what the whole adoption narrative relies on and sustains. The meaning of being adopted, however, signifies a question, one that I don't know how to answer, and don't even really know how to properly pose.

I think it's this gap between fact and meaning that has lead me to identify as a Korean adoptee in a more robust way than I would have in the past (if at all). I see this identification as an affirmation of both the fact of adoption, and the necessarily open-ended exploration of what being adopted means for both others and for myself.

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<sup>69</sup> I have cited participant's written words – contributed through emails, blogs or social media sites – in the precise form that they wrote it, including abbreviations, shorthand and spelling.



As this excerpt conveys, Sam's present identity seemed to have evolved through sensemaking that was both inexplicable and purposeful, meaning that it was not prompted through a discrete identifiable event, but did involve thinking deliberately and reflexively about the meanings and positionalities interwoven in their life history and current sense of self.

One of the pivotal threads that I identified in Sam's story was the distinction they made between the *fact* and the *meaning* of adoption. For Sam, the 'fact' of adoption seemed to encapsulate the process that resulted in their legal incorporation into their adoptive family – a process that was completed, irrevocably, in infancy. Sam indicated that for most of their life, they considered this to be the end of the significance of their adoption; it was “structurally tied to the past perfect” and, although it impelled the trajectory of their life in a critical way, it had not carried lasting meaning on a day-to-day basis. Sam described their past attitude towards adoption in a brief vignette of their time (as a teenager) living with their adoptive family in their birth country South Korea:

I think for a while I became very defensive, for instance when a health care professional wanted to pin my depression or body issues to my being adopted – I didn't want that to define me, or for it to be the root cause of things I was struggling with. So in a way I kept affirming that being adopted meant nothing, that the family you grow up in is an accident whether you are genetically related or not, but of course it doesn't mean nothing. I lived very close to [the Korean adoption agency] but never stepped foot in the agency. I was completely uninterested in following anything up. But then, I had no reason to, because I had no reason to doubt or be critical of the adoption narrative.

Sam's reflections suggested that their past (in)actions and beliefs about adoption were congruent with what they termed “the adoption narrative”. They elaborated on their understanding of this discourse as follows:

If I run with the assumption that my initial history is correct, if I was made into an orphan in order to have a better life in a wealthy Western country – and running with what I see as the *standard adoption narrative* – then I am 'lucky' to have a biological mother that gave me a gift (another possible life), so that I could be 'lucky' (again) and become a gift (to a family that couldn't have children of their 'own'). And this is made possible by the cutting off of all social ties with her, in order to make room for the creation of new social bonds. I was given up in order to be taken up. (emphasis added)

This version of adoption sounded wearily familiar to me, for it is the same story that I recall associating with my own adoption – that I had been saved from a life of poverty in a backwards Asian country and gifted a life of relative wealth in the progressive and benevolent West,

becoming a cherished ‘gift’ for my parents in the process<sup>70</sup>. In this redemptive clean break narrative – often promulgated by the ‘initial history’ form supplied by an adoption agency to adoptive parents, and in family myths and stories (Chatham-Carpenter 2012; Harrigan 2010; Krusiewicz & Wood 2001) there is seldom room for ambiguity, melancholy, struggle, grief, confusion, contradiction, or other consequences that are not simply static or benign. In this version of events, unimportant bonds are broken (out of love and for a greater good), new and important bonds are decisively made (out of love and in a ‘lucky’ turn of events), and life moves (happily) on. As Sam so perceptively recognised, adoption is discursively pigeonholed by such narratives as being a mere *fact* of the past, one to be ignored – as if it “meant nothing” – or to be celebrated as a wholly positive, ‘lucky’ circumstance.

While some adoptees may indeed see their adoption in this frame (which is itself a valid perspective), Sam indicated this simple yet powerful “adoption narrative” had recently become *inadequate* for explaining personally salient aspects of their contemporary life and identity. Their lived experience and sensemaking about how the ‘fact’ of adoption might still resonate for them was more complicated – more dynamic and influential – than this adoption narrative implied. This, Sam posited, was the “meaning of being adopted”, which signified “a question, one that I don’t know how to answer, and don’t even really know how to properly pose”. They explained this shift in their thinking about adoption as follows:

I think the questioning just came quite naturally once I became more open to thinking about being adopted in a more robust way – again, like thinking about adoption not as an event in the past that is over, but something that I’m always going to question, and which is always going to put me (my sense of self or identity) in question.

Thus, a notable change had occurred in Sam’s considerations about adoption and self – from conceiving of adoption as a benign fact, to recognising it as an *experience* with ongoing and shifting significance and meaning in their present life. The question they now appeared to be asking: *What is the meaning of adoption – to and for me?* reveals that adoption can be enduringly impactful, highly personal, and (significantly) ambiguous and changeable in its meanings. Sam’s story also raised a number of additional themes of importance to this inquiry.

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<sup>70</sup> Yngvesson’s (2002) paper, ‘Placing the “gift child” in transnational adoption’, interrogates the history and implications of the ‘gift child’ trope in intercountry adoption. Ouellette (2009) further describes how plenary adoption is interpreted and constructed as a gift to the child, lovingly bestowed by sacrificial birth parents, altruistic adoptive parents, and benevolent adoption professionals.

***“I don’t belong anywhere and nowhere belongs to me”***

A pervasive feeling of “not belonging” seemed to be one of the most salient aspects of Sam’s sensemaking about being an intercountry adoptee. They identified neither with Australia nor Korea, despite bearing a passport of the former country, and being born in and having lived in the latter for several years as a teenager. This sense of ‘non-belonging’ related to their cultural identifications, and also permeated their relationships and intellectual understanding. Sam explained:

I think that belonging is more than a felt, important attachment to a place, so it’s not simply that I don’t have a strong attachment to any place. I suppose when I say that I will never feel like I will truly belong anywhere I mean that *I don’t belong anywhere and that nowhere belongs to me*. There is nowhere from which I come, and there is nowhere that is mine. It’s like even the possibility of being homesick doesn’t exist . . .

Like when I hear friends talk about ‘home,’ or about the way the ocean looks as they round a bend on the drive back to their childhood house, or about the smells of the place they’ve camped at almost yearly since they were a child, it sounds like more than just familiarity. I know familiarity, and I know it’s not simply that. And so I think it creates a standard of something that I should have, understand, know, or remember. And it becomes really clear that you don’t. And I don’t think this only pertains to place, I think it also applies to relationships . . .

Even my interest in the world or people in a more abstract or intellectual sense, is related in some way – it’s like being there but not being a part of things, it’s a position of non-belonging that allows you to have that bit of distance to question and analyze things. (emphasis added)

It is not unique for adoptees to report feeling like they ‘don’t belong anywhere’ (Ballard 2013; Meier 1999; Yngvesson & Mahoney 2000). However, as noted in Chapter 3 and in my autoethnographic insights in Chapter 7, this sense of non-belonging is increasingly linked with embracing a hybrid state: ‘a new kind of fluid, complex, multiple, open, inclusive identity, replacing old identities and cosmologies of stability and belonging with the uncertainty of a liminal position in-between two or several cultures’ (Moslund 2010:6). This positioning can emphasise the possibility of inhabiting a ‘comfort zone in a place somewhere between insideness and outsideness’ (Higgins & Stoker 2011:401), and is sometimes celebrated as a ‘strategy of empowerment’ (Gray 2007:229) or a liberating subversion of conventional understandings of ‘race’, nationality and cultural identity (Anchisi 2009; Goode 2015). In this respect hybridity commonly represents hope, solidarity and emancipation from marginalising structures and discourses, particularly in relation to cultural belonging (Ballard 2013). Yet Sam’s account of their identity seemed qualitatively different to these uplifting conceptualisations of postmodern hybridity. They did not communicate feeling ‘in-between’ Australia and Korea (or Asia), nor did they experience a persistent dynamic of ‘push’ and ‘pull’ between two nationalities or cultures.

Regarding ‘being’ Australian they offered: “I am Australian on paper and I guess I only identify as Australian in that limited sense”, and of being Korean they asserted: “I feel ambivalent about being ‘Korean’. If it’s an identity, I don’t know what it means.” So rather than claiming a hybridity that allowed for multiple points of attachment and affiliation (Felski 1997), Sam’s statements depicted (to me) a *lack* of attachment and affiliation, and an entrenched sense of distance and disembeddedness. They were not so much ‘suspended in-between’ (Ang 2003:150) as – *suspended*. Their narrative suggested that they did not feel they had a legitimate claim over any geographical, cultural or relational space. Instead, they inhabited a fundamental “position of non-belonging” in respect of places, cultures and interpersonal relationships – one that did not seem to resolve itself through embracing a transcendental form of hybridity. And for Sam, this feeling of not belonging was linked, perhaps indelibly, to being adopted: “Increasingly, I’ve started to question how, and in what way, being adopted is related to all of these things.”

### ***The “meaning that you’re told” and the “meaning that is yours”***

By way of explaining some of these complexities, Sam spoke about a disjuncture between the dominant “adoption narrative” described previously and the meaning/s that they had internalised. These experienced meaning/s included conditionality, insecurity and impermanence, and spilled out into their interactions and relationships in personally significant ways. They explained:

Like, knowing that I was adopted as a kid – that must have affected my personal relationships and attachments. And again, I don’t know how else to explain it, other than to say the meaning of being adopted – you learn that too as a kid, whether or not the people around you realize or intend it. For instance, being told that you’re adopted so that means you’re lucky and so loved because you have two sets of parents. That is *the meaning that you’re told*; *the meaning that is yours* is that ‘luck’ and love is conditional...underneath it all, is a second chance. I think this makes you acutely aware of the people around you, of being good, of putting others above yourself, of loving people the way they want to be loved.

Survive is a really strong and dramatic word, but it’s something like learning how to survive, or how to navigate a world that is not permanent, that is never safely or securely yours, that can be taken away, and to which you don’t really belong. And I think all this definitely plays a role even today in the relationships that I have, or know how to have, my sensitivity to other people, difficulty trusting people. (emphasis added)

It emerged that the meaning Sam had been ‘told’ about adoption was indeed a counterpoint to their *felt experience* of life after adoption, for their account of their experiences evoked responses related to insecurity and uncertainty. Sam’s use of the word ‘survive’ prompted in me an impression of living close to a brink or an edge where relational safety and security was never

assured and always up for (re)negotiation. Sam expanded upon this state of vulnerability, reflecting that it was:

. . . like being a visitor wherever you go, a guest, constantly needing to learn how to be and behave, always on someone else's territory, needing to be invited and polite, and feeling constantly grateful for being allowed to be there. I think it makes sense that this would be related to being adopted, it's about the unshakeable feeling that everything is conditional. Or maybe it's 'deeper' than a feeling because it lurks behind or underneath so much of what we feel.

Sam did not seem to feel that anything was theirs by *right*, such that occupying space and being a valid and valued presence was a condition that had to be continually *worked for* or *earned* on "someone else's territory".

Sam's statements resonated with my own persistent feelings of non-belonging, relational distance and impermanence. I simply do not know what it is like to completely and unquestionably belong in a relationship, family, community or nation. I am acutely aware of precarity and transience, and the idea of upsetting others or being disliked provokes a foreboding sense of fear. It is as if disapproval will expose me to be unworthy of the great 'gift' of adoption – for a worthy recipient of such a gift (a 'second chance' that perhaps they did not deserve) would *not* upset others. My right to exist in the world *feels*, as perhaps it does for Sam, 'conditional'; I am constantly auditioning for a life that I do not occupy by birthright and striving to prove that I deserve it. In Sam's words, "it makes sense that this would be related to being adopted" – to being 'gifted' a life that was conferred not by the linearity of birth, but through the benevolent choices, desires and charity of strangers. Further paraphrasing Sam's words, I have not been *told* by significant and/or particular others that my place in the world is conditional, uncertain or needs to be earned; but nonetheless it is "the meaning that is [mine]".

What underpins this meaning remains unclear to me. Some, like early adoption researchers Betty Jean Lifton (1975, 1979) and Nancy Verrier (1993), would trace these emotions and responses to the trauma of maternal-child separation, circumstances which still resonate strongly with many adoptees (see, for example, Reed 2018b), but which are not necessarily prevalent in other people's experiences. For instance, I have witnessed adoptees clearly and emphatically state that 'separation trauma' or a 'primal wound' (Verrier 1993) is definitively *not* a part of their experience. Leon (2002), has argued that feelings of uncertain belonging derive from consistently internalising *socially constructed* familial ideals, whereby adoptive kinship is stigmatised and biological kinship is maintained as 'real', 'natural' and ultimately, superior. And some suggest that although the severance or curtailing of bonds through adoption can affect attachment security (a sense of comfort and security in close relationships), this effect is generally small and

connected also to factors such as adoptive family relationships and reunion experiences (Feeney et al. 2007)<sup>71</sup>. Further still, perhaps a sense of impermanence develops out of one's recognition of 'the arbitrariness of choice' in adoption – 'the fact that any adopted child could have had a different story' (Yngvesson & Mahoney 2000:82) – which unsettles the prospect of any certainty about where and with whom you 'belong'. All I can conclude from this is that: if your story contains (multiple) disconnections and dislocations, is it not possible and reasonable that you might also *feel* disconnected and dislocated? Sam's and my own story provide insight into the *experience* of such feelings of disconnection and insecurity – feelings that may remain in an indefinite state of unresolvedness and consistently rooted in questions that I too "don't know how to answer, and don't even really know how to properly pose." All I know is that dislocation lies at the heart of my narrative and self, decades after that first disconnection occurred.

### ***Intersections of identity: More than an adoptee***

Importantly though, as Walton (2009a) recognises, intercountry adoptees are not *only* adoptees – they are also much more than this. In more detail than most other interviewees, Sam spoke also about other axes of identity: as queer or non-binary, a person of colour, and a 'third culture kid' who spent most of their childhood living abroad from their passport country (Moore & Barker 2012). Sam's identity was therefore more multilayered and complex than the label 'adoptee' might suggest, notwithstanding the connections they also made between these various aspects of their life and subjectivity.

Moving internationally during one's formative years has been associated with feeling that one belongs in multiple places, or nowhere at all (Walters & Auton-Cuff 2009). When I asked Sam whether they felt that living abroad while growing up was relevant to their sense of 'not belonging' they reflected that it was, and referenced the inherent transience of their formative years and the effect of knowing that mobility (for either them or their friends) was inevitable:

Moving around would have played a big role in terms of my sense of not really belonging. I was surrounded by people that were also living overseas, that were mobile but didn't choose to move. It affects the way you form friendships (i.e. with the knowledge that your friends will leave, or you will), but there's a sense of commonality there, one that I only later realized I was lucky to have, even if I didn't recognize it at the time.

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<sup>71</sup> Participants in Feeney et al.'s (2007) research, and in this study, were all adopted in infancy. Those who were adopted at later ages, perhaps with memories of their time in orphanages, foster homes or with their birth families, may grapple with a different or exacerbated set of complexities and challenges to those mentioned here.

Spending their school years in Asia also meant that Sam did not see themselves as ‘coming from’ Australia, and hence the possibility of identifying as ‘Australian’ was rendered more problematic. They added that “since my dad moved here from [Europe] and my mom from Singapore as young adults, and because my sister and I both have quasi-American accents due to schooling – none of us ‘sound Australian’”. Sam’s history of moving internationally, and of being part of an international family, has combined with their feelings about being adopted to reinforce their sense of non-belonging, particularly in relation to feeling ‘at home’ in Australia and in social relationships.

However, Sam also made the important point that although they shared similarities with their peers in international schools, their background as an intercountry, transracial adoptee also made them unique:

And a lot of questions about identity and race and belonging that arise are similar, I am guessing, to those that arise for Asian Americans (which made up the majority of the student population), and in a lot of ways I think we have very similar experiences, but I can’t really speak to that for obvious reasons. However, even if the sense of transience is normalized in these communities, most of the people I grew up with have access to immediate and extended families that they firmly belong to. At risk of generalization, they have a strong sense of their cultural background, even if they might often resent it. They know where they come from, they have grown up around people that look like them, with a language that is familiar and that embodies familial and cultural history. I’m not saying that I miss these things, because I don’t know what it’s like to have them – I just think that this is a pretty significant difference.

In contrast with their peers, who had “access to immediate and extended families that they firmly belong to”, Sam’s account conveyed some distinctions, particularly regarding notions of familiarity, as well as ambiguity about cultural and familial belonging. By referencing their Asian American peers’ “strong sense of their cultural background . . . they know where they have come from, they have grown up around people that look like them”, the additional layers of distinctiveness and dislocation that further complicated Sam’s identity construction were revealed.

It appeared that Sam’s identification as queer or non-binary in relation to their gender also deeply impacted their sense of ‘non-belonging’; they reflected on many parallels and linkages between being adopted and being queer. As they explained, these identifications (as transnational adoptee and queer) both involved feelings and experiences of confusion, dissonance, uncertainty, discomfort and disempowerment:

Perhaps it sounds obvious, but I think being adopted and being queer are both ways of being a body in a world, where the relation between body and world is ambiguous and hence always up

for negotiation – or in need of being defended. But on top of that my relation between my ‘self’ and my body is also ambiguous and something to be worked out and worked on.

In a sense, I feel like being adopted and being queer are both about having an identity that is not really an identity, or a lack of defined identity, because you’re constantly trying to figure out what they both mean, in what social and cultural contexts, etc. And you’re trying to repudiate the identity that people impose on you, how they view you; your explanations are usually defined negatively, i.e., I’m both Korean and not Korean, both Australian and not Australian, both a woman and not a woman, but I’m not a man, etc. It’s like having to protect an emptiness without understanding that emptiness.

There’s a feeling of being overdetermined, of not knowing how to express yourself in a meaningful way, of feeling like there is a clash between how you feel, how you are perceived by others, and by your own body. It’s almost a type of shame, shame as in the affect of being tied to a body that you can’t escape, that spills over or over-signifies (it says more than what you want it to say), that makes you vulnerable and unable to control – not only what your body does without you intending it, but what it shows, what it ‘says,’ what it offers to interpretation, what it gives to the world without your consent.

I feel like my body is not really ‘mine,’ and I feel like this sense of being out of step and out of control, and never feeling at home, is something that links my being adopted and queerness. It generates a lot of confusion; the confusion of not knowing enough or having things figured out . . .

In Sam’s reflections I recognised multiple layers of them being “out of step . . . and never feeling at home”. It emerged that Sam was engaged in an intrapersonal project of trying to “work out and work on” what their queerness and their personal history of adoption meant to and for them.

Moreover, grappling with how to define the personal significance of these subject positions was implicated with how to think of and define their own body. Sam further reiterated:

. . . am I a girl or am I ‘really’ a boy? What does this ‘really’ even mean? Would having a male body ‘fix’ my problem, the feeling that my body doesn’t really belong to me and that I don’t belong to it? What does being Korean mean? What does blood mean if we are told it means nothing, if blood doesn’t make a family?

It was apparent that Sam’s self-identity perceptions were clearly ‘in process’ (Hall 1996a:2) as they worked on explicating who they might be, and who they wanted to be, in various individual, social and cultural contexts. Their body, as a signifier of gender and a product of ‘blood’, or biogenetic connections, was central to these cogitations, and a personally significant site of ambiguity and uncertainty.

Critically however, Sam’s feelings could not be explained solely by their self-perceptions. For just as their self-concepts were informed by discourses relating to what adoption may actually involve and can mean, they also appeared to be shaped by dominant distinctions of gender and racialised cultural identity based on appearance. Such discourses provide rigid categorisations



(man, woman, Australian, Korean), privilege singular, essentialist identifications (man *or* woman, Australian *or* Korean), and emphasise congruence between a (gendered and racialised) body and one's identity (Ferguson, Carr & Snitman 2014). Hence these discourses circumscribed how others stereotypically 'read' Sam's body and their identity, rendering 'queer' and 'transracially, transnationally adopted' as marginal. A struggle between discourses that regulated how Sam was likely to be perceived and how they could articulate their identity on the one hand, and what types of agency they experienced relative to their desires on the other, became evident. Sam was in some ways disarticulated from dominant configurations of identity, *at the same time* that these discourses attempted to corral, control and explain their identity. In particular, Sam's experience of living in Korea was broadly illustrative of an assumed correspondence between body and identity:

Being in South Korea felt like constant pressure . . . And even now I'd say I identify as a transnational adoptee, a Korean adoptee (but less strongly so), but not Korean . . . all of a sudden you find yourself in a place you supposedly 'belong' to, or come from, and I think it can be a very jarring and disorienting experience. There's a certain comfort in blending in, however, and in some ways I liked the anonymity afforded to you (which you don't get in Australia). But people were very confused when I couldn't speak Korean . . . There was also a kind of expectation that I would 'feel' Korean, that I would learn the language and the customs.

The apparent discord between how Sam saw themselves – as *not* Korean – and how dominant discourses of belonging and cultural identity implicated that they *should* see themselves and be seen by others – *as* Korean, on account of their Korean body – placed Sam in a position of feeling “overdetermined” and “vulnerable”. There was a sense of powerlessness and violation expressed in Sam's view of their identity construction, as they found themselves ascribed and misunderstood on the basis of their physical and phenotypical appearance. They were enduringly aware of this vulnerability, which, alongside their confusion about “not knowing enough or having things figured out” in relation to their gender identity and personal adoption narrative, amplified their sense that their identity was fundamentally characterised by being “out of step and . . . never feeling at home”. Sam continued to articulate:

I guess in a really general sense, being adopted and being queer, having this ambivalent relationship to my body, all of these inter-related things have to do with figuring out how to belong, in a world that has very defined ideas of what 'belonging' and identity is. I think that's why I said earlier that I feel like they're related. But I am still very unclear on precisely how they do.

### ***Space, agency and belonging as an intercountry adoptee***

The literature presented in Chapter 2 has established that adoptees are often infantilised and positioned as children in need of pity or help (Hemmeke 2017; Reed 2018a; Walton 2012). Apart

from wrestling with matters of adoption and gender identity and how these issues might influence their subjectivity, experiences and relationships, Sam also expressed that they did not wish for these challenges to precipitate pity or concern:

I worry that talking about these things amounts to self-indulgence, that people think I am self-absorbed, selfish, ungrateful – or worse, that I am wounded, something to be pitied, something to be conceded . . . I want to have control over how I’m viewed and how I’m understood. I want the space to think about who and what I am, and what I am really feeling – without feeling the need to look after the feelings of those around me, including without needing to convince them that I’m okay . . .

This desire for space, agency, and for greater “control over how I’m viewed and how I’m understood” led Sam to identify more strongly as a ‘transnational adoptee’ and to seek to build relationships with other adoptees. They described the meaning of these connections with other intercountry adoptees as follows:

I’ve found that with a few of the adoptees I’ve met recently, that there’s this space where I’m not anxious about these things, a space where I can just explore and ask questions and be honest about how little I know about how I feel, how inchoate my opinions are, and about how utterly confused I am . . .

I think those attitudes that I am acutely wary of are weirdly paternalistic (i.e. you’re making a big deal out of nothing) or maternalistic (you need to be saved or nurtured and looked after) – and I find them patronizing and oddly self-serving. You’re being treated like a child . . .

But, in a way that is really unclear to me at the moment, I think I want more ‘childlike’ (like: equal – or brotherly/sisterly) relationships . . . I think I like the idea of admitting vulnerability and allowing myself to be dependent on others, others who share a loosely common background with me.

For Sam, their positioning as a ‘transnational adoptee’ was an identification that allowed for them to independently reveal a level of vulnerability. They felt that among other adoptees they could be “honest . . . inchoate . . . confused” yet kept relatively supported and safe from more widely-held assumptions about belonging and identity, and patronising concerns for their wellbeing. Sam indicated that they had formed a local reading and discussion group, “a space where adoptees can get together and exchange ideas and opinions on books, films, news articles, academic studies, policies, etc . . . [and] within which we can be honest, open, and critical”. They thus sought to claim a relational space to which they belonged, that validated their otherwise marginalised subjectivity, and which allowed for the “open-ended exploration of what being adopted means” – in concert with, rather than despite, others.

### ***Extending the story: Intersectional identities***

Sam's intricate reflections demonstrate the potential value of bringing an intersectional perspective to studies of adoptees' identity constructions. Deploying this approach involves examining the social location of individuals in real life contexts, considering how, and under what social, cultural, political and institutional conditions, intersecting axes of identity such as 'race', class, gender, ethnicity, nation, age and sexuality *together*, position individuals in the social world and in relative locations of power and subordination (Berger & Guidroz 2010). According to an intersectional understanding, then:

. . . race-ethnicity and gender are intersecting categories of experience that affect all aspects of human life: thus, they simultaneously structure the experiences of all people in this society. At any moment, race-ethnicity, class or gender may feel more salient or meaningful in a given person's life, but they are overlapping and cumulative in their effect on people's experience. (Ferguson et al. 2014:45)

These intersections and accumulations are evident in Sam's case; their sense of non-belonging was magnified by the indeterminacy and "overdetermination" they experienced in relation to their gender identity *and* adoptive status. Being queer and transracially, transnationally adopted were experiences embedded in their subjective self, that variously interacted to produce their specific accounts of "being a body in a world . . . and never feeling at home". There is a notable dearth of research which purposefully approaches the identities of intercountry adoptees from an intersectional perspective, with autoethnographic work by Pearson (2010), a hard-of-hearing Korean adoptee, and Anchisi (2009), a woman adopted from Korea by European parents, constituting exceptions. Yet Sam's story suggests that invoking an intersectional lens, particularly in instances of multiple positions of marginality, may not only depict but explain the multifaceted identities of adoptees in more holistic ways. Importantly, their story also highlights a distinct lack of research examining the experiences of adoptees who also identify as LGBTIQ+<sup>72,73</sup>.

### ***Extending the story: Finding resonance and reflecting on my own sensemaking about adoption***

Sam's story crystallised the point that although we (research participants, adoptees) are bound by powerful discourses informing our experiential sensemaking about our social locations, these

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<sup>72</sup> LGBTIQ+ is an umbrella term for persons who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, gender diverse, intersex and/or queer (AIFS 2017).

<sup>73</sup> A perspective paper collating insights from adoptees who speak from these standpoints has been produced by Inter Country Adoptee Voices (Long 2018).

discourses do not necessarily *determine* the ways we make sense of our circumstances and ourselves. For there is a “meaning that you are told” and a “meaning that is yours” – and these meanings may be related and inform each other, while not being one and the same. This perspective is significant because it recognises that experiences of intercountry adoption are politicised and socioculturally located – they occur within, and not outside discourse (Hall 1996a:4) – while *also* creating a space within which multiple, diverse, changeable and contradictory ways of thinking about adoption, self and belonging are to be *expected* and *accepted*. Illustrative of these potential disjunctures, Bordo considers some of the unintended meanings that may accompany the words ‘chosen’ and ‘precious gift’, terms so often used in adoption discourse:

The notion of being ‘chosen,’ it turns out, does not confer a sense of specialness, but of difference – and a haunting reminder that if one was chosen, one also might have been rejected and might yet still be. (The film *Stuart Little*, which begins by having the Littles visit an orphanage to ‘pick out’ a brother for George, finally settling on Stuart from among a sea of children, perpetuates this model.) A related idea is that an adoptive child is a ‘precious gift,’ which, as Lynn Franklin, author of *May the Circle Be Unbroken*, points out, can ‘mean the difference between feeling like an object and feeling like a person’ (p. 132). (2002:322)

Similarly, Yngvesson and Mahoney poignantly narrativise the potential fissure between ‘told’ and ‘made’ meaning in their retelling of a friend’s daughter’s attempt to story her adoption:

... a friend who adopted from China described a few years ago her (then) 6-year-old daughter’s effort to explain how she became ‘adoptable’ – ‘My mother threw me away like a blade of grass’. Recognizing the truth of this statement, the adoptive mother felt compelled to refuse the conventional explanation – ‘Your mother loved you so much that she wanted you to have a mommy and a daddy’ – an explanation that simply did not work for this abandoned baby produced by China’s one-child policy. (2000:80)

Yngvesson has also postulated that adoption is characterised by the ‘existential condition of thrownness into the world’ alongside ‘the need for connection, for hands to catch him or her, so that she can take her “place” in the world’ (2003:23). There is complexity in this apparent duality; sentiments of all-conquering love may not override feelings of conditionality, objectification, or perceptions of being ‘discarded’, nor do they encapsulate the tragedy, injustice, inequality or disempowerment that may be implicated in the relinquishment, abandonment, loss or forcible removal of a child.

Significantly, Sam’s recognition of the deeply personal ways we may make sense of adoption – informed or framed but not determined by “the meaning you are told” – provided me with a useful way of thinking about my own feelings about adoption. I have always been ‘told’ that I am precious, loved, and was ‘saved’ from a life of institutionalisation and lack. How could I reconcile

this narrative with an entrenched sense of dislocation? In short, for precise reasons unknown, the meaning that is *mine* is different to this other simplified and more celebratory version of adoption; I continue to feel my ‘thrownness’ *even as* I feel my incorporation into a loving family. Moreover, being thrown and caught is not a single, discrete event: I was thrown when my mother relinquished me, and caught by an adoption agency; I was thrown when I lacked a primary caregiver in a 1980s Korean orphanage, and then caught when I moved on to a foster home; I was thrown when I suddenly left that home and then caught in a new home filled with foreign sights, sounds, smells and people on the other side of the world; and I was thrown when I did not feel similarity or connection in this new environment, while being simultaneously caught by my family’s love for me. Being thrown and caught; these are the two sides of my coin. The interplay of these two sides are not often well understood (even within adoptive homes) and thus speaking about adoption or revealing to others that I am adopted tends to invite misunderstanding and brings to the surface uncomfortable questions about worth, value and deservedness – and with them, shame<sup>74</sup>. Thus, in both my own and Sam’s stories there is a ‘hard kernel of reality that exceeds the coherence and completeness that legal narratives of adoption seek’ (Yngvesson & Mahoney 2000:81). Perhaps this ‘hard kernel’ is why I, seemingly like Sam, often struggle to feel secure and valid in the spaces I occupy – part of me is still reeling from being ‘thrown’ just like a blade of grass, or a piece of trash.

I was also struck by the unresolved nature of Sam’s identifications. This aligns with Yngvesson and Mahoney’s view that in adoptees’ lives, ‘dislocations deny the possibility of a seamless narrative of origin . . . lives do *not* present themselves as a story . . . key “pieces” are missing . . . the story that is presented “doesn’t make sense”’ (2000:77,80, emphasis in original). These disruptions can be difficult issues to grapple with. They pose questions without clear answers and provoke unexplainable effects. So much intercountry adoption discourse prioritises an assessment of whether adoption is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ so that in the process, the innumerable range of nuances and complexities that may exist in adoptees’ lives is overlooked. Throughout Sam’s story I was brought to a stronger realisation that our stories and identities are changeable, sometimes ambiguous or confusing, and not always resolved neatly or decisively. The story of another participant, Julie, provides a further example of the multilayered and dynamic nature of intercountry adoptee identity formation.

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<sup>74</sup> Unfortunately I am often challenged to make my adoption public. I am regularly asked by acquaintances where I was born, when my parents came to Australia, where my parents are from, or whether I speak a language other than English. My face precipitates and cannot shield me from such questions (see also Ballard 2013).

## Family, ‘race’ and identity: Julie’s story

Julie’s life story, relayed during an in-person meeting and a phone conversation, was detailed, multilayered, and emotive in content (though not emotionally told). She was very articulate and open about her experiences, having already described them a number of times for research and anthology purposes. However, Julie’s story has not previously been the subject of sustained focus in a research context, thereby limiting the extent to which her perspective has been able to add to current literature by providing a nuanced understanding about sensemaking in relation to intercountry adoption. The data drawn upon for this original study included Julie’s oral telling of her life story, as well as articles centering on her experiences as a Vietnamese intercountry adoptee that she wrote between 2001 and 2017 for websites and anthologies<sup>75</sup>.

### *“I always had a sense of shame”*

Julie was adopted from Vietnam when she was around 6 months old. Her adoption was arranged privately through a lawyer in Vietnam and a Christian agency in Australia in the early 1970s, prior to Operation Babylift. Julie was the middle of five children and the only adoptee in her family. Apart from Indigenous Australians, she was the only non-white person in the communities she grew up in. Throughout her childhood, Julie’s physical appearance was a mark of difference that consistently attracted nasty and denigrating remarks. She was teased about her Asian features and developed a strong sense of shame about her appearance. She recounted this as follows:

Growing up I felt shame about my eyes because they were slanted and I used to get teased about my eyes. I used to get teased about my nose. I used to get teased about my mouth because my profile on the side is not the same as the profile of my [white brothers and sisters] who, they have a different profile. I remember them calling me “monkey face”, even my own family calling me monkey face because I had a different profile. So I grew up very ashamed and I actually remember walking around and talking [with my hand over my mouth] because I’d be trying to cover my mouth to not show my profile, that’s how ashamed I was. (Julie, 43)

Julie indicated that during her childhood she was never spoken to about how she was treated. She had no support figures and was not able to access information or engage in meaningful conversations about racism, adoption or bullying. Therefore, she did not realise how pervasive and personally damaging her experiences were until much later in life:

The funny thing was, I didn’t actually ever consciously think about it, like I do now. It’s like it’s

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<sup>75</sup> Some participants (see Chapter 4) agreed to the researcher accessing and analysing articles, social media posts and raw documentary footage related to their experiences as intercountry adoptees. Following Julie’s consent, pieces she wrote for adoption-related websites and anthologies have been considered as data for this project.

just how I was, but it's not like anyone ever had a conversation with me to help me be aware that, oh, actually, that feeling's not a great feeling . . . There was never anyone to talk to about it and it wasn't until I moved to [a major city] when I was in my 20s that I first came across adoption as a topic and I was literally in my mid-20s until that happened. Up until then, I believed my whole life, just thinking that this was just me and just feeling icky and yucky and awful about myself.

Despite experiencing racism outside her home, the most significant aspect of Julie's childhood was the cruelty and abuse she endured within her adoptive family. Julie described an "unusual dynamic" in her family that led to her being "picked on, teased" and made "the slave of the family". She was reminded that as an adoptee she "owed" the family and was told "her mother was probably a prostitute". She commented that: "They just didn't even think how that would affect me and that shame that I would internalise about being Asian as a woman." Julie was also sexually abused by several male family members. She described these experiences as follows:

My dad, I don't know when it started, probably from day dot . . . I guess, essentially, I never really bonded with my dad and he never really bonded with me. Funnily enough, too, I never really bonded with my mum, like there wasn't that instant or close connection with my adopted mum that remained up until, probably until my late mid-20s . . . My sister always hated me, my older sister, and I remember her physically grabbing me a few times but once in particular where she tried to strangle me, literally around my neck and I couldn't breathe. She just hated me and she would always dob me in to my father . . .

This kind of set up this really unusual dynamic and essentially my father mistreated me quite badly from as early as I can remember. I was always picked on, teased. I was told I had tree trunks for legs. I was told I had to work. He made me get out and work every single morning and night and yet the rest of the children, he left them alone. I was, and you ask any of the siblings and they'll say the same, that, "Yeah, he made me the slave of the family" . . .

He actually . . . I had suffered abuse, sexual abuse from him, my brother, my own cousins since the age of five. That was pretty traumatic, which I didn't really understand the full effects of until I was in my mid-20s, when I first started getting help.

As noted in Chapter 2, the adoptees who arrived in Australia in the 1970s were subject to assimilationist ideologies that at the familial level often translated into ignorance or dismissal of the potential effects of being racially 'different' (Gray 2007; Williams 2003). In Julie's case however, this 'ignorance' extended into abuse, magnifying and solidifying the sense of shame she had developed from racist treatment outside the home. She explained:

[My family] just reinforced and almost validated what I was getting from external . . . So, I think the fact that I had it in both, yeah really compounds it and made it so much worse. It was much worse than just racism in my family, it was abuse, you know . . . Racism was a very subtle undercurrent, but the real effects in my family, was being singled out, treated differently . . .

Julie's self-esteem and self-image were devastated by these behaviours. She described feeling a "deep, pervasive sense of ugliness" as a young adult, believing that as an Asian woman she was unattractive and undesirable. She recalled that this feeling became particularly acute as she reached late adolescence and began to think about dating and romantic relationships: "Yeah, I never had guys dating me at church or at school and I always just felt like, 'Aw, it's because I'm ugly', as I'd look in the mirror." Julie carried this sense of ugliness and indignity with her when she left home at the age of 18, a significant turning point and critical period in her life

### ***The courage to heal***

When Julie was 18, she moved alone to a major capital city. There, for the first time, she was exposed to a variety of ethnicities, cultures, and cuisines. She also described being able to explore and embrace her personality to a much greater extent than she had been able to while living at home, where she considered she was "the me that [my family] wanted me to be."

However, despite this newfound diversity and independence, the first five to seven years of Julie's life away from her family were painful and tumultuous. She spiralled into a deep depression – the legacy of suffering childhood sexual abuse and of being marginalised and unsupported. She was eventually prompted to seek help and attended a therapy group for childhood sexual abuse survivors. She described this critical experience, and the years leading up to it:

I actually saw a film with one of my first boyfriends that I'd ever had at the age of 18 and it was a foreign film but it must have been something on sexual abuse because it triggered something in me, all the memories and I just became an absolute depressed wreck for about five years and suicidal, majorly depressed . . . But it was the catalyst – I guess all of that abuse and that cycled down to remembering [and] it was the catalyst to me reaching out for help . . .

I ended up going out with another guy whose mother was a therapist and it was through him that I got *The Courage to Heal* book. He gave me a book called *The Courage to Heal* by Ellen Bass, fantastic book on sexual abuse. It just made me cry and he was the one who said to me, "You can get help for this." And so that instigated my first start into getting therapy and realising that there was self-help, that you could go through all these avenues to access professional help.

The best thing I ever did was a women's group . . . They had about 10 of us women who'd all suffered child sexual abuse . . . I tell you what, it was the most empowering thing I ever did because it was the first time I ever realised I wasn't alone and that there were people who had worse stories than me . . . The healing out of that was just incredible and I guess from that whole therapy, I then – it's funny how it wasn't until I dealt with that issue of abuse that I was then able to actually say that, "Ah, I had other issues, too." I then started to realise I had adoption-related issues, about not fitting in and all this identity stuff, and yet, I'd never been aware of it before.



Becoming aware of how abuse *and* adoption had impacted her identity and self-esteem, and that dealing with these issues was possible with the help of others, was pivotal in Julie's life. Importantly, it was the catalyst for her confronting other emotional issues that had been both masked and exacerbated by abuse and isolation. She continued to struggle with body image and feelings of shame about her Asian appearance and heritage, and also identified a deep-seated sense of loss and grief stemming from losing her biological mother. As I considered Julie's story, three actions seemed particularly critical in helping her to overcome these feelings of shame and loss: she travelled to Vietnam for the first and (at the time of our interviews) only time in her mid-20s; she engaged in ongoing therapy, including a form of body psychotherapy; and she created a support network for other intercountry adoptees.

Although when our interviews occurred she had only visited Vietnam once, Julie found the experience profoundly transformative. She spoke of the revelatory effect of meeting Vietnamese people and learning about their – her – history as follows:

I met the Vietnamese people and I just realised they were . . . When you see the full horrors of the Vietnam War and the way that war was done, it really brings home to you how absolutely resilient the people are and I connected to that. I connected to that because I thought, "You know what, I've gone through just as much shit." It wasn't a war, but it was a different type of war and emotional trauma. I've now realised where I've gotten that ability to withstand it from. It wasn't from my adoptive family, that's for sure. It was definitely from my genetics and I think it instantly connected to me, too, realising that my Vietnamese heritage was absolutely significant and having that Vietnamese DNA in me was significant.

I guess, since then, I've really openly embraced being Vietnamese, being Asian, and it's really changed from that real . . . It's almost like the shame was almost oozing out of me. It was so incredibly overpowering, right. Whereas, where I am now, I'm so incredibly proud to be Asian and to be Vietnamese. Yeah, it's like a complete flip.

Williams' (2003) Masters dissertation on the experiences of Vietnamese adoptees emphasises how negative portrayals of Vietnamese people and culture affected her research participants' identity constructions. She states that:

adoptive parents, in adoption narratives, objectify Vietnamese people, particularly birth mothers, as inferior and less moral . . . Positive knowledge about Vietnamese people and culture is notably absent leaving little to balance the negativity surrounding the participants' heritage. (Williams 2003:69)

Such dismissive and denigrating attitudes were particularly evident among Julie's family members, who teased her about her Asian features and speculated that her biological mother was a prostitute. Realising that there could be *positive* aspects to having a Vietnamese identity was, therefore, profoundly meaningful for Julie.

While this return visit was a significant catalyst for change in terms of Julie's cultural identity, she also wrestled with feelings connected to being relinquished by her biological mother. She described these feelings as a "black hole . . . of loss, grief, chaos". Julie identifies strongly with Nancy Verrier's (1993) concept of the 'primal wound'; in the past she has written of "buried grief" and a "very real and deep pain of being separated from one's mother". Professional psychological help was integral in helping her to feel at peace with this grief and pain, and able to move forward in healthy relationships with significant others in her life. She explained:

I went to a lot of therapists but the ones that I've found the most useful for both the sexual healing and the adoption healing were people who actually did a type of therapy called body psychotherapy . . . Yeah, that body therapy was absolutely crucial for me to heal and that therapist helped me to in a nutshell, reconnect with the mother in, my mother in me . . . I lived my life not realising the grief that I had and that deep, deep intense grief of, I miss my mother so much but yet logically, it didn't make sense because how can you miss someone you didn't even know?

It wasn't until I did that body therapy where I got reconnected with that deep grief, learned to express it, learnt to reconnect with it, and let it allow me to, for it to connect me to my mother, because that grief is what connects me to my mother. I realised, my therapist said one thing to me that was very powerful when I was in that process and that is that: you know your mother losing you, you are part of her. She is in you . . .

I always felt like there was this massive, just black hole. I coined that term, the black hole, where it just felt I was going to be swallowed into this black hole of depths of despair, misery, the feelings of loss, grief, chaos I couldn't make sense of. It was just an endless black hole, whereas, once I had that healing with her, I've never felt that black hole again and it's been incredibly amazing, yeah.

Familial disconnection is a theme that runs throughout Julie's story: she reported feeling disconnected in different ways from her adoptive mother, father and siblings, *and* her biological mother. However, interestingly, Julie cited her *connections* with other intercountry, transracial adoptees as vital to the sense of identity she built in her adult years. After attending the group therapy for child sexual abuse she began to actively search for an adoptee support network. It was the late 1990s, and despite the passing of some 30 years since the first international adoptees had entered Australia, Julie could not locate any support services specifically aimed at intercountry adoptees. She subsequently created an intercountry adoptee support network. In a reflection written around ten years prior to our interview, Julie described the emancipatory effect of meeting other adoptees and sharing her story with them, and with social workers responsible for facilitating intercountry adoptions:

How did I begin to integrate the fragmented parts of what made up my concept of who I was? Key was starting [the adoptee support network] i.e., turning my emotional energy into a positive activity and using my experience to help others in a similar situation. I found giving to

others was very helpful for healing myself . . . Also, the validation of experience and feelings in meeting other adoptees who identified with my life experience and telling my story to social workers [in government departments] (to ensure it would be useful learning to not repeat the mistakes made in adoption processes 20 plus years ago) was vital to dealing with my “black hole”.

Hence, pivotal to Julie’s journey from depression and shame to self-acceptance and peace was: validation from others with similar experiences; opportunities to express her ‘voice’; and using her negative experiences to work towards positive outcomes for herself and others. In sum, the three interconnected strands of healing that occurred in the decade after she left home – related to sexual abuse, shame about her Asian body and heritage, and grief over losing her biological mother – were crucial in enabling Julie to build a healthy self-concept and pursue healthy relationships.

### ***“I actually like who I am”***

Julie expressed that since her early thirties, she has been “very comfortable” with who she is. Perhaps most symbolic of the change in her identity and self-esteem has been her marriage to a Chinese-Australian man. Echoing the sentiments of other intercountry adoptees who have internalised ‘racist’ attitudes towards those who share their ethnic background (Walton 2009b; Williams 2003), Julie reflected about her past attitudes towards other Asian people, and her belief that ‘Asian’ was not beautiful or desirable:

I guess eventually, I mean this goes to show how anti-Asian I was, I actually wouldn’t let my now husband even date me because I was always like, “I’m not even interested in Asians.” I wouldn’t even date an Asian guy because I had so much shame. I always envisaged myself having Eurasian children because I thought they were beautiful, not full Asian. I thought full Asian was not beautiful.

After overcoming her feelings of shame about her Asian heritage, she was open to dating and marrying her now-husband. Julie now positions getting married and having children as among the most important points in her life. She described the significance of forming an Asian family as follows:

Yeah, because I guess, that was really a sign that I’d embraced my full Asianness to the point where I could marry an Asian man . . . It’s interesting, because it’s about suddenly – because it’s mirroring you. That’s what it’s about. It’s about I get up in the morning, every morning and I see my Asian husband and I no longer feel ashamed because I can look at him and I can love him and it’s like being able to love myself, so of course it makes sense.

As her comments illustrate, Julie's choice of partner is reflective of a sense of peace about her ethnicity and heritage, and is symbolic of her embracing a life and identity that transcends the legacy of being adopted into a family and community who consistently 'disrespected her difference' (Williams 2003). Ultimately, therefore, the multifaceted healing that Julie progressed through has enabled her to claim an identity that is not dictated by the negative events in her past or by others' expectations of her. In contrast to Sam, Julie's sense of self appears to be, as Bhabha's (1990, 1994) concept of hybridity suggests, 'born out of a productive, creative syncretism' (Ang 2001:35). She now speaks of her identity as being multilayered and symbiotic:

... when I talk about my identity now, I'm more than just an adoptee. I'm a mother. I have found who I am and it's not the Julie that was adopted into my family anymore, it's more than that and it's taken a number of years to really explore who I am. It's a bit what I term, it's like incorporating both worlds. I've literally had to go from being ashamed of my Asianness to literally exploring it and embracing the parts of it that I want for me and encapsulating that with the identity of my Australian part, as well, and literally melding the two and finding some type of symbiosis.

Acceptance and agency thus loom large in Julie's life story, and, in her particular case, transform her narrative from a story of trauma and injustice to one of self-driven redemption and dignity. She spoke of accepting her vulnerabilities, her sense of loss, and the reality of the mistreatment she suffered, and actively working towards healing her wounded self-concept and embracing the role that *she* plays in her life's trajectory, relationships and wellbeing. Julie eloquently wrote of these important themes in her life narrative – acceptance and agency – in the years prior to our interview:

I believe the integration of ourselves as adoptees i.e., filling the black hole, occurs when we can accept our full range of emotions and embrace them, soothe them like a child and validate their existence. Sink into them and allow it to be ok and see what happens if we stop running away from the feelings but trust they are telling us something honest about our vulnerability and loss. This, I believe is why so many of us wish so much that "others" (our adoptive parent, our significant other) could do this for us or be there to help make it "go away", when really, it's what we can only do for ourselves.

That's why I truly believe that love isn't enough from our adoptive families because eventually, it's what we adoptees have to do for ourselves. The journey out of the black hole is possible but can only be done by the adoptee themselves. It's our gift to ourselves and allows us then to "live the life we chose" instead of "living the life chosen for us".

In Julie's case, "living the life she has chosen" has not only involved forming her own family, but also achieving healthy relationships with her adoptive parents. Although she did cease contact with her adoptive parents for several years in her early twenties, she ultimately decided that for

her, it “hurt just as much . . . to feel like I was completely family-less”. Julie explained the progress of their relationships:

So, it's really quite strange, but yeah. My relationship with them is good and I think it's because I did so much healing before . . . Initially when I was doing my healing journey, I was banging on their door, trying to get them to come to the party, to heal with me and to kind of journey it together, but then I realised, after a few years and after getting so depressed and suicidal and everything about it, because they weren't even on the same page. I eventually realised that if I don't just deal with it by myself, I can't wait around for them to even get it, let alone, apologise . . . It's been a nice, kind of icing on the cake, that I found my peace, but inevitably, after that, my father ended up apologising from a full-hearted position and it's just been the most amazing thing to receive that after I've already healed, you know?

Finally, although her own actions have been instrumental in building her current sense of identity, forming connections with other intercountry adoptees has also been pivotal to Julie's self-acceptance. She has found significant meaning in being able to advocate for adoptees through writing, speaking, policy discussions, and the facilitation of groups and websites. She describes herself as neither 'anti' nor 'pro' adoption, but committed to bringing to light the complexities of intercountry adoptees' experiences. She notes, however, the propensity of simplistic, positive stories about adoption to silence those that speak of abuse, neglect, or larger socio-political inequalities. She related:

I think essentially out of all that trauma and terrible stuff, I've ended up harnessing it and channelling it into a really good avenue which is to support others and to help others. It's surprising how many of us actually suffer a very similar journey, which is terrible but that's part of why I speak out about all of the aspects of adoption, not just the great and the good – because there are plenty who have experienced a really positive experience, wonderful adoptive parents. There are also many who do talk about the other stuff and yet they're pretty much silenced because it's not considered okay to talk about, whereas in fact they really suffer . . .

It's a way for me to make sense of what was technically a terrible adoption but to give my life some meaning in the sense of, “Well, there must be some reason why I'm here and why I went through all of that.” I guess it's that natural part of us that wants to make our life worth something . . . We as adoptees just have to make the best of it and so this is my way of making the best of my random lottery is to make it better, hopefully, for some people following down the generations below.

As Julie conveyed, making sense of her adoption has been political as well as personal and traumatic as well as restorative, providing opportunities for both individual and collective agency in pursuit of the betterment of self and of others. The complexity and personal transformations evident in her story also reinforce that the meaning of being adopted can be multidimensional and certainly not as simple as recovering the 'lost' aspects of one's past. For, despite the primacy of loss underpinning Julie's story, ultimately her narrative is not solely about finding her 'roots' but, rather, coming to terms with the 'routes' she has taken (Clifford 1997).

### ***Extending the story: Insights on family and healing***

Julie's narrative offers a number of valuable contributions to intercountry adoption literature. In particular, her experience highlights how critical the dynamics and relationships within adoptive families can be to adoptees' identities, self-esteem and wellbeing. Chapter 3 explained that adoption literature tends to emphasise racist or essentialist attitudes encountered *outside* the home (particularly during school years, or as young adults living independently), and the 'culture keeping' efforts of adoptive parents, as pivotal to shaping adoptees' cultural identities and self-worth. Meanwhile, abuse, neglect, and other psychologically damaging actions are usually associated with *pre*-adoption institutionalisation, and positioned as factors that may affect an adopted person's 'adjustment' in their new (adoptive) environment. Underpinning these views is the tacit and unquestioned assumption, supported and perpetuated by the 'rescue' narratives identified in Chapter 2, that adoptive homes are *universally* loving, safe and the 'best' option for 'orphaned' children.

While many adoptive parents are indeed very loving and have become more respectful of the challenges of racial difference in recent decades (Gray 2007), the effect of various types of abuse, dysfunction and mistreatment *in* adoptive families remains largely overlooked in the current literature. Baden et al. touch on these oversights, asserting that:

Clinicians and researchers must consider that untreated or undetected mental health needs, alcohol/drug abuse concerns, and/or interpersonal problems *within adoptive parents* may dramatically affect parenting capacity and capability as well as outcomes for adopted children . . . Too often the research design examining adoptee outcomes reflects the assumption that adoptees' dysfunction, behavioral issues, and emotional challenges *reside solely in children*, with relatively little or no examination of adoptive parents' pre- and post-adoptive mental health experiences (e.g., anxiety, depression, previous relational trauma, undiagnosed mental illness, and parental dysfunction that may not be detected during pre-adoptive screening). (2015:92, emphasis added)

Although practices around assessing prospective adoptive parents and educating them on issues pertinent to adopted persons' identities and wellbeing did change significantly between the 1970s and 1990s in countries such as Australia and the US (Gray 2007; Tuan 2008; see also Chapter 2), the less comprehensive screening and education processes of those earlier decades continue to affect adult intercountry adoptees.

Julie's story is a powerful, albeit extreme example of how dysfunction in adoptive home environments can damage adoptees' self-esteem and self-concept. Apart from Julie, one other

research participant, Ellen, also recounted abuse in her adoptive family<sup>76</sup>, while three others mentioned they were no longer in contact with their adoptive parents. Julie's (and Ellen's) story entreat us to ask: what happens to adopted persons when their homes are abusive, when familial relationships are dysfunctional, and when appropriate support is not offered? And what might prevent such situations from happening in the future? Positing answers to this second question is well beyond the scope of this research. However, Julie's story presents a case that enables us to consider responses to the first. Her experiences evidence how personally intricate individual adoptees' stories can be, and the pivotal and enduring impacts that a lack of sensitivity, understanding and support can have on them, well into their adult lives<sup>77</sup>. At a personal and pragmatic level, her story also highlights two ways in which one might seek to recover: by forging connections with other adoptees (allowing for a sense of validation and for opportunities to assist others); and, by exercising agency in one's healing and self-development – that is, actively seeking avenues for help or support, doing what Julie has described as “significant [mental health and self-development] work” over many years. These important themes were further emphasised in Ellen's life story.

*Rebuilding self after family dysfunction: Another narrative of abuse and healing*

Ellen was adopted from South Korea as an infant in the mid-1980s. She spoke about emotionally and physically abusive behaviours in her home environment, describing her childhood as difficult and turbulent:

My adoptive parents divorced when I was five and it was actually quite, we had quite a tumultuous childhood all of us. Mum had borderline personality disorder which was never diagnosed . . . Our household was quite violent and . . . It was quite hard. I don't really remember much from when they were still together up until I was five but it was hard. They split when I was five and my sister had already moved out by then and gotten married . . .

Then it was just, for years and years and years after that it was custody battles every year at least for the next seven years, I think up until I was twelve; just back and forth. In that time mum remarried, dad remarried and then mum also had breast cancer, which ran in her family . . . She went through that and she actually made it into remission and then in '97 I suppose one of her suicide attempts was successful and so she passed away in '97. And I say attempts just because she would threaten it a lot; she did try and do it a lot . . .

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<sup>76</sup> Six out of 27 contributors to the Australian transracial adoptee anthology *Colour of Difference* (Armstrong & Slaytor 2001) reported abuse in their adoptive families.

<sup>77</sup> While some research has investigated incidences of 'adoption breakdown' – adoptions that are dissolved or discontinued during the adoptees' childhood (see Palacios, Rolock, Selwyn & Barbosa-Ducharme 2019) – there is very little known about why, and with what effects, adult intercountry adoptees cease contact with their adoptive families.

It's funny because it was almost like . . . When we were with dad – like we lived solely with my dad and my stepmum and she, they were basically, they were there in terms of being a caregiver . . . So we had somewhere to sleep and we went to school and all that sort of stuff but it was really quite, they were quite neglectful in terms of. . . They were just really, I suppose to put it bluntly they were quite, really tight with money and things like that. There was no warmth and they had no emotional capacity so we missed out a lot in terms of that. Not a lot of encouragement and things in terms of schooling and stuff unless it made them look really good . . .

So that affected me I suppose self-esteem wise...but on the opposite side when we were with mum, she was so emotional. We got a lot of love and warmth from her so it was, she was also a very volatile person emotionally. So she fought with her [second husband] a lot, so we're still having a lot of that – in that abusive environment. She was never abusive towards us, but him and her. Whereas on the other side dad and my stepmum were actually quite emotionally abusive I guess. (Ellen, 32)

Similarly to Julie, Ellen emphasised the substantial level of “psychological work” that was involved in dealing with her upbringing. She recounted a particularly intense time of “rebuilding” in her mid-to-late twenties:

Yeah, so I had broken up with my partner, and I think, I don't know what happened, I mentally hit such a rock bottom and I remember, like I suppose this is how I did discover it, my psychologist said to me, “in the past you were never able to build a proper foundation for yourself, and now you're...” that's what I was doing. I'd grown, like I'd gotten rid of whatever, probably false foundation that I'd built, and then having hit complete rock bottom I was having to literally build my way out of the hole I suppose.

Yeah, it was really hard, and it felt really bad. It's funny actually, because it felt really hard, but also it was a bit like, almost . . . really hopeful and a little bit excited about what was coming because it meant, I think for me, I kept telling myself it meant something good was coming. Yeah, *there was just a lot of work*. I think that was the first time I'd realised how to be alone, and how to be okay about being alone. That's the first time ever I realised how much I enjoyed being in my own company, and I didn't have to be around other people and yeah, it was actually really freeing, but it was hell. (emphasis added)

Ellen also highlighted the effect of meeting with other adoptees:

I remember the first time I met a group of them and we sat there and we just talked about things. How we felt about ourselves in the past or all of the little things that come up in your life and you just think you're the weirdest person. It was just incredibly validating to hear other people say things that I'd only thought about in my own head.

Like Julie's experiences, connecting with other adoptees was a reassuring balm at a challenging time in Ellen's life. Through these connections she was able to share and hear things that “no one else can really understand . . . except perhaps other adoptees”. Thus, although unique, both Julie and Ellen's narratives share similarities, providing valuable insights about the validation and healing that can follow from *sharing stories* with other adoptees.



Critically, for me, both women's experiences were invaluable, 'unexpected stories . . . that disrupt[ed] [my research] project' (Cary 1999:418). As discussed in Chapter 3, encountering racialising perceptions *outside* of the family, which impute upon intercountry, transracial adoptees certain biographies and characteristics unmatched to *their* senses of self, can indelibly shape one's identity as an intercountry adoptee<sup>78</sup>. Surprisingly, Julie and Ellen's powerful stories interrupted *my* preconceived notions that racialisation outside the home was likely to be the critical 'site' of sensemaking (about self) amongst the participants. For both women's accounts centred on resilience and healing from circumstances they had experienced *within* abusive households – notwithstanding any racist or racialising experiences that had also affected their self-concepts. That I had not anticipated these types of stories speaks also to the dearth of academic work examining the effects of intimate family life on intercountry adoptees' identities<sup>79</sup>. It also reflects my own naivety<sup>80</sup>, and the utility of biographical-narrative research for surfacing unanticipated and unexplored aspects of experience. I was deeply humbled that these interviewees shared such personal details of their lives with me. Their stories provoked a stronger awareness in me that intercountry adoption involves multiple ruptures – not only in one's nationality and attendant aspects of nationality or ethnicity (culture and language, for example), but also in one's familial connections. Julie and Ellen's stories, and those of other participants who did not speak of abuse but nonetheless foregrounded impactful family relationships in their narratives, led to me recognising that these relationships can contribute much towards sensemaking about being an intercountry adoptee. This is a critical overarching finding of this research that not only supports but extends Heaser's acknowledgement that for the adult Korean Australian adoptees she interviewed, 'the significance of family was overwhelming' (2016:151).

### ***Extending the story: Transformation and 'making life better'***

Given the ethical and methodological call to engage in 'socially just' acts of representation discussed in Chapter 4, it is important to note that the value of Julie's story potentially extends

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<sup>78</sup> An aspect of experience that I have previously explored and written about – see 'The dilemma of voice in biographical narratives: Confronting complexity in the "unexpected stories" of intercountry adoptees' (Goode 2018).

<sup>79</sup> Very little research considers the relative weight, or interplay, between influences that are internal and external to the family environment on adoptee identity formation. Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler and Esau (2007) provide one example of this scholarship, which emanates primarily from the psychology and counselling disciplines. Williams (2003) provides another example with her examination of Vietnamese adoptee identity formation.

<sup>80</sup> This naivety was underscored not only by my reading of the extant literature, but also by my particular background and experiences. As a child I never experienced, nor was I conscious of anyone in my social circles having experienced abuse or neglect at home. Additionally, I was not actively part of online adoptee discussion groups that may have discussed such issues. The possibility of such experiences within adoptive families was in many ways, and quite naively, 'off my radar'. Combined, these aspects of my background as an adoptee and a researcher reinforced a naivety about the kinds of narratives this project might elicit. Consequently, Julie and Ellen's stories in particular sharply heightened my awareness of the importance of family in shaping adoptees' self-perceptions.

beyond making a knowledge contribution to academic literature or influencing adoption policy and practice. By (re)telling her story in a focused and in-depth way, rather than through short ‘bites’ in a broader thematic discussion, I hope that the transformations and resilience evident in her narrative carry greater potential to instigate change in the lives and self-concepts of others who may find resonance in her story. In his discussion of autoethnography and its contribution to communication research, Adams (2012) reflects on how his life has been changed – and ‘made better’ – from reading the autoethnographic work of others. He notes how his pedagogy, writing, and social awareness has improved from reading insider experiences, and that personal narratives may offer broader audiences valuable ‘alternatives for living’ (Adams 2012:191). Although Julie’s story as it appears in this research is not an autoethnography *per se*, the notion that her story can bring about change in others, thereby helping to make their lives better, is nonetheless highly significant for the sense of resonance and revelation it may provoke in other adoptees (and in adoption practitioners, parents and researchers). Borrowing Adams’ claims, the narrativisation of her life experiences offers ‘a story to think and live *with* rather than sterile facts and findings to think *about*’ (2012:191, emphasis in original).

After hearing the ‘unexpected story’ of Julie’s life and spending considerable time thinking about and living with her narrative, my own perspective on what was possible for myself and others changed. I felt that the *extent* of her healing, from the depths of depression and suicidal tendencies, to feeling comfortable, whole and at peace with her identity and loss, was remarkable. If it was possible for her, then perhaps it is indeed possible for others to work through whatever burdens, sadness, or wounds they carry (whether these impacts are related to abuse or not) and find themselves *fully* okay on the other side. Julie herself reflected on these possibilities in our interviews, recognising both the potential scholarly significance of stories about abuse occurring in adoptive home environments, along with the healing capacities of such accounts:

It’s a topic that’s very much, not very well understood and researched and definitely not talked about by many people. So, I share it mainly because I want there to be much more understanding of how this all really happened, what it’s really like and what we can do to facilitate people’s healing. You know, that’s to me, why I share it.

## Conclusion

Above all, the stories in this chapter invite recognition that adoption does not always begin and end with a ‘fact’. It can have resurgences, echoes and threads that run through lives, emotions, relationships and sensemaking about self and one’s ‘place’ and/or value in the world. Moreover, the preceding discussion has highlighted the insufficiency of simplistic adoption narratives that

limit adoption to a lucky or redemptive circumstance; such narratives are unable to capture more complicated, individual and changeable orientations towards being a transnational adoptee.

Adoption is not *always* or *simply* a 'fairytale', and to uncritically cast it as such is profoundly delegitimising to those who suffer abuse, racism, and persistent feelings of loss or of being 'out of place'.

Sam and my own stories also highlight some of the difficulties that adoptees can have with feeling a sense of belonging. We both expressed a generalised sense – not solely nor chiefly related to racialisation – of 'non-belonging' and of questioning one's *right* to belong and 'be' in the world. This is an area of experience, feeling and sensemaking that is largely unexplored from an in-depth, qualitative standpoint. Sam and my own stories provide some insights that may contribute towards filling this gap, while demonstrating that ascribed meanings about adoption and identity can also be resisted and discarded for various, very personal meanings that are difficult to explain and precipitate uncomfortable consequences.

In contrast, Julie's sensemaking about her life as an intercountry adoptee centred around healing from abuse within her adoptive family – a topic that is rarely discussed in adoption literature. Her story was far from a 'fairytale' or 'rescue' narrative. There were multiple, intertwined layers to Julie's healing process, including visiting her country of birth, engaging in ongoing therapy, and creating a support network for intercountry adoptees. Ellen, who also described abuse in her family home, similarly emphasised the role of psychological 'work' and forging connections with other adoptees in her narrative.

Although Julie and Ellen's experiences of abuse set them apart from other participants, the significance of family in adoptees' sensemaking about self was nonetheless foreshadowed in their stories. Both Julie and Ellen's stories are vivid examples of how family dynamics can affect one's identity and sensemaking about being an intercountry adoptee. This theme is explored further in the following chapter, drawing on participant comments about the various ways they have perceived and experienced family relationships.

## CHAPTER 6 – THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ‘FAMILY’

### Introduction

Asian adoption memoirs are always working against and in connection to the notion of origins and how much or how little one has access to one’s own personal past. In the earlier days of Asian adoption, we were asked to articulate ourselves in terms of ‘real-ness’: our ‘real’ families, whether or not we were ‘real’ Asians or ‘real’ Americans. Now, as we hear more and more about other adoptees’ reunions with biological families, we know ourselves in relation to those (missing) people. Reunited, reunited but estranged, not reunited but looking, and not reunited or interested are some of the ways I have heard Asian adoptees categorized in relation to origins. The ‘origin’ has gained momentum in place of its essentialist partner, ‘the real.’ (Wills 2016:217)

This chapter specifically considers how family dynamics and family relationships featured in interviewees’ life stories, and expands on the earlier accounts offered by Julie and Ellen in Chapter 5. The discussion features four prominent themes that address: participants’ attitudes towards searching for their biological families; experiences of locating biological families; reflections on relationships with adoptive family members; and sensemaking related to having their own biological children. Together, these insights underscore the centrality of family relationships in intercountry adoptees’ life narratives, and illustrate how particularly personal, individual and dynamic various understandings of ‘family’ (and adoption) can be.

### Reflections on searching for biological family

#### *Shades of desire, disinterest and ambivalence*

Some participants expressed that finding their biological family had always mattered to them. For instance Chloe, who met her Korean family when she was 12, recalled:

Yeah, it was something that I'd always wanted to do. I'm not really sure what prompted it, potentially it had to do something to do with, [social services] here wouldn't allow you to go and try and track down your parents until you were of a certain age, just because they wanted to make sure that you had the maturity to be able to deal with that situation. Which I think is around 12 or 13 years old at the time. Yeah, not really sure why, it's always been something that I . . . I wouldn't be able to answer the question as to why it's something I always wanted to do. It always has been something that I felt I wanted to do. (Chloe, 28)

Meeting her biological family was clearly important to Chloe. This desire could not necessarily be qualified through reasoning, but had been *felt* from a very young age.

In contrast, others indicated that they bore various levels of disinterest or ambivalence about meeting their biological relatives. Some had not made any attempt to find them, while others had done so without giving it much thought or emotional investment. For example, Alice reflected that although she had an intellectual interest in experiences of adoption, she did not wish to search for her own family<sup>81</sup>:

In terms of how I feel about adoption, I know some people get super obsessed with Korea, and super obsessed to find their families. I've already got a family and they're trouble enough. I don't need more parents to deal with. I mean I love my parents and my sisters, but I don't, yeah I'm one of those people that doesn't really care to go on and investigate that. (Alice, 32)

Several other participants spoke about feeling a sense of *relational distance* from their biological families, which hindered the development of strong or easily identifiable emotions. They explained that as they had never met their relatives nor shared experiences with them, and/or had limited information about them, consequently it was difficult to imbue them with much personal meaning. For instance, Tahlee used very neutral terms in her references to her biological parents:

I have been told the biological persons responsible for my conception and birth were a de-facto couple with a number (unsure exactly) of children between them already and were simply unable, for whatever reason, to maintain an additional child. I understand I was most likely handed over to the welfare right from birth, possibly not being seen by my gestational carrier. I have difficulty with forming a fitting, yet respectful title for the biological persons – 'birth mother' and 'birth father' seem a little too liberal. (Tahlee, 30)

Tahlee's decisions about how to refer to her biological relatives – as "biological persons" and a "gestational carrier" – are significant. Dąmbska argues that common (non-specific) names 'treat the object signified by it as one of many similar objects, as an element of a certain class' (2016a:281). A proper name, meanwhile, highlights individuality, enables precise signification, and contains 'the emotional elements of an evaluation' (Dąmbska 2016b:221). Tahlee's objective ways of referring to her relatives were reflective of the impersonal and emotionally *insignificant* ways she viewed them.

Similarly, Sam also spoke about experiencing a detached relational distance from their biological relatives, explaining that:

My biological family is just a big question mark, I suppose. I don't know much about my biological parents, and all of the information that I do have is what was provided on my Initial History form. And actually, in responding to this question I realize that I don't really think of my

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<sup>81</sup> Alice's thoughts on finding biological relatives changed somewhat in the months following our initial interviews, discussed further in the section: 'Forming new families: The significance of having children'.

biological connection/s as constituting a “family.” I recognize that I am tied or bound to two people (and more) by blood, but that is the only connection, and this connection doesn’t really feel properly social, although I’m sure it is on some level. (As an aside, there is barely anything to attach to the signifier “blood,” since I was not provided with any medical history) . . .

Because I don’t know if the information I’ve been given is accurate, because I have no way of confirming the story (without establishing a relationship with my biological mother), I can’t fill in any part of my “initial history” with any degree of certainty. So, I guess from my point of view, any belonging I may have to my biological family is impoverished – in the sense that this belonging is not meaningful or substantial, more outline or contour than rich and textured.

Sam’s self-described disconnect from their biological relatives was encapsulated by their comment that they could not call their relatives ‘family’, but rather saw them as an unknown set of people to whom they were biogenetically linked. A lack of any shared or known history, identity or experiences with them, meant that in Sam’s life any ‘relationship’ was unclearly defined, with a surface level presence of uncertain and tenuous significance. Hence, because Sam’s parents were unknown in both social and factual terms, these circumstances appeared to limit the personal significance of Sam’s ‘biological family’.

The ambivalence that Alice, Tahlee and Sam expressed towards searching for their biological relatives was also evident among some participants who *had* subsequently met theirs. Adam met his Sri Lankan aunt when he was 16, leading to contact with his biological mother and half-brother. Reflecting on what motivated him to search for his family, Adam spoke about not wanting to have regrets, about also having other concerns in his early teenage years, and wanting to prepare himself for the process:

I guess I wasn’t really hesitant to try and do it early on, I just, I think I had different priorities at the time when I was like 13 and 14 . . . So, I think in those years, from 13 to 15 I had to mentally prepare myself, just to try and figure out whether I wanted to do it or not. (Adam, 24)

For Adam, locating his relatives was a matter-of-fact task that he did not focus substantial emotion or energy on. He further explained:

For me, it was just like – and I hate to say it because it sounds terrible – but it was just another thing that I was going to do. Because at the time growing up, you know, you’ve got so many things going through your head, you’ve got school, you’ve got friends, you’ve got whatever else is going on, and this was just another thing . . . And then once we found out that it actually was going to work, when we got the return letter, that’s when it all changed. So, at the time it was more just . . . well we’ll try it, but if it doesn’t work what can we do?

Despite having a difficult upbringing in her adoptive family (described in Chapter 5), Ellen also expressed ambivalence about searching for her family prior to locating them in her early twenties. On reflection she said:

I've never been an adoptee that's . . . I've never had this desire to find my family. I don't have a desire to get a new family or anything like that . . . I don't consciously feel rejected, I don't consciously feel abandoned . . . I think I felt a feeling of being at peace with it.

Although Ellen had not harboured a strong yearning to find her family, in her late teens a chance encounter with an adoptee who *had* recently located her own, prompted her to try to do the same. Curiosity, rather than strong emotions, drove her motivations and anticipations about the possible outcome:

I didn't feel the desire, like a burning desire to find them. It's just that [the other adoptee who found her parents] was there and I thought okay, well it didn't cost me anything either, and I like thought, okay, well why not? More of being curious . . . So I was just like, I mean I don't know if I was actually that curious, but I just felt, sure, why not? So we did it . . .

It was two years before Ellen heard the news that her parents had been located. She commented that in that two-year period, finding her family was a “background” issue in her life that she did not spend much time or energy thinking about.

And when I got the call, I was so shocked because it just came out of the blue. I remember being in touch with the social worker, like maybe once or twice in that two-year period, but I mean I guess like I just, I didn't really care that much. I think, I suppose that's another part of the surviving where I'm just trying to get along with my life and not, I don't know, like I think it was just so much in the background that yeah, I just didn't really think about it.

I was struck by these stories of ambivalence towards searching for biological family for the simple reason that they contrast so sharply with the notion that biological families are more ‘real’, and necessarily, the source of an unrelenting desire in an adoptee’s psyche. Entrenched western ideologies about the family underlie a powerful and enduring understanding of what the ‘ideal family’ looks like – namely, a stable and firmly heteronormative unit based on bonds of biology and heredity (Fisher 2003; Katz & Doyle 2013; E. Kim 2007; Leon 2002; Randolph & Holtzman 2010; Wang, Ponte & Ollen 2015; Wegar 2000). As French asserts, such constructions of family create the possibility of questions from others and self about familial belonging and legitimacy:

‘Do you know your real parents?’ ‘Why did your real parents give you up?’ Questions such as these lay bare prevailing cultural attitudes of the superiority of biological ties that cast familial bonds founded in social relation as deviant or somehow ‘unreal.’ In being united through sociolegal connections in the absence of biological relation, questions such as these reflect the burden shouldered by adopted persons, who are driven to consider, and ultimately question – if but for a fleeting moment – the legitimacy of their familial ties. (2013:139)

The confluence of biological with ‘real’ and adoptive with ‘less-than-real’ may lead to generalised assumptions that adopted persons have a ‘psychological need . . . to return to where she *really* belongs’ (Yngvesson 2003:7, emphasis in original) – with her biological family. However, the narratives retold in this project instead portray various shades of disinterest, ambivalence and desire about searching for unknown relatives. The absence of a *social* relationship between participants and their biological relatives – precipitated by the ‘social death’ of the adoptee and their first families that preceded and enabled their adoption (Kim 2009:857) – were notable factors underpinning these accounts. For some – but certainly not all – it was difficult and challenging to feel strongly or coherently about people they had never met, knew very little about, and who had no tangible involvement in their everyday life experiences.

It was also interesting to note that interviewees’ desires to find their biological relatives did not appear to be *determined* by their relationships with their adoptive parents. For example, although Chloe explained that her parents were “incredibly supportive” in her childhood years, this positive relationship did not mean that she had no desire to find her biological parents. Meanwhile, although Ellen spoke of physically and emotionally abusive home environments, these experiences did not appear to initiate a “desire to get a new family”. Nonetheless, the sentiments of indifference relayed here should not be read as definitive statements that feelings of loss, sadness, grief or longings to find biological family do not occur – just that they do not occur *always*. The insights provided by adoptees themselves are much more diverse than what popular narratives and discourses about adoption suggest.

### ***“I just want to find a family member”***

In contrast to other participants, Jacqui harboured strong feelings about connecting with her biological family at the time of our interview. She was born in a maternity hospital during the Vietnam War, and has been told that her mother left her there soon after her birth. In the following weeks, the hospital was contacted to see whether any infants might be in need of evacuation in Operation Babylift. Along with two other newborns, Jacqui was taken from the hospital to the airport, put in a shoebox, and flown to Australia. Her adoptive parents had responded to an advertisement in the local newspaper about adopting a Vietnamese orphan.

Jacqui indicated that she had no interest in finding her biological family for the first 21 years of her life. The birth of her first child stirred a curiosity that remained largely latent until a decade later when she began to connect with other adoptees through social media. It then became increasingly important to Jacqui to find biological relatives.



Jacqui's desire to find her family was clearly evident in a filmed interview she participated in while visiting Vietnam for the fortieth anniversary of Operation Babylift in 2015<sup>82</sup>. When she was asked: "What are you searching for?", she responded:

A family member . . . A lot of people say, oh mother, father. I don't care. I just want to find a family member. It's going to go on from there. You know, I mean there's things I need to know, and it's not, okay, why did you give me up, or why did you walk away? I've been asked that question. It's the most ridiculous question you can ask a Vietnamese adoptee. Because, I mean I don't hold any grudges against my mother or my father. You know, it was wartime, what choice did they have? So my expectations aren't very high.

So I just want to find somebody. So I can say, oh God, you know, I make that expression in my face, or my kids make that expression that I don't or my husband doesn't. So there are these little things that I *need* to find out. You know, I look at my kids – they might do something and I go, I don't do that, my husband doesn't do that. So it's got to come from somewhere.

Or am I going to walk down the street one day in Vietnam and see this older Vietnamese woman with tattoos and bleached blonde hair and go, oh, she's gotta be my mother! You know, so it's that – it's just finding out the questions, you know. I need answers. (Jacqui, 41)

It was apparent that finding any family members had become vitally important to Jacqui. However, her quest to find biological relatives was not only about curiosity or knowledge; it was also a source of deep emotion, unanswered questions, and was highly, personally significant. In the interview footage she recounted, through tears, her experience of visiting the hospital where she was born:

The day I went to the hospital, that was confronting. I had my son with me . . . And when I was told that it's the weekend, there's nothing to find out . . . I just stood and I walked out to the courtyard somewhere in the hospital and I sat down. And there's a shrine to the right of me and my son came and sat with me. And I just said, "I'm not supposed to find anything, I keep hitting these huge brick walls." And I feel as if there's always going to be something stopping me. It's really hard.

So I sat there and I thought, wow. Mum was here 40 years ago. She had me. How long did she stay on the grounds for? Did she hide behind that tree? I'm standing and I'm going – I'm probably standing where she stood. And I could have stayed there all night. I could've done and I couldn't. And my son's going, you alright mum? I'm going, I'm okay, I just, I don't know what to do . . . do I keep going with this, or do I leave it alone? . . .

And I thought, you know, has she stepped where I'm standing at the moment? Did she hide somewhere? Did she stay on the grounds, and did she watch me leave? And I'd never, ever thought of that before this time. And that has been the biggest, biggest low.

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<sup>82</sup> Jacqui generously shared raw footage of this interview, captured by a television documentary crew, with me.

Throughout our interview Jacqui reinforced the personal impacts of not yet being able to locate her biological relatives – who she did think of as family:

It's funny, some people say, oh I just want closure. Well no, it's not closure. Closure is closed off, that's it, end of story. Well it's not. It's a beginning. That's how I look at it because it's every orphan's dream; I just think it would be something else to complete my life. I can see how it affects me when I go back there and when I come home, it will always eat at me. All the time.

Like I say, well I'm 41 now, I cannot keep going back, keep searching. I need to know. I think if I got to quite an old age and not have found anything then yeah, it's heart-breaking and essentially that missing piece of my life. . . I've had bouts of depression over it. I've come home with a very heavy heart again, I tend to really keep to myself. I feel somewhat that more bit positive now I've done my DNA test again, but I mean it has, I think it is making quite a big impact in my life now.

Jacqui's strong desire to locate her family contrasts sharply with other participants' more ambivalent attitudes (described in the previous section). In the absence of information about her history, DNA testing provides the most viable, yet also uncertain, search strategy for her. This search has become a central and psychologically impactful aspect of her lived experience as an intercountry adoptee. She feels severed from people she regards *as* her family, and this unresolved alienation has become a source of loss, incompleteness and heartache.

### ***Seeking family after a “happy adoption”***

My story is yet another variant on why one might wish to locate relatives, and how one may feel about it. Over the past fifteen years I have initiated several unfruitful attempts to find my biological mother<sup>83</sup>. In my early twenties I was motivated by the possibility of finding, in my mother, reflections of myself. I have always been very different to my adoptive family members, not only in physical appearance, but in *all* ways – my mannerisms, voice, ways of thinking, habits, energy, interests, flaws and talents. Subsequently, I wondered if a certain affirmation of self could be achieved through being able to see myself reflected back at me – at least *sometimes* and in *some* ways.

Over time those feelings have been overshadowed by more pragmatic concerns. Now, I am less inclined to expend time, energy, or emotion on a venture that has very little chance of success, and within which I yield very little agency to affect an outcome. I work, study, and have a husband and son. The very *prospect* – let alone experience – of re-sending documentation,

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<sup>83</sup> I chose to search for my mother because my file contains more information about her, meaning that there was a higher chance of a successful search. My file also suggests that my father did not want to know about me upon learning of my mother's pregnancy, casting doubt on his willingness to be contacted.

waiting, hoping, and being disappointed, feels exhausting. Yet, to avoid regret, I still wish to initiate another attempt when my emotional energy permits.

Recently though, I have become more acutely aware of a question that casts an ominous shadow over my desire, and which I wish to focus on here: *Is trying to find my biological relatives hurtful to or a betrayal of my adoptive parents?* My personal and research experience suggests that even when parents do not directly articulate any sensitivities around the issue, it is not uncommon to feel a tension between ‘protecting’ adoptive parents, and seeking to find one’s biological family. In this project, Chloe reflected: “I think at times maybe it upset [my adoptive parents], the fact that I was very interested in finding my birth parents.” Tahlee also articulated: “My mum gets really upset and insecure whenever I talk about any of this stuff. I don’t usually tend to bring it up.” Meanwhile, Adam commented: “I know from one of my ex-girlfriends – also adopted – their parents basically said you know, we brought you here to give you a better life, so why would you want to go and look for them?”

Yngvesson (2003, 2007) gives voice to similar sentiments that arose in her longitudinal anthropological study of Swedish intercountry adoptees, citing Swedish social worker Ingrid Stjerna who speaks to and works with, prospective adoptive parents: ‘Background and country and decorations and songs, all that is fine – but the mother: no.’ This potential for forging another maternal link, asserts Stjerna, ‘awakens anxiety’ and forces adoptive parents ‘to come to terms with the pain and misery’ of adoption (in Yngvesson 2003:23). One of Yngvesson’s adult adoptee research participants also spoke of this particular angst:

Amanda Fredriksson, who was adopted from Ethiopia in the 1970s and has made several return visits to spend time with her extended birth family there explained the complexity of her journeys back for her Swedish family, and particularly for her Swedish mother, for whom the trips became a ‘charged’ (*laddat*) topic. The third time she went, her mother asked: ‘Why do you want to go?’ She didn’t really understand why I should continue to make these visits. (2007:570)

In an American context, Reynolds et al.’s (2016) study found that most of the Korean adoptees they researched avoided discussing Korea, adoption or searching for biological family in order to protect their parents’ feelings. One of their participants commented: ‘I think it would be interesting in one aspect, but I know it would hurt my adopted mom deeply . . . My mom would definitely take it personally and I still don’t understand why . . .’ (Participant cited in Reynolds et al. 2016:245–246).

It is critical to recognise that adoptive parents’ protective and guarded sentiments do not occur in a vacuum. Novy has written about three dominant myths typically used to imagine adoption in

Euro-American culture: ‘the disastrous adoption and search for birth parents . . . the happy reunion . . . and the happy adoption’ (2005:7), positing that:

These stories are myths, even though they conflict, because they act as paradigms to shape feelings, thoughts, language, and even laws about adoption, and to reflect deep cultural beliefs about family. In the two versions of the search story, the birth parents are clearly the ‘real parents.’ In the happy adoption story, the birth parents may exist in memory, but no matter how important this memory is . . . it does not constitute a living complication to the reconstructed family. What all three have in common is the assumption that a child has, in effect, *only one set of parents*. (2005:7, emphasis added)

These stories may be considered – borrowing from Yngvesson’s findings – narratives of ‘exclusive belongings’ (2007:8). They cast adoption as a transaction that *wholly replaces* one set of parents and one possible life with another, without room for ongoing contact, complex feelings or multiple allegiances<sup>84</sup>. Similarly, Leifsen recognises that:

Adoption in the formalized intercountry form does not produce a person constituted of a multitude of relations. It is a much more controlled process of separation, objectification and re-constitutions, one where relations are replaced and social discontinuity created. Thus the socially constitutive work going on in the adoption process is characterized by *the making of one relation*. (2004:193, emphasis in original)

In this paradigm then, biological families are relegated to paperwork and/or mythical status – both, if one is fortunate enough to actually have a paper file, and solely the latter, if one is not. And thus, although adoptive parents’ feelings of betrayal, fear or incomprehension may indeed be grounded in fierce and visceral love, simultaneously, they are rooted in powerful ideologies that render adoption as a mechanism for realising western notions of proprietorship and exclusive familial belonging (Quiroz 2012:544; Yngvesson 2003:8). In short, popular narratives about adoption suggest that if you have one ‘good’ set of parents – if you had a ‘happy adoption’ – *then you should have no need to look for another*.

Mine could be classed as a ‘happy adoption’. By this I mean I am loved, and grew up in a safe and secure household, free from abuse and with access to first-world educational opportunities.

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<sup>84</sup> I am conscious here that the movement towards ‘open adoption’ in many western countries, including Australia (Higgins 2012), may have softened the perception of adoption suggested by Novy (2005). However, it is evident in the literature and participants’ quotes cited above, as well as in my own experience, that a tacit belief in the ‘exclusivity’ of a parent-child relationship, with attendant expectations of allegiance and gratitude, is still resonant in intercountry adoptees’ lives. It is also pertinent to recall here Cuthbert et al.’s (2010) insights (see Chapter 2) that domestic and intercountry adoption tend to be perceived in very different ways. While family preservation and openness in adoption have become policy imperatives for Australian children, children overseas who are at risk of adoption (and their biological parents) are not given the same consideration. Instead, it has been suggested that the model of ‘closed, autonomous and final’ adoption is in fact a *driver* of interest in intercountry adoption, affording a greater sense of privacy and ‘naturalness’ for adoptive parents (Cuthbert et al. 2010:436).

My parents gave me the best upbringing they knew how. (Nonetheless, as mentioned before, I am also very different from all of my family members and have often struggled to feel that my personality ‘fits’ with theirs.) My parents have not explicitly expressed that they feel betrayed by my search for biological relatives. They have barely mentioned them at all, either in my childhood or adulthood. I was simply their (much longed-for) daughter.

However, as I reflect on this now, I realise: *silence speaks*. It says that certain topics are irrelevant, unimportant, or shameful. Silence also defers to dominant societal narratives that, with no opposition, fill and infuse the vacuum. I do not know *how* I knew, but I always did know that my adoption was something to be grateful for. When I first began to take tentative steps towards ‘reconnecting’ with my ‘Korean roots’, I posted in an email group that included both adoptees and adoptive parents of Korean children:

I'm a 20-year-old adoptee wishing to begin searching for my birth mother in Korea . . . I was wondering if anyone out there has any experience in searching for a birth mother years after the adoption. My wonderful parents fully support this search. :)

My parents were neither supportive nor unsupportive of my endeavour. I recall it being a slightly uncomfortable topic that we did not really discuss at all. Yet, I distinctly remember that *I knew I had to add this final sentence*. Without it, I feared being seen as ‘ungrateful’ or ‘bitter’, and even that some might feel I was ‘attacking’ adoptive parents by merely suggesting that I had a desire to know another set of parents.

Although I was not conscious of it at the time, this pressure to project gratitude and indifference about adoption has run throughout my life<sup>85</sup>. In my early teens I became aware that a non-adopted friend’s mother had passed away when she (the daughter) was very young. My friend had scant, if any, memories of her mother, and her father had remarried (thus, she gained a ‘new’ mother). On the anniversary of her biological mother’s death this girl would arrive at school in a melancholy state, sometimes with old and precious photographs. Her friends would be respectful, supportive and sympathetic. They recognised her sadness. She had lost her *mum* – even if she did not remember her well. Yet if I had expressed a similar sentiment in relation to my ‘lost’ birth mother, I suspect that I would have been met with incomprehension, dismissal, or variants of the

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<sup>85</sup> I feel the weight of this narrative much more strongly than the sentiment that my biological family is my ‘real’ family. While I have at times been subject to the expectation that I must harbour an irreconcilable longing for my ‘real family’, I have more commonly encountered the view that adoption is ‘special’ and ‘lucky’. For example, a health professional once reacted to my adoptive status (which I often have to reveal in medical appointments) with the exclamation: “Wow, that’s so cool!”

message that ‘at least I was adopted to a good family in Australia’ or ‘I should be grateful for how things turned out’<sup>86</sup>. Suggesting that adoption might be more complex than this, and involve a sense of loss or disconnection, feels *dangerous* and *divisive*. It is not safe to say; it gestures towards ingratitude, a lack of strength and resilience, and unworthiness of the ‘gift’ of a ‘better life’<sup>87</sup>.

As I introspected more deeply on these feelings, I found myself uncovering and confronting additional meanings – as if peeling back layers of an onion<sup>88</sup>. I recognised that the assumption that transnational adoption precipitates a ‘better life’ for which one should be grateful rests on a particular conception of ‘the good life’ – namely that it is white, middle-class and located in the west (see Hübinette 2004). This parallels with Riggs and Due’s (2015) analysis of how Australian mothers of children adopted from overseas may render adoption ‘acceptable’. Riggs and Due maintain that in their Australian mothers’ accounts, ‘birth countries and cultures are reduced to *inherently pathological* situations for children to live in . . . thus constructing the “choice” between remaining in the birth culture and being adopted to Australia as clearly favouring the latter’ (2015:285, emphasis added). From this standpoint, intercountry adoption can be understood in simplistic terms as substituting ‘bad’ for ‘good’, where a life of depravity and deficit in the east or global South is exchanged for love and opportunity in the west.

It is not only first countries and cultures that are pathologised in such narratives; biological parents are also cast as ‘invisible or as inadequate or deviant’ (Riggs 2012:460). They become hidden behind opaque, romanticised narratives such as ‘your mother loved you so much she couldn’t keep you’, marginalised through dismissive or disparaging inferences about an

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<sup>86</sup> Anecdotal, personal and scholarly evidence indicates that these are not uncommon responses. For example, a contributor to the adoptee-run website *Dear Adoption* describes directing a non-adopted friend to the website for an insight into adoptees’ experiences. Her friend’s email response was:

Wow, I looked at that website you sent and it is so sad. It’s so awful that these people can’t move on and just be thankful for what they have . . . we all have hard things in our lives to overcome you know? And these people were actually saved from way worse lives probably. None of us gets to pick our family. I know so many people who are adopted and they aren’t depressed like that. They’re so happy! Wasn’t Steve Jobs adopted? I mean these people need to move on . . . (CT 2018, online)

<sup>87</sup> Yngvesson notes that although one of the meanings of ‘gratuity’ is ‘given or received without cost or obligation’, another is: ‘unearned’ (2002:227). When one is given something of great value that is *unearned*, this can create a feeling of obligation – the obligation to prove oneself worthy of that gift through pleasing, conforming and performing. This is a tremendous burden; I cannot shake the feeling that I am constantly *auditioning for my own life*. Am I worthy? Do I deserve it? Is my life *justifying* this fortunate and undeserved twist of fate?

<sup>88</sup> Julie, whose story was relayed in Chapter 5, has also used this analogy to describe her experience as an adoptee:

I always described adoption as layers of an onion, you’re constantly opening a new layer and you go along and then it will sting for a little while. It will bring up something and then you move along and get to another layer . . .

unwillingness or unsuitability to be a parent<sup>89</sup>, or *simply erased* through silence. As Riggs (2012:462) asserts, this fails to acknowledge experiences of disempowerment, grief or loss in biological families and communities (or among adoptees themselves), or to validate the continuation of links between adoptees and their birth families. Some scholars argue that intercountry adoption is sustained by the invisibility of birth families (Willing et al. 2012). This invisibility enhances its ‘acceptability’ and reduces adoption to a simple commodity exchange that does not need to involve enduring or meaningful relationships between those who give/lose, those who receive/gain, and the child/adult who indelibly links them all<sup>90</sup> (Riggs 2012; Yngvesson 2002).

This simplistic rendering of intercountry adoption has de-legitimised and silenced my more complicated feelings about being disconnected from the woman I was born to, then ejected – exported even – from the country I should have called ‘home’. I do *not* see my adoption in terms of a simple exchange; and yet, popular narratives continue to compel such perceptions. Perhaps this is why the following statement resonates: ‘Adoption is like having all of your birth family die and getting a replacement family and being told by society how lucky you are that all of your family is dead but we gave you a new one’ (Russell 2000 in Baden 2016:13).

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<sup>89</sup> For example, it is not uncommon for Asian female adoptees to be told (as Julie was) that their mothers were ‘probably prostitutes’. Korean American adoptee and researcher Kim Park Nelson found:

In the course of my doctoral research on adult Korean American adoptees, I was particularly disturbed to learn that many of the women in my study had been told as a matter of simple fact while growing up that their Korean mothers were probably prostitutes, or that they themselves would have probably ended up as prostitutes if they had not had the good fortune to be adopted. There is no evidence that South Korea’s sex industry has been a major supplier of adoptable children in Korea . . . The most likely source for this pervasive myth is not Korea, but the United States . . . [The] myth of Asian woman as prostitute is so widespread in American society that it stands as an easy corollary to the birth country portion of Asian adoptees’ stories . . . (2013, online)

Although I have not been told that my mother was a prostitute, I have nonetheless been subject to perceptions that my country of birth is a ‘backward’ place that I should be glad to have left. There is usually no consideration of the loss that I, or my birth mother, may have endured. Most recently, over dinner with a group of acquaintances, my research became a topic of discussion. Not long into the conversation, a smiling, earnest acquaintance exclaimed: ‘Well, at least you didn’t grow up in *Korea*!’ In a separate instance, after expressing some discomfort over being adopted, I was asked incredulously, ‘Would you have preferred to grow up in an orphanage?’ Interactions such as these indicate that for some, intercountry adoption is not thought of as complex, ambiguous or involving any dislocation, but is simply considered as a transfer from a ‘bad’ to a ‘good’ life for which the recipient should be grateful.

<sup>90</sup> I am cognisant here that some adoptees feel no need to think about or find their biological families, and that these perspectives are just as valid as my own. I am also conscious that: circumstances of relinquishment vary greatly across cases, times and countries; not every person, even if given all possible support, wishes to parent; that in some instances abuse and neglect are perpetrated by biological relatives; and that reunions with birth families are not always pleasant or lasting. Hence, I am not seeking ‘to privilege or reify biological kinship, nor to argue that all [biological] mothers should (or should want to) parent their children’ (Kim 2009:868). Instead, I wish to tease out some of the feelings and perceptions that underpin my perspective on my own story.

Similarly to Yngvesson (2002) and Riggs' (2012) views, Smolin argues that in the triad of birth family–child–adoptive family, 'the child is inherently and permanently connected in profound ways to all of the other triad members and links the triad members to one another' (2004:284). In my twenties I wrote to a friend that my genes gave me the 'building blocks' of who I am. I still feel deeply that I am in *some* way connected to my biological parents. The biogenetic fabric of my being derives from theirs. I see them every time I look in the mirror, and I feel their presence every time I reflect on the aspects of my personality that simply appear to be part of my 'wiring' (and I seem to have a lot of those!). I did *not* materialise out of thin air into the arms of my adoptive parents. Aligning with Yngvesson's incisive statement, I 'came from someone, and from somewhere, and [bear] the traces of that elsewhere, just as [I bear] traces of the pull, the desire that links [me] to the adoptive parent and adoptive country' (2003:23). Therefore, when others infer that my biological parents have no value or are 'bad stock' who I should be grateful to disassociate from, does it not follow that *I* am inescapably marked – at least in part – by that same worth-less-ness?<sup>91</sup> I have always felt a deep sense of shame about being adopted, in part because it signifies that I, like my parents, might be defective and inadequate.

During this research project, I had my own biological child. Simultaneously, I began to encounter the critical scholarship described in Chapters 2 and 3. These works recognise and explore the 'intersectional forces of gender, class and race inequities' (Sidhu 2018:2192) that are implicated in transnational adoption. Importantly, they also surface various stories of birth family experiences, where traditionally they remained as 'ghosts in the room' (Gunsberg 2010 in Willing et al. 2012:465). For example, in her study of Vietnamese adoptees, Williams cites the following story from a fellow adoptee:

I arrived safely in Australia [in 1975 as part of Operation Babyift], into the arms of my wonderful new family – complete with three older sisters. My Vietnamese mother knew none of this. Four months after she had left me at the babies' home [urged by the father], she returned with my grandmother to collect me. When she arrived, the place was deserted. I had disappeared without a trace. My mother told me she fainted on the footpath that day. (Turner 2003 in Williams 2003:142)

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<sup>91</sup> Articulating this aspect of my sensemaking about my adoption is uncomfortable for many reasons, including the criticism it invites from those who do not share the same perspective, and the potential for it to cause hurt, confusion, or even anger. It is also *academically* uncomfortable to draw upon 'essentialist' notions of biogenetic connection and to maintain that I feel that my parents are 'a part of me'. Wills, herself a Korean adoptee and scholar, states that minority and ethnic studies 'continue to be deeply invested in the idea that people's identities are not biologically derived and self-contained but rather "constructed" and relational' (2016:205). I indeed concur, for example, with the notion that 'race' is a construct, and not a biological given from which one's subjectivity and place in the world should follow. However, as Wills (2016:206) points out, people with fractured pasts continue to connect their present subjectivities with their origins.



Anthropologist and adoptive mother Kendall (2005) relates the stories of other birth mothers. Based on fieldwork conducted in Korea in the 1970s and 80s, her work relays instances of extended family members ‘forcibly’ placing children for adoption:

My village sister introduced her friend and told me . . . ‘Her husband is away in the army. Her mother-in-law threw her out and is forcing her to get divorced. Her mother-in-law is sending her baby to a foreign country.’ (2005:167)

Stories of husbands sending children abroad are also recounted:

The woman burst into tears. ‘When I was young,’ she said, ‘I got divorced. It was the marriage before this marriage. I had a daughter. My husband sent her to a foreign country to be adopted. She may have gone to the United States. She may have gone to Germany. I never knew.’ (Kendall 2005:168)

In a time and place where women were commonly at the mercy of their husbands and extended relatives, intercountry adoption was an expedient way for families to be dissolved, and burdens removed. Williams (2003), Kendall (2005) and other adoption scholars (e.g. Dorow 1999; H. Kim 2007) have provided invaluable insights into the deeply personal and painful stories of ‘birth parents’, and the ways that entrenched power structures have resulted in the loss of children.

As I reflected on what it might feel like to separate myself, or be separated, from my son, I realised, along with others (Riggs 2012), that biological families are de-humanised in much intercountry adoption discourse. ‘They’ (mothers and fathers in developing or non-western countries) are often not thought of as being like ‘us’ (mothers and fathers in the developed or western world). They are not our neighbours, parents and friends. My adoption file states that my mother was poor, unmarried, and worried with ‘much anguish’ about the fate of her child. I do not know if this is true. However, I do know that for much of my life, I (and those around me) did not consider what that ‘anguish’ might have looked and felt like for a living, breathing human being who was/is perhaps not so dissimilar to myself. She was faceless, foreign and ghost-like; she had merely a shadow of humanity.

As a consequence of these realisations, I no longer look at adoption as merely part of my individual story. I now understand it as a by-product of inequitable distributions of power and wealth, with profound, complex and highly variable impacts for *all* members of the adoption triad. When adoption is framed in this way, the notion that seeking biological family is a ‘betrayal’ or an expression of ingratitude appears frustratingly obtuse in its narrowness and singularity of perspective.

Recalibrating my perspective on this has been intensely unsettling. Juxtaposing my adoptive family's silence (or unawareness) about the complexities of adoption *with* those very complexities has created a wedge of disconnect between us. Korean American adoptee, researcher, and blogger JaeRan Kim explains a similar experience:

My own parents have never been able to talk about the elephant in the room, but I know that the idea of losing me was the reason they were unable to talk to me about my adoption. The sad thing is that by not talking to me about their fear of losing me, they forced me to find other people to process my adoption with and caused me to segregate my life. Thus, as I began to get my poetry and essays published, I never told them. As I began to get involved with Korean adoptee organizations and activist groups, I did not tell them. I didn't talk about my feelings about traveling to Korea. I didn't tell them I was doing a birth family search. (J. Kim 2007, online)

The elephant in my room is that adoption has affected me deeply, despite the assumption from others that it is an aspect of my past that is either benign or 'lucky'. I continue to feel an instinctive compulsion to conceal my feelings and actions related to my original family and culture, not only for reasons of personal privacy – these are indeed highly personal matters – but also because I continue to be wary of the assumptions and reactions that may follow a greater level of openness. For Ballard, a Vietnamese American adoptee and scholar, the conundrum that one's own personal story precipitates such misunderstandings is a 'narrative burden', a *blending and intertwining* of 'identity, source, origin, and story . . . with difference, dialectics, and discomfort' (2013:242). Discussing my adoption brings a risk of stigma, of surrendering control of my story to a naïve, insensitive or even hostile audience, and of grappling uncomfortably with unclear boundaries of privacy, concealment and disclosure (Ballard 2013:238–239). Walton (2019) has further argued that these pressures and considerations constitute the 'emotional labour'<sup>92</sup> of navigating life as an intercountry adoptee. The associated suppression of emotion and complexity, and the need to manage others' perceptions, then becomes an enduring source of personal difficulty<sup>93</sup> (Walton 2019:27). The 'narrative burden' and 'emotional labour' of telling my story and contending with resultant misperceptions, or choosing to hide my story to avoid such tensions, are central to my present-day experience of being an intercountry adoptee.

A fear of 'insulting' adoptive parents – including my own – has remained with me in the fifteen years that have passed since I first began to investigate my heritage. Within the frames of

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<sup>92</sup> Emotional labour is understood here as the 'emotional toll' of a role, subject position or activity (Walton 2019:21).

<sup>93</sup> Walton also makes the incisive, and very important, point that the emotional labour experienced by some intercountry adoptees is '*not innate* to being an adoptee because adoptees' experiences are structured and variously shaped by transnational and transracial adoption processes' (2019:16, emphasis added). This suggests that complicated emotions related to adoption are not pathological or predetermined, but are intricately connected to the dominant understanding that intercountry adoptees should be 'grateful, lucky and saved' (Walton 2019:26).

powerful cultural narratives that were widely accepted at the time of my adoption in the early 1980s, and which still infuse conversations about adoption today, it can be difficult to express a perspective on searching for biological family that would not vex, sadden or outrage someone, somewhere. Speaking about seeking my first family could be interpreted as a damning indictment on my adoptive parents, on all adoptive parents, or on adoption as a method of family formation – and that is not my intention. Nor do I intend to ‘replace’ or ‘reject’ my adoptive parents, returning to where I ‘really’ belong. Rather, I seek with this autoethnographic voice to challenge invalidating and disempowering views that adoption can be simplified as a complete erasure and replacement of a terrible life and inadequate family with better versions of these, and to illuminate the potential implications of such views for adult adoptees.

I must restate: I had a ‘happy adoption’. Yet parts of *my* self, and *my* story, are unknown. And despite the discomfort, fear or anger it may cause others, I do still wish to find them.

## **Relating to biological family post-reunion**

### ***Strangers, but kin?***

Chloe and Ellen, who met their families in person at the age of 12 and in their late 20s respectively, both described feeling a sense of connection and emotion upon meeting their biological relatives that was nonetheless offset by geographical and language barriers, and by lifetimes spent apart. Ellen reflected on some of these contradictions:

Yeah it’s a bit funny . . . because [my husband and I] went back in October and we saw [my Korean family] . . . And my brother speaks English so he translates, but my mother doesn’t speak English at all. And my sister can, but she’s so shy that she doesn’t. So I think it’s sad, it’s just it’s so hard to have a conversation, so sometimes it just feels really weird and you don’t know what to talk about.

Then at the same time, like at the same time [that] it feels awkward, at the same time it just feels like we’ve known each other forever. And like, when we said goodbye we were all crying, but I’ve only met them twice, and I barely speak to them when I’m home, so it’s like, what is it that?

Like there’s this connection that’s sitting there . . . but we can’t talk. It’s funny but it’s like I don’t actually know them, I don’t know them at all, so it’s a really odd feeling and I don’t really know how to describe it. . . we’re always keen to see them, but I don’t know . . . They’re important without being everyday important I suppose . . . I don’t know where it will go either to be honest with you.

Relating to her family seemed to involve, as Ellen recognised, an “odd” juxtaposition of connection and care on the one hand, and distance and awkwardness on the other. She had not

shared any life experiences with her family, did not know them well, and did not share their language; these divides appeared to affect the extent to which they could form close relationships. Yet simultaneously, it also felt “really emotional” and “like [they’ve] known each other forever”. These sentiments were echoed by Chloe:

They are [important to me], yeah. In the sense that, like I do feel like they’re like my family, but I don’t know, we’re not particularly close. Like my sister got married and had a baby and I only found out about it through Instagram. Yeah, but I mean, in the sense that they’re my family and I care about them and, yeah. Probably that’s the extent of it.

Chloe later elaborated on this sense of simultaneous connection and disconnection with her biological family, explaining that it was hard to communicate openly and honestly with them about herself and her life in Australia. She indicated that a desire to avoid causing discomfort had led to an instinctive inclination towards withholding certain details about herself.

It is a bit weird, my [Korean] sister, I think I mentioned, she recently got married . . . Has a little baby. It’s – in a way, I feel very connected, even though I haven’t even met my niece. In a way, it’s almost sad that I feel like I’m missing out, I feel very disconnected in a certain way, despite the fact that we share DNA . . .

I was actually having a conversation with one of my friends about potentially going over, and visiting my niece. I felt like it would be really strange about being honest with them about my family back home . . . A few years ago, I decided to become vegetarian. I feel like I wouldn’t be able to tell them that I couldn’t eat all these lovely dishes that they’ve prepared for me, and things like that.

I’d essentially go over there and lie about the person who I am in Australia, and eat the meat, to tell them everything was fine with my family. I think because I wouldn’t want them to worry about me, or something like that. Yeah, it’s a bit of a strange one.

Hannah, meanwhile, told an extended narrative about meeting her biological father. She very generously shared an email that she wrote to her Australian family describing this meeting, which occurred over lunch at a restaurant in the Korean countryside. She was accompanied by her husband Michael<sup>94</sup>, and joined by two of her father’s sisters and their husbands.

We met my father at a restaurant in the country. It was actually a typical Korean type of meeting. As we got out of the cars at the same time, my uncle said, “This is your father,” and we looked at each other and went into the restaurant! I didn’t know what to say, I couldn’t even remember [hello:] *Anyanghaseyo*. It was a little bit strange, but we all sat down and ate *bulgolgi* (beef and rice and side dishes) and the *soju* flowed (we had Coke) and it was okay . . .

I showed my father a lot of pictures and gave him some presents and played the violin for him. He gave me his email address and I gave him my Cyworld [Korean online social network]

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<sup>94</sup> Any names that participants mentioned have been substituted with pseudonyms.

address, which will be good, because [my Korean friend] Ellie can translate anything for me and I can ask him all the hard questions without being rude and putting him on the spot. He said that I have my mother's eyes and cheeks. I don't take after him much at all . . .

Ellie had written out my life story in Korean (and printed it over a picture of me on pretty pink paper), and my father was pleased when he read about my music history because he plays the guitar. He is a carpenter. Michael said that he reminded me of my dad at home, because he had tools in the back of his car.

Like I said, I was my usual laidback self, but I think it was a little harder for him. Drunken Uncle (who was really living up to his name) gave me a bottle of *soju* to pour for my father and when I did, he cried. An important Korean thing. He held my hand, and as it was cold, he said I had poor circulation, I think. Serious Uncle muttered something about taking ginseng, but I was able to communicate that it was because of laziness. I said in Korean, when it comes to exercise (pretending to be active), I don't like it (*an jo ah*) but Michael does (*jo ahn he*). He understood and laughed.

Before we left, he said *mianhamnida* (he was sorry) so I said *gwenchansamnida* (it was okay). Like most Koreans, we weren't melodramatic, but it seemed fitting. Apparently, he hadn't slept for three days, but I told him I was happy, and we will be able to communicate in Cyworld in the future . . .

[We] both feel that things went well, and that we will meet all of the family again in the future and as often as they like. They were all very kind, and even though it was an awkward situation, they didn't treat me at all awkwardly. Even Drunken Uncle, who was continually giving us thumbs up and joking (at our expense, I suspect).

Looking through my skewed and partial lens<sup>95</sup>, I discerned in Hannah's description of meeting her father: some uncertainty and discomfort; gratitude and kindness; creative solutions for translation and communicating; feelings of calm; and some emotions and stress points. Like Chloe and Ellen, Hannah's account conveyed a dual sense of being amongst both 'strangers and kin' (Melosh 2002) with her biological relatives. She was welcomed and shown love, but also continued to be distanced by language, and a lack of shared experiences.

Hannah received only one email from her father before learning ten years later that he had (recently) passed away. When she learned of her father's death, she described it as a "shock", also recognising that it had a deeper impact on those who had shared their lives with him:

On January 13 this year, [my father] had a heart attack and stayed one week in the hospital before passing away. He was 61. It was very sudden and my First Aunt seemed quite emotional still. *I felt shocked and sad, but that it was very much her loss and not mine.* He was her big brother – he was the first of five, she is No 3 and the first daughter (hence, First Aunt). (emphasis added)

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<sup>95</sup> I have not met my biological family, and it remains hard for me to imagine what it is like coming face-to-face with 'blood' relatives. In trying to interpret the meaning participants gave to their experiences, I felt somewhat like I was stabbing in the dark, and was very self-conscious of my 'outsiderness' in this respect. To overcome this particular dissonance I focused on the *verbatim texts* of participants' transcripts for reliability (see Chapter 4).

Generally, my participants' accounts of meeting their biological families appeared to be incongruent with any overarching sentiments that these were their 'real' families with whom they 'really belonged'. The meetings they described were not simply a matter of: "oh, we just love each other and everything's so happy" (a commonly-held outside expectation identified by Ellen). Instead, more nuanced pictures emerged from these stories, in which language and cultural differences, and lifetimes spent apart, continued to affect the strength and meanings of these relationships.

### ***Confronting unknowns and misinformation***

Both Chloe and Ellen also mentioned discovering that their parents were still together and that they had multiple full siblings, a revelation that is not uncommon amongst Korean adoptees reunited with biological relatives<sup>96</sup>. Ellen recounted:

Yeah, so [my parents] still are [together]. They weren't when they had me, because they'd broken up, and then they got back together and then got married and had two other kids, and yeah I was shocked. I don't know, I think in my head, whenever I thought about it, I thought oh yeah, maybe one of them might be dead or both of them might be dead, like I don't know, maybe they don't want to talk to me . . . Then to find out like there's this whole family sitting there was just like – I mean, what do you say?

Chloe's parents had also been married, and she discovered three siblings as well:

So I kept thinking that my parents were married, my birth parents that is. It turns out that they were, and not only that they were married but they had – I have two older sisters and a younger brother, which was incredible. I met all of them.

I met my parents at first, which is a very surreal experience. I never really know how to describe it to people when they ask what it was like . . . Then I met my sisters and my brother and my grandparents and aunty and the whole lot. So many people . . . who had no idea that I existed up until the fact, the point that I had tracked down my parents.

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<sup>96</sup> Heaser (2016) identifies a number of sources that describe the omission of information, or the provision of incorrect details, by Korean adoption agencies. This includes Korean-American adoptee author and activist Jane Jeong Trenka, who reflected in one of her memoirs:

One cannot live in Seoul as an adoptee for long without noticing that something is terribly wrong. Of the about two hundred adoptees who live in Korea long-term, there is an overrepresentation of adoptees who have been reunited with their families. Those adoptees who have been reunited with their families know exactly how they came to be adopted, and usually, the story their Korean families tell is not the same story that the agency told their adoptive parents at the time of adoption. (Trenka 2009 in Heaser 2016:7)

Heaser also referenced discovering 'fabrications' in her own adoption file (2016:7), exposed when she met her biological family.

For intercountry adoptees, finding out the ‘truth’ about one’s origins can be hindered by scant information, fabricated stories, and a myriad of complications related to cultural, linguistic and political divides. Both Ellen and Chloe appeared to indicate that a lack of information had led to some surprise when they each found out that their parents were still together, and, that they had multiple siblings. Yet for Chloe, clarifying some of the most intricate details of her past is less important than maintaining respectful and positive relationships. She reflected on what *not knowing* the specifics and circumstances of her adoption means for her:

I think it’s a strange dynamic . . . the last time, I went to stay with them where they live. I can understand very few Korean words, but one of them I know is sorry. And [my mother] just kept saying I’m sorry, I’m sorry, over and over again. I didn’t really know what to say, like . . .

And the question I very often get when I tell people that I’m adopted, is why they decided to give me up for adoption. And I don’t have the answer to that, but don’t ever really – it doesn’t matter to me, I don’t think, having the answer to that. And I never want to ask my parents, I just feel like it would cause them too much pain so, yeah.

Hannah spoke of her surprise over the story she had learned from her paternal relatives about the actual events surrounding her adoption. In Hannah’s case she found out that her adoption agency had provided false, yet surprisingly elaborate, information about her family’s circumstances. She described the story that the agency told her when she visited with her adoptive mother at age 15:

Eastern Child Welfare said, oh your mother and father were married and they had your brother, and they were very poor. And your mother had to have several abortions. But when she fell pregnant with you, there was no money, and the grandparents were sick, so she was talked into giving you up for adoption. That is why you have a brother, and you were sent to [the adoption agency]. So that’s the story they told, and [my adoptive mum] was writing it down, just like oh, you know, this is it, this is what happened . . .

However, over two decades later, Hannah’s paternal aunt had relayed a very different story:

My aunty said: oh no, your parents only knew each other so briefly, we’ve never met your mother, we don’t know anything about her. And your brother is only your half-brother, he’s not your full biological brother . . . And yeah so now I kind of think all the rest of it, none of that was true. But that’s ok. Because I understand that’s normal. That’s what happens to everyone, it wasn’t just me.

Like Chloe and Ellen, Hannah gave the impression of being respectful of her biological family’s feelings and sensitivities, and was determined to be satisfied with the information that she *was* able to access and substantiate to the best of her knowledge. She elaborated on her feelings about this as follows:

I sent my aunty a text message when I came home from Australia . . . basically, no pressure, but if you ever, you know, have anything you can tell me about my father growing up or anything

about the family I'd love to know. Just so I know. Not for any other reason. I've really tried to let them know every time, I wasn't there for any sense of apology or trying to make things right. It was just . . . I'm just interested. All the information . . . That's what I wanted, out of curiosity to know this stuff. And so I didn't hear back from her . . .

But also knowing other people finding out stuff they didn't want to find out, I'm very much, I guess in general, determined to be content with life. So I think well, nup, that's – I'll just leave it with that. Because if I'm meant to find out, I know that I'll go to Korea again another day and you know, maybe I'll find out more, maybe I won't. But what I have discovered about my family has been quite good. Nothing too . . . Except that my father had a heart attack. So I'm like, that's the one bit of medical history that I have, that I need to take care of my heart health.

For some adoptees, 'extra' unexpected information may potentially come to light when they do locate their relatives, while other details remain unknown, perhaps forever. Yet, within the context of this project, this situation did not appear to cause too much consternation for most of the participants; indeed they accepted certain gaps in information as a *part of their story*<sup>97</sup>.

### ***“Twists and turns”***

The discussion thus far has focused on some of the emotions, contradictions, unease and considerations associated with the participants' biological families. Following is an examination of how some interviewees' relationships with their relatives have deepened or taken unexpected turns. Both Hannah and Adam reported that they had grown closer, or desired to grow closer, to particular members of their biological families over the past few years.

A decade after meeting her father, Hannah received an unexpected letter from her half-brother. She indicated that this communication had instigated a closer relationship that she wanted to pursue further, particularly in light of her adoptive father's passing in late 2015:

I got a letter, a hand written letter from my brother . . . and I wrote to him, and he sent me a photo . . . And then, well what happened is, my Australian dad died last year. And so I really wanted to keep that connection with my brother . . . I'm surprised I feel emotional about that now. I just . . . I didn't have any energy to . . .

But his letters were really interesting. He was really kind and just saying stuff like you know, good on you, go for it. You know that Konglish, it doesn't make 100 per cent sense. But the sentiment was so kind . . . I was really surprised, and I wouldn't have blamed him for not wanting to take that on again, you know, just the thought of having a sister, because he's gone through his own struggle, losing his dad as well.

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<sup>97</sup> This was another aspect of interviewees' stories that made me conscious of my 'outsider' status in relation to their lives and narratives. When I think of meeting my biological family, I imagine finding answers to unanswered questions; I simply do not know what it is like to confront further silence or additional, unanticipated questions.



So it's all very . . . *twists and turns*. And I feel like the next time I go to Korea, I may find a part of the puzzle that makes all the other ones redundant again. Just . . . you don't know what it's going to be. (emphasis added)

In a further development, Hannah received another letter from her brother the day after our first interview, and sent me an email elaborating further on the meaning that this relationship held for her:

. . . when I exchanged some letters with my Korean brother (just before and after [my adoptive] dad died in Nov 2015), it was the best thing and the hardest thing. My Korean brother was so kind and supportive, more than my Aussie brother – or was I projecting? Already I feel like we have more in common.

My relationship with my Korean brother is like the unicorn of sibling relationships. Maybe I was afraid of it not working or wanting to keep it special. I wanted to keep the conversation going but somehow did not.

This morning when the mail came, there was a letter from my Korean brother. The first communication for about 9 months. I have dropped it around to a friend for translation. I'm sure he wouldn't tell me off for not replying but of course I feel a bit nervous about what it says. And curious that it arrived out of the blue after just speaking to you! So that chapter remains to be finished.

Hannah's connection with her brother seemed fond and special, yet also fragile and tentative, as they embarked upon getting to know each other. Like Ellen, Hannah also expressed some uncertainty about how the relationship might evolve, alluding to some of the unknowns, complexities, and sensitivities involved in the extra-ordinary circumstance of reuniting with family after intercountry adoption.

Adam connected with his mother and older half-brother after meeting his maternal aunt in Sri Lanka when he was 16. His mother now lives in Japan, and Adam was able to talk regularly with her over Skype, before meeting her in person when she flew to Australia for his twenty-first birthday. Adam described their time together as warm and emotional, and a valuable opportunity to hear more about her life:

And you know, I guess waiting at the international terminal for her to come out of the gates was probably the most emotional I've ever been in regards to my adoption. Because it was literally like, the last time I'd physically been in contact with my birth mum was when I was two weeks old. And then I was just about to turn 21. So it was incredible to think that after all this time we were finally reuniting again . . .

[She] was out here for about ten days or so. And that was wonderful. Probably one of the best things I've ever experienced. Listening to her life story, how much she struggled and how much pain she's gone through. And how much she's really, or how far she's come since the days that she had nothing, really. Literally had nothing . . .

However, while Adam expressed that his relationship with his mother had generally been very positive, relating to his extended family and his half-brother had been more difficult than he had anticipated. He recounted his brother's first and only visit to Australia, not long after they first began communicating over Skype, and the frustration and anger he felt about their time together:

. . . probably about six or seven months after we started talking and getting known to each other, my half-brother actually said I want to come out and visit you . . . So he came over and met my group of friends – and it was probably the worst experience I've ever had. And the reason I say that is because it was more like the big brother trying to assert his authority on the little brother . . .

And I was 16, I was like sort of thinking: this is my family, this is my friendship circle, don't come here and tell me what to do because you're older than me . . . that's just, you know, he hadn't grown up – because he'd grown up in a village and I'd grown up in a first world society. So it was like two completely different worlds had collided.

In this instance the divergent cultural expectations around familial authority had impacted upon Adam's feelings towards his brother in significant, yet unanticipated, ways.

Another difficult episode occurred years later, when Adam's cousin invited him to this same half-brother's wedding in Sri Lanka. After booking his flights, Adam was told not to come, as the rest of his extended family did not know who he was<sup>98</sup>. After some discussion with his cousin and his mother, Adam made the decision to still attend the wedding, describing it as an extremely painful experience:

. . . it was probably the worst thing I've ever experienced in my life . . . I could physically see that nobody knew who I was. People were looking but I was told to blend in to the crowd . . . I had to sort of not be seen. And when everyone else was sort of occupied I had to slip in to the back of the church and sit at the back with sunglasses on and suit and . . . had to not look at anyone, say anything to anyone.

And then after they walked down the aisle my cousin came and got me and said you know, you just sit in the car and wait until all the photos are done . . . So I sat in the car in 45 degrees with the air conditioning on for 2 hours. Just sitting there doing nothing because I wasn't allowed to be seen by anyone. Which was literally . . . Probably the most hurtful thing I've ever had to experience in my life. Really was. And yeah I didn't really know what to do or what to think . . .

It broke my heart in so many different ways that I can't even explain. You know, it's – you're with your family but they don't know that you're there. Because I could see my aunts, my cousins, like all my blood relatives, and they don't know that I even exist. It brought me to tears. It really was so hurtful.

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<sup>98</sup> Adam's mother had been estranged from her Catholic family over her decision to marry a Buddhist man (Adam's half-brother's father, who was killed in an accident before Adam was born). The revelation of an illegitimate child placed for adoption would presumably have caused significant scandal and further risk of alienation and conflict.

Despite the hurt caused by this experience of ‘outsiderness’ and the stigma of illegitimacy within his biological family, Adam continued to talk with his mother over Skype, and invited her to his engagement party in late 2015. She flew to Australia with her husband Daniel, and Adam had the opportunity to discuss the wedding with her, which he described as a “turning point” in their relationship.

So on the way home my birth mum and I and Daniel were having a big discussion in the car. And I’d never told them how I felt after the wedding. And we were all in the car driving home in tears because we didn’t know . . . And I explained to her, you know, how worthless and useless I felt in, at the wedding because I wasn’t meant to be there in the first place. And she said, you know, it definitely wasn’t the way she wanted it, the whole wedding was a shamble anyway. She’s so sorry for how everything panned out . . .

And yeah so, I guess that was like a turning point in our relationship, because we were able to re-discuss our experience from the heart. And no question was too much of a question. Even [my fiancé] and my birth mum had a few fairly deep conversations, and that was really nice to see them both connecting and talking and getting to know each other.

Although Adam expressed that he would still like to know his extended family, he accepts that this is unlikely. Nonetheless, he considers his biological mother “family” and has taken steps to build a strong and honest relationship with her. Hannah and Adam’s stories of reunion illuminate the varied and unexpected outcomes that can result from meeting biological relatives. In some instances, connections are strengthened and become mutual, authentic relationships. In other cases, however, familial and sociocultural values limit the extent to which meaningful bonds can be forged between adoptees and their first families. This ‘dialectic of closeness and distance’ (Docan-Morgan 2016:113) strongly characterised some participants’ relationships with their biological relatives.

### ***‘Real’ family?***

Finally, some participants also gave insights as to whether they considered their biological families to be more ‘real’ than their adoptive ones. For instance, Chloe made the following comment, referring not only to the relative importance of her adoptive and biological families, but also to naïve assumptions made by others about her familial connections: “People would ask if I’m going to live with my birth parents once I’d met them. I was like, no, that’s ridiculous, my parents are my parents” (Chloe, 28). And although meeting his biological mother and half-brother had no doubt been a focal point of Adam’s life, he expanded by describing how he views his adoptive and biological mothers very differently:

My adoptive mum is my mum . . . You know, she is my rock, and she is the one who taught me everything I need to know. My birth mother is my mother. She is the one who gave me life. And she is the one who gave me an opportunity for a better life. But that's all she's done. There's nothing more that she has done for me. And I'm not saying that in a rude way. But it's the reality . . .

You don't have to be blood to be family. That's how I see it. And that's literally how I see it. Because you know, my mum and dad mean to me, mean so much to me. But they're not blood. But they're family. And even though my birth mother is family, she's not. But I still have a great relationship with her . . . But she's not. Because she was never there.

Ellen echoed Adam's sentiments:

It's weird, and you don't know, I don't know what to call [my biological mother]. I don't really want to say, oh my mother, and I do tend to say mother, because to me my mum, my adoptive mum is my mum, but I just, I don't know what to call them, so it's really weird.

None of these particular participants – Adam, Ellen or Chloe – indicated that they felt their biological relatives to be ‘family’ *in the same sense* as their adoptive relatives. For these participants, being *parented* (mothered) by their adoptive mothers informed their use of a personal and familiar term of endearment: ‘mum’, while the *social distance* felt from their biological mothers underpinned a more formal, less intimate term: ‘mother’. In this way, ‘belonging’ was tied not to genetics – but to the strength and depth of social relationships.

## **Relating to adoptive family as adults**

Co-existing with the notion that biological families may be more ‘real’ than adoptive ones, is the persistent ‘fairytale’ adoption discourse that positions adoptees as protagonists in their own uncomplicated ‘rags to riches’ or ‘happily ever after’ stories (Latty 2016; Williams Willing 2004). Some participants indeed celebrated and felt very positively about having been adopted; strong social bonds with their adoptive families appeared to underscore these perspectives. However, others indicated that their relationships with adoptive relatives were much more complicated.

### ***“I view my family as my family”***

Several interviewees spoke about how close they were with their adoptive families (who they simply considered ‘family’). For example, Adam expressed, “my mum and dad . . . mean so much to me...they're not blood. But they're family.” Meanwhile, Tahlee wrote about a particularly emotional time in her life that drew her closer to her adoptive mother in particular:

Shortly after my 18th birthday, my dad passed away extremely suddenly and very unexpectedly. Naturally, this rocked the family unit and through it my mum and I have developed a much stronger and deeper bond. My brothers were married and parents themselves by now, and had their own commitments, so it was just mum and I.

I remember going back to work and life moving on in some ways, but at home it was like a protective and safe bubble at home, just for mum and I. We got heavily involved with following tv programs, movies and eating!! Lol There was a time early on, that mum and I even moved our beds into the loungeroom, so that we could be together, not having to part and we felt safe there.

Tahlee described her present-day relationship with her adoptive mum as “very close . . . more best friends and less parent/child.” The robust relationships she had formed over her lifetime within this close and supportive adoptive family unit, underscored her feelings about them. To Tahlee they were simply, ‘family’:

From as early as I can recall, I was told by my mum, dad and brothers, (echoed by close friends and family), that I was their “prayed for” baby. I have experienced nothing but positive feelings, great love and enduring affection from my family and friends. I view my family as my family . . .

As far as I’m concerned, there’s genetic and spirit (like nature and nurture), my parents and siblings are simply that to me as they have performed the role and satisfied all the requirements of mum/dad and siblings. The de facto couple gave the magnanimous task of parenting me over.

For Tahlee and Adam in particular, their close relationships with their adoptive families were anchor points in their lives, foundations from which the rest of their stories flowed. Alice too expressed a sense of satisfaction and secure belonging in her adoptive family. She reflected: “I do essentially feel lucky that I was adopted. And I know some adoptees hate that. But I feel lucky because my life is good, and my parents are good and my family’s good.”

By contrast, several other interviewees (including Julie and Ellen, whose stories appear in Chapter 5) spoke about very challenging, difficult or hurtful interactions with their adoptive relatives. The following discussion considers some of these experiences, highlighting in particular how the divergent racial backgrounds of some of the adoptees and their families became the source of problems that marred or disrupted connections.

### ***Becoming estranged***

Several interviewees mentioned that they were no longer in contact with their adoptive parents. Ellen reflected that ceasing contact with her adoptive father, brother and sister was a by-product of manipulative behaviours and dynamics in her family:

I think the difference between us is I feel like I went and did that psychological work to get out of that pattern of bad behaviour, and in doing so I realised that they're still in it . . . It was just a really highly toxic environment to be around them, and all of, actually everyone in the family, and that's pretty much why I don't speak to them, because it's just healthier at this point in time for me to do so.

Like Ellen, Chloe was estranged from her adoptive parents at the time her interview took place; they had not spoken for around a year. This situation appeared to be a particularly dramatic turn in their relationship, as by her own admission, Chloe's parents had been "incredibly supportive" during her childhood, encouraging her to connect with Korean culture and meet her biological family. However, despite this earlier support Chloe described how the relationship breakdown had since been precipitated by interactions around 'race', belonging and family. Hence, her position as a transracial, intercountry adoptee seemed central to their estrangement. She explained that their relationship breakdown was preceded by her adoptive sister choosing to marry an 'Asian' man:

I mean the catalyst is definitely my sister getting married. And she married someone who's from a Filipino background. And there was . . . just something that I've never seen from my parents before, in that they felt very much like my sister and I were denouncing whatever non-Asian part of our identity it is. And you know, she was running, and going and joining this [Asian family] that she's found now. And she's found where she's meant to be.

Which was from both my sister and my perspective, it was something that was very much fabricated, something that they had in their head, and something that never ever was [an issue] growing up . . .

It's difficult to say [what happened], because they said lots of things that just didn't really make sense and sound rational to me. Potentially there was something going on there that I don't understand that does have to do with the fact that we're not of the same race.

Chloe expanded on the role of 'race' and, by extension, transracial intercountry adoption, in her estrangement from her parents, indicating a propensity in her parents to overlook the significance of their racial differences:

But obviously there were issues and like, just in terms of culture and identity issues that they wouldn't understand being white and me being not . . . That was definitely a factor in what happened about a year ago now. So yeah, just remember things that they wouldn't understand, like subtle, very micro forms of racism which they wouldn't want to think was a big deal but I honest – I felt it . . .

I think one thing I do remember and reflecting on it now that [One Nation politician Pauline Hanson's] back in parliament again, at the moment . . . Well, the first time it would have been twenty years ago now that she was in parliament so I would have been about eight, around that age. I remember having – I'm not sure why I remember; obviously it was a very important thing to me at the time – a conversation with my dad about him having quite supportive views of her

politics, like One Nation, and my uncle actually was a member of the party and volunteered for them<sup>99</sup>.

And I remember having a conversation about her not liking people who looked like me, and my dad not really understanding that. I'm not really sure why, I guess because for him I maybe wasn't one of the people that she was talking about because she was talking about people coming here as immigrants from overseas, but for me I felt like she was talking about people like me – so that was maybe an example.

The fallout with her parents had prompted Chloe to reflect on the significance of adoption and 'race' in regard to her familial relationships more closely than she had in the past. And, in the course of these reflections, she had also begun to identify how racial differences had likely underpinned some previously unnoticed disconnections during her childhood, and ultimately, a complete relational disconnection in adulthood.

### *Navigating tensions in adulthood*

Although Hannah was still in contact with her adoptive family, she too expressed that some of her familial relationships had taken unexpected turns in recent years. She commented: "I had a really great upbringing and close family, but in the last few years it's kind of unravelled quite a bit." Hannah spoke very poignantly about her adoptive dad, who had passed away around a year before our first interview. It seemed that for most of her life they had had a close, special relationship:

Family legend has it that when I was wheeled out at the airport as a baby, I was fast asleep. When I woke up, I looked straight at my dad and smiled. My sister said that I had him wrapped around my little finger ever since. He would literally have done (and sometimes did) anything for me, in a way that my mother didn't (and she still did quite a lot). He was also quieter than Mum and never wore me out talking!

However, a decline in her dad's health, and tension over an inheritance led to a shift in their relationship in the years prior to his death. Hannah explained:

Even before my dad died, he was sick for a long time, he had open heart surgery like 15 years ago, and then had diabetes, and then he was on dialysis. So there was this decline where I kind of feel like he wasn't himself anymore . . .

The next part of the story goes a bit King Lear. In a very, very condensed summary – Dad wanted to give us three children his 1400 acre farm. I walked away, so he gave it to my brother and sister (and willed me the home that Mum lives in). I wanted it to be peaceful but it broke Dad's heart because he wanted us all to have it together and be friends forever.

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<sup>99</sup> The founder of the conservative One Nation party, Pauline Hanson, asserted in her maiden speech to the Australian parliament that Australia was 'in danger of being swamped by Asians' who 'have their own culture and religion, form ghettos and do not assimilate' (Hanson 1996, online).

It was a good decision for my little family but not for Dad and I. It felt like I lost his love in the last few years.

Some of this story was communicated to me through an email, to which Hannah attached a number of photographs. These showed her: as a toddler being carried on her dad's shoulders; as a child standing with her dad, presumably on his bushland property; and as an adult on her wedding day, looking back towards the camera as her dad escorted her down the aisle. Hannah's relationship with her dad (and its maturation over the years) was clearly a very important part of her personal narrative, one that illustrates the preciousness and also precarity of close family relationships. Being adopted appeared to be immaterial to Hannah's experience of loving, and being loved, by her "Aussie dad".

Hannah described her dad and adoptive brother as "two sides of a coin". She expressed that she had never been close with her brother, and that as adults they had grown even further apart. In this case, adoption did appear to play a strong role in their relational distance:

Years ago, my brother and his wife went through many rounds of IVF to have their kids . . . His wife suggested adoption, maybe from India because our dad was from there. My brother was dead against it, because he had worked very hard for his stuff and he didn't want it to go to someone else's kid when he died . . .

I don't think he knows I know this, but mum thought she should tell me, for some reason! So now I have always had in the back of my mind that to him, I am "someone else's kid".

Although this disclosure of prejudice did have a bearing on Hannah's opinions about her brother, for her it was more impactful that at times, her brother had made insensitive remarks about her children's Asian heritage.

One of the reasons I don't get on with my brother is he thinks it's ok to make fun of being Asian because I'm his sister. It gives him permission to do that . . . Once when my oldest [daughter] was about four or five he said to her at the dinner table, a lunch, lots of people there, he said to her, "Oh have you asked your mum where you get your slitty eyes from?" And I was like, I was stunned. I didn't know what to say, I just changed the topic . . . I kind of feel like yeah, I can't be too close to situations that may produce that kind of comment. So we'll just keep each other – you know, it's safer over here.

Despite a more positive relationship with her adoptive mum, Hannah also made mention of the fact that she too had, at times, made discriminating and insensitive racial comments around her. She recounted:

The other funny thing my mum said once was, I don't know how it came up, but you know in Korea you don't see people with disabilities very often . . . I said to [my husband], have you ever



seen, we've never seen the whole time, a Korean person with a disability. And my mum said, "Oh they all look a bit like that." I was like, "Mum!" And she was like, "Oh, you know what I mean." Because you know how they used to call Down's Syndrome mongoloids.

In contrast to these relationships, Hannah described her relationship with her adoptive sister as quite close. The tensions Hannah felt to varying extents with her adoptive brother and mother, combined with her dad's passing, her warm relationship with her adoptive sister, and her reconnection with her biological brother, had caused her to consider more attentively the meanings of family and adoption. She reflected that for her, 'adoptive' and 'biological' did not appear to correlate neatly with closeness or similarity. She characterised her connections as fluid and complex, rather than formulaic and fixed:

My brother and sister, who are my parents' biological children, we can see where they get their various traits from. But my sister and I have the most in common. We have that sister bond that neither of us have with our brother, who's her biological sibling.

Definitely nature takes over in some respects, where it doesn't affect your relationships – it's just one little factor. And when people say things like, "blood is thicker than water", I just find that so intriguing. Because I'm not quite sure how that applies to me in lots of ways.

Hannah also explained how the fluidity of her relationships with various family members had shaped how she came to identify her own family unit – consisting of herself, her husband, and their two daughters – as her 'real' family. In response to a question about her preference for familial terminology, she answered:

I say "biological", just because I think it's more of a descriptive term, not an emotional one. It's just that's how you'd classify it. Or I say "Korean family" and "Australian family". But I'm not particularly worried about if it's different, because sometimes I will say a different thing and not notice it . . . The one thing I would never say is "real family". 'Cos that changes and I just, I think *my real family is my husband and my children*. (emphasis added)

Hannah and Chloe's narratives are two powerful examples of how family relationships can evolve in adulthood and take unexpected turns that continue to inform sensemaking about family, adoption, and belonging. They show that adoption into a loving family is not a formula for ensuring uncomplicated lives and simple relationships, any more than being born into a biological family may be. Moreover, their stories reveal that commenting on phenotypical differences in disparaging or insensitive ways, or denying how differences can be salient for transracial, intercountry adoptees, introduces layers of complexity that can have enduring negative effects on familial bonds. There are instances in their stories of subtle variants (in contrast to more overt manifestations in Julie's story discussed in Chapter 5) – of what Williams calls a 'disrespect of "difference"' (2003:58). Significantly, Hannah spoke too of wanting to support her children

throughout any such experiences of disrespect (subtle or otherwise), given their combined Korean and Indian ancestry:

The funny thing is, my husband is half Indian. So I kind of feel that it's just a wonderful thing that even though my dad was Indian and I'm not Indian that my children still have that Indian connection. And they're three-quarters Asian. So I'm very mindful of the fact that, you know, things will be different for them than it was for me, but I don't want to trivialise their experience of that and to help them celebrate it . . .

I used to think – because [my mum] would always say I'm being too sensitive. But I don't think I am . . . I think I need to be sensitive so that my children who are about to go through 'teenagehood' have someone who's maybe more understanding and not just, not from the school of tough love. Even though I think I aim to have a good balance of not pandering to them, but at the same time you have to be a little bit understanding and not just, "you'll get over it".

### **Forming new families: The significance of having children**

In May 2006, I visited Stockholm to give a series of talks about my research on transnational adoption in Sweden. While there, I spent time with several adopted adults whom I had interviewed over the course of the previous 8 years regarding trips they had made to visit their birth countries and in some cases their birth families. Since my previous visit, a number of these adoptees had given birth to children of their own, an event that carries a particular emotional charge in the context of a parent who was herself 'abandoned' by her mother at birth or shortly thereafter. (Yngvesson 2007:562)

As more intercountry adoptees come of age and move through adulthood, the effects of motherhood on adoptees' sensemaking about their dis/connections with family is beginning to be interjected quietly and sporadically into scholarly discourse<sup>100</sup> (Day, Godon-Decoteau & Suyemoto 2015; Yngvesson 2007). These works emphasise how having one's own children can be a catalyst for generating different ways of thinking about self, adoption and family, and it is into this still vacuous and (potentially) emotionally-charged space that this original research also speaks. Jacqui, Julie, Tahlee and Hannah already had their own (biological) children at the time of our initial interviews, and Alice gave birth to her first child not long after<sup>101</sup>. Most spoke in some way about the impact of becoming a parent on their thoughts about family or adoption<sup>102</sup>. I too

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<sup>100</sup> The topic of fatherhood remains even more obscure in intercountry adoption literature. As Yngvesson's (2007) research suggests, it is the abandonment by a *mother*, who has carried the to-be-adopted child in utero, that is most often foregrounded in the literature and in the minds of many who experience, speak or write about, intercountry adoption. Adoption remains, quite overwhelmingly, discursively feminine (Chen 2016:162).

<sup>101</sup> Although Adam also had children, his narrative focused on his relationship with his biological family rather than on how having children affected his views on adoption or family. Chloe, Ellen and Sam had no biological children.

<sup>102</sup> Hannah's narrative does not feature in this section ('Forming new families: The significance of having children'), as her insights on how her children have affected her perspective were discussed earlier in 'Navigating tensions in adulthood'.

have insights to offer here; my son was four months old when I commenced the interviews for this project.

***“Becoming a mum has put things in a different perspective for me”***

Several participants described having children as a catalyst for changing their thoughts and attitudes about themselves and *their* biological parents. Jacqui spent the first few decades of her life “not caring” about her origins or adoption. However, she described that when she became pregnant in her early twenties, she suddenly realised that she was going to have a ‘bloodline’. Jacqui reflected in new ways on the significance of her ‘bloodline’ and the continuity implicit in a biogenetic connection:

It was strange, it almost hit and I thought oh my goodness, I’m going to have my first bloodline now. And I never even thought of that. And I thought wow, I’m going to have this child that’s mine. She’s my blood. And she’s going to have looks similar to mine, or she may look just like me. She may have my mannerisms. So that was a really big turning point for me.

Jacqui also referred to “placing [herself] in [her] biological mother’s shoes” and realising for the first time that a severed connection between biological parent and child may actually have multifaceted impacts on both the parent and child:

So in a sense I was probably placing myself in my biological mother’s shoes, going, well I may be her only child. And she’s got no idea where I am, what I look like or anything. So that’s when I look at myself in the mirror and I’d say okay, I don’t know who I look like. I wonder whose nose I’ve got, or why have I got that face. You know all of those mannerisms and why do I do that, where do I get that from . . . So that’s when I probably started to think – I need to find out.

Although Jacqui did not actively pursue searching for her relatives until many years later (detailed more fully in Chapter 7), her daughter had been a catalyst for ‘realizing kinship . . . (backward) to her birth mother and (forward) to her unborn child . . . through which she herself [was] able to take her place in the world’ (Yngvesson 2007:563–564).

Meanwhile, Tahlee, whose narrative had portrayed some ambivalence about locating her biological relatives, also spoke of how *her* experience of motherhood prompted her to consider her own parents’ experiences of pregnancy, birth and relinquishment:

Becoming a mum has put things in a different perspective for me, as I travelled and am travelling through motherhood, I sometimes cast my mind to what ‘the birth people’ may or may not have been feeling or what was going through their mind when they discovered they were pregnant and the decision-making around arriving at the decision to give birth and relinquish me to the system.

However, Tahlee placed less emphasis on the significance of biogenetic connections than Jacqui did. She indicated that for her, a small but growing interest in her Korean family and heritage was not so much about recognising loss or realising resemblance, but about taking an opportunity to broaden and enhance her and her son's awareness of their shared history and background:

Now that I have begun treading the parent path, I'm a little more interested in where I came from. I realise a lot of people place a huge emphasis on where they came from and genetics, but I don't so much, or at least I don't believe I do. Having said that . . . I feel there is an untapped facet of me, (previously stated as fun or quirky, that I don't really attend to) that I'd like to develop. As for my son, I wasn't raised with fluency or proficiency in this facet (no fault or criticism to my mum), and it is something I would like to nurture/nourish in my son. In doing so, this is also motivating for me to nourish it in myself . . . I believe it will give him (and I) another few layers of understanding and being able to connect with people that otherwise we would not have.

In referencing the gaps in her own knowledge about her birth country, Tahlee's sentiments echoed the mothers in Day et al.'s study, who had 'imagined themselves interacting with their child about the child's culture, ethnicity, and race, and considered not only what was important to pass on but also what they were currently *capable* of passing on' (2015:364, emphasis in original). Learning about Korea was a chance to enhance an awareness of her and her son's heritage, with the potential to broaden their connections with themselves and others.

Like Tahlee, before *her* daughter's arrival Alice did not harbor much desire to connect with her family, or with Korea. She described adoption as a "non-event in [her] day-to-day life", and following her daughter's birth was caught off guard by her maternal feelings and her subsequent decision to make contact with her biological mother:

I recently-ish had a baby and was very surprised by my own maternal feelings, the pregnancy was a surprise and unplanned one. I never wanted children . . . Riding this unexpected maternal buzz I decided to try to get in touch with my birth mother. This is not something I thought I would do, my interest in adoption and adoptees being purely intellectual . . .

After Alice initiated a search, an adoptee support agency attempted to contact a woman in Korea who matched Alice's mother's details. The woman denied having placed a baby for adoption and hung up on the social worker when contacted by phone. Alice wrote about her unexpectedly emotional response to these events, expressing her hurt and anger, in a social media post that she generously shared with me:

I am disappointed but not at all surprised by this outcome. I'm not one of the adoptees that has yearned to be more Korean or has felt misplaced in Australia. However, I am surprised at the kernel of hurt, right in my chest, when I think about this. It only lasts for half a second and only when I dwell on it but it is not something I ever expected to feel.

I am sure this is my mother and the rejection, not once but twice is a little hurtful . . . part of me says, screw you birth mother! I suppose I should be happy that my life as it is will be unchanged, my life is good! Uncomplicated is good . . . I'm just very surprised at my own feelings on this, considering adoption has been largely a non-event in my day to day life, and something I thought I felt nothing about.

The experience of becoming a mother had provided Alice with a new perspective on her adoption, relinquishment, and the possibility of (re)connection, and had led to some unanticipated actions and emotions. Alice also explained that her experiences had caused her to think about motherhood, parenting, and the narratives adoptees are so often told about adoption, in different ways:

As a mother I find it hard to believe, that you can carry a child full term, allow 33 years to pass and then not want to know how they turned out. But I know that being a mother is a lot more than giving birth to a child, it is nurturing them, holding them and loving them. My REAL mother fed me the narrative of my biological mother loving me, she loved me so much she gave me up for another family, yada yada, in reality this makes no sense but as a child I believed this and I guess it was etched in my brain a bit and I never logically thought it through as an adult and asked her where the evidence for that is!

Threads of maternal love, dis/connection, inscrutability, myth and “a kernel of hurt” were entangled in Alice’s narrative about herself, her adoptive and biological mothers, and her daughter. Alice and others’ sensemaking processes about adoption after having their own children reveal that this pivotal life event can prompt unexpected developments in an adoptee’s attitude towards their biological parents (their mother in particular). The physical experience of bearing and birthing a child caused realisations that their own mothers had borne and birthed *them*, prompting curiosity around the feelings and decisions that would have pre-dated their adoptions. Tahlee also became cognisant of the opportunity to enhance her son’s awareness of *his* (and by extension, her own) heritage. In these ways, having biological children ignited participants’ desires to know more about their own birth families – a development that could lead to uncertain and unanticipated outcomes.

### ***“It does impact our children”***

Both Julie and I had experienced a desire to connect with biological family *before* having our own children. In this regard, becoming mothers precipitated, broadened and/or renewed our pre-existing perspectives. For Julie, her children underscored the personal significance of genetics, and provided a counterpoint – and some explanation for – her feelings of disassociation from her adoptive family:

For instance, my father used to pick on me because I would be so picky about food and it hasn't been until I've had children of my own and they're so fussy and picky about food and I'm like, "Oh, man, it's genetic" . . . and he just never got it . . . he said, "I just can't read you." . . .

I think we live our lives as adoptees in adoptive families, where you're constantly hearing, "Oh, biology doesn't really matter," because that's what they'll say. You just assume that that's correct and it's not until you have your own children and live your life with them year after year after year and as they're getting older, that you suddenly go, "You know what, biology has an awful lot to do with it."<sup>103</sup>

Julie also spoke about realising that her children have a stake in her orientation towards biological relatives; because *they are their relatives too*. In some ways this position echoes Tahlee's experience of wanting to "nurture and nourish" a connection to Korea in her son, despite not having made that connection herself during childhood. Julie described her children's interest in knowing their biological grandmother, which had subsequently prompted her to commence an active search for her mother:

Yeah, well, I actually am still in the process of finding them, so I'm actually doing some active searching at the moment and I've also just recently done my DNA test . . . I had already gotten to a place where I was very peaceful with my life, with my experience, I was happy. But it wasn't really until I had my kids, that I suddenly just went, you know what . . .

You know, my daughter said to me, she goes, "Oh, I wish we knew my tummy grandma." 'Cos I call my birth mother my "tummy mummy" . . . So, you know, *it does impact our children* and that's why I have more incentive now to search for them, although I'm very aware that, if I find them, it opens a whole new can of worms . . . (emphasis added)

Alice too expressed that in many ways, her search was "more for [her daughter's] sake than [her own]".

I have also become aware of the stake that my *son* has in my search for biological relatives. He has inherited traits, tendencies and perhaps even medical vulnerabilities that he may one day want to know more about, and my actions will play a role in his ability to access this information. I wrote about this to Alice, commenting that I was "worried about regret, for both myself and [my son]" and that searching for relatives was "perhaps for our shared benefit, so that we both might know part of our genetic history". Moreover, like Tahlee and the participants in Day et al.'s (2015) research cited earlier, my son's arrival prompted me to become more aware of my *distance*

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<sup>103</sup> Julie's experience contrasts strongly with those that foreground 'nurture' in the formation of self. For example, a domestically adopted participant in Colaner, Halliwell and Guignon's research reflected: 'I consider my nurturing . . . is what made me. You know. I look like my birth parents, but I—my personality and a lot of that is . . . clearly . . . how I was raised' (2014:478).

*apart* from Korean culture and language. Wall, an academic who is also mother to a child adopted from Romania, claims: ‘For adoptive parents, it can be practically difficult to familiarize themselves with and cultivate their child’s original culture; they are often unable to access and reinforce elements of their child’s culture to any depth in everyday life’ (2012:327). Indeed.<sup>104</sup>

Although my family owned and displayed trinkets and books from Korea, Korean culture<sup>105</sup> was never a part of the *fabric* of my life – not even a little. My son has also been cut off from a place, culture and people that he may desire to know many years from now. Adoption has an indelible impact on adoptees’ children, too.

### ***The importance of social relatedness***

My evolving relationship with my son has also triggered a realisation that our *social connection*, rather than merely our genetic bond, is the pivotal factor in how we relate to one another. Julie described the “instant connection” she felt with her children, beginning in pregnancy, and spoke about recognising the similarities – rooted in genetics – that she and her children shared. By contrast, I was surprised to find that I did *not* see myself mirrored in my child. Even now, three years after meeting him, he is only just beginning to feel like ‘mine’. Although he looks (and is) half Asian, he does not look or act much like *me* – more like an Asian version of his father! He is his own little person, and I am clearly not his only maker.

Hence, instead of materialising an instant and ‘magical’ sense of connection arising from our shared genetics, our relationship has developed and been *built*. We have formed a meaningful and loving bond through living in close contact with each other, spending time, getting to know each other, and seeking to connect with authenticity and openness to each other’s unique personalities. Our relationship reinforces the importance of social interactions, shared experiences, sensitive and respectful awareness of each other’s individuality, and consistent caregiving in forming a ‘connection’.

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<sup>104</sup> Yet, unlike an adoptive parent with a level of agency, *I* did not choose intercountry adoption; choices about my cultural and linguistic awareness and abilities were made *for* me, and now (bar considerable effort) I will pass on this legacy.

<sup>105</sup> I acknowledge here that there is no singular, essential ‘Korean culture’. However, there are certain shared practices, understandings, histories, customs, stories and ideologies that many Korean people would be aware of, and which may, at various times, infuse their everyday values, speech and behaviours. For example, I remember two non-adopted Korean Australians at my baby shower speaking about a soup that Korean mothers eat after giving birth – which I knew nothing about – and bowing to each other and mumbling a Korean farewell as they left. Even though they did it with a giggle, indicating that it was somewhat foreign to them as well, it was evident that they had nonetheless been exposed to certain ‘Korean’ practices and phrases. The ‘intricate layers of Korean culture’ (Walton 2009b:240) were present in their home lives in a way that they were not for me, nor most others in this study.

Furthermore, I see how my adoptive parents regard him no differently to my sister's (their biological daughter's) children, and how *he* knows them as those special people called 'Grandma' and 'Pop'. For now, genetic relatedness seems irrelevant in his intergenerational landscape. Like Alice, whose attempts to connect with her biological mother prompted in her a renewed awareness that her adoptive mother was her "REAL mother", my son has bolstered my recognition that my adoptive family *is* my family – just as he *also* compels me to also consider my connections elsewhere. Like Hannah, then, I am not quite sure how the saying that "blood is thicker than water" applies to me.

Adoption continues to present itself in my life like a tangled skein of wool. Some threads represent connections and others, disconnections; some contradict others, or are built on mere speculations that remain unanswered. This tangled bundle of experience and meaning has been further complicated – and in some ways unsettled – by a new human being with his own small but expanding skein that is somehow connected to mine. My son has taught me more about the multidimensional nature of adoption and reminded me that its effects cascade through multiple lives and generations in ways that *matter*. At the same time, he has also strengthened my awareness of the diverse and idiosyncratic complexity of human relatedness, prompting my appreciation for the foundations of care and time on which familial bonds are so often – yet not *always* or in *all* ways – built.

## Conclusion

In the introductory chapter of *Other People's Children: Adoption in Australia*, Cuthbert and Spark capture the contradictory tension between love and 'blood' present in many adoption stories:

Clearly . . . neither the narrative of family as 'blood' nor that of family as 'belonging' is sufficient to account for the interrelationships between belonging, family, identity and blood connections which constitute our dynamic and constantly shifting families and relationships – adoptive and other. (2009:10)

This chapter has teased out details of some of these interrelationships, by concentrating on the dynamic familial landscapes evident in participants' narratives and my own.

Many interviewees' reflections about searching for biological relatives unsettled the notion that one's 'real' family may be found in 'blood' connections. Instead, the social and emotional bonds participants formed with their adoptive families, forged within shared histories and life experiences, were the source of much greater meaning in their lives. Love and care – through



what Tahlee (and others) recognised as the “act of parenting” – did indeed seem to matter more than biogenetic connections alone.

Yet, a number of participants also indicated that ‘blood’ (a biogenetic connection) *can* and *does* matter too. As my autoethnographic account indicated, this can be difficult to acknowledge and honour within the shadow of powerful narratives (infused into practice) that stress full and exclusive parentage motivated by racialised hierarchies between nations, cultures and families. Meanwhile, Jacqui’s sentiments portrayed strong emotions and a longing for biogenetic familial connections. Even those who described feeling that adoption was a “non-issue”, at times felt curiosity and an urge to know their biological parents. In Alice’s case, not succeeding then brought with it an *unexpected* “kernel of hurt”.

Among those who were successful in locating their biological relatives, relationships were tentative, tender, and sometimes awkward or upsetting. They developed in unexpected ways for some interviewees such as Adam and Hannah, reflecting Docan-Morgan’s finding that Korean adoptees’ relationships with their birth families tend to be ‘dynamic and ever-changing’ (2016:113). In most cases, participants saw their biological relatives as both ‘strangers’ and ‘kin’. Although acknowledging an important bond, many also felt distanced from their first families; none acknowledged them as being more ‘real’ than their adoptive ones. These relationships demonstrate the effects of severing social bonds in early life. When adoptees separated in infancy attempt to reconnect with their biological relatives decades later, there is no magical ‘return’ to former, possible relationships; only the potential creation of new ones.

Some interviewees reported remaining close with their adoptive families throughout adulthood. However, others confronted conflict, insensitivities, and relationship breakdowns with adoptive family members in their adult years. In some cases these fractures were connected to racial differences and participants’ adoptive histories. Such stories point towards the enduring importance of *respect* and *sensitivity* about adoption and racial differences within adoptive families, and further reinforces that what constitutes ‘family’ is indeed ‘dynamic and constantly shifting’ (Cuthbert & Spark 2009:10).

For some participants, myself included, this shifting landscape expanded to include the creation of new families: partners, and our own biological children. These bonds prompted different and sometimes unexpected perspectives, understandings and actions, underscoring that adoption is not an isolated occurrence. Instead it can be an enduring and variable source of meaning in the lives of adoptees, and multigenerational in its effects and complexities.

Many of the stories and threads of stories told in this chapter reinforce that ‘connection requires work (it is not a biogenetic given)’ (Yngvesson 2007:563). However, they also invite recognition that adoption to the west is not a formula for a fairytale life or for persistent, close relationships. Thus a number of myths have been challenged by the accounts of the participants in this research: the myth of exclusive belongings that forecloses the importance or presence of biological families; the myth of ‘real’ families that calls into question bonds that are not preceded by ‘blood’; and the myth of a happy ending, whether it be an adoption fairytale or a fairytale reunion. Instead, ‘family’ appeared to involve contradictions, uncertainties, vicissitudes and disruptions, *as well as* love, supportiveness, consistency and care. The following chapter continues to explore the range of ways that participants’ self-concepts have evolved over their lives, shifting focus from family relationships to perceptions of their cultural identities.

## **CHAPTER 7 – CULTURAL IDENTITY IN INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTEES’ LIFE STORIES**

### **Introduction**

This chapter draws upon the theorisation of cultural identity discussed throughout Chapter 3, namely that within this research context it encompasses a *multi-faceted and processual sense of belonging* to social groups that have value or emotional significance. Part 1 considers participants’ retrospective reflections on their cultural identities as children and adolescents, drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977) concept of habitus to explain these recollections. Part 2 examines how participants spoke about their identifications as adults, exploring the significance of shifts in interviewees’ identities during their adult years. With the exception of Sam, who spent a significant portion of their childhood living in Asia after their adoption to Australia, all participants were raised in Australia from infancy during the 1970s and 80s and/or 90s<sup>106</sup>. Additionally, while Sam’s mother is Asian and Hannah’s father was Indian-Australian, most other participants referred to their adoptive parents as ‘white’. With this distinction in mind, the discussion considers how the interviewees constructed their cultural identities as *visibly* transracial intercountry adoptees from Korea, Vietnam and Sri Lanka, who grew up in white Australian families throughout this particular time period.

### **PART 1 – Into ‘whiteness’: Exploring the foundations of participants’ cultural identities**

#### **Growing up ‘white’: Experiences in formative years**

The most striking commonality between participants’ accounts was their reference to seeing themselves as ‘white’ during their childhood and adolescence. The use of this term was largely unprompted; it emerged organically throughout the interviewees’ narratives or in their responses to interview questions<sup>107</sup>. For example, Adam described his childhood self as “a white person in a

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<sup>106</sup> Jacqui also spent several years in the UK in her early childhood, but the majority of her upbringing occurred in Australia.

<sup>107</sup> Not all participants used the term ‘white’ to describe their childhood identity. However, even in these instances there was a tendency for participants to identify strongly with the Anglo-Australian culture of their adoptive family, and to not notice physical differences between themselves and their family members. For example, Korean adoptee Tahlee, who did not meet many other Asian people until her late teens, noted: “I wouldn’t say I wanted to be white, *I didn’t really notice any difference between my appearance and those around me.*” (Tahlee, 30, emphasis added)

dark person's body", and once asked his mother "when [he] was going to turn white". Meanwhile Ellen reflected: "to me in my head at that age I was white". Julie provided perhaps the most vivid description of her 'whiteness'. She relayed:

I remember growing up, looking in the mirror and I would get a shock . . . where you suddenly realise, "Oh, my God, that's me." I never related that image of me to me in my mind. The me in my mind was a picture of my sister: freckles, curling massive hair, white Aussie skin, tall.

In my own case, my adoptive mother recalls another Korean adoptee visiting our house one day when I was around four years old. After she left I exclaimed incredulously, "Mum! Laura looks *Chinese!*" Although I don't remember explicitly thinking of myself as 'white', this example demonstrates my propensity in early childhood to think of others who looked similar to me as foreign and racially dis-similar. And evidently, at an early age I was already beginning to verbalise the assumption that people who appeared Asian must be 'Chinese' – a commonly-reported generalisation in predominantly white, western societies (Park Nelson 2007). My early perspective, and those of other participants in this research, was therefore that my appearance and ethnicity was the same as my adoptive parents' – which, whether or not I thought of it in these terms, was 'white' Anglo-Australian. Drawing on the ways participants themselves described their cultural identities, I have therefore mobilised the term 'white' to illuminate related aspects of their various identifications.

### **Explaining 'whiteness': Family, friends and community**

Interviewees explained their 'whiteness' by referencing their family, peer groups, and the wider communities in which they lived. Most participants had limited access to Asian people or cultural practices, and considered whiteness as both the racial and cultural norm. Illustrative of this, Adam commented that:

I guess because I've grown up in such a white society it's like I was a white person in a dark person's body, if that makes sense . . . when I was very young, I asked my mum when I was going to turn white, assuming that *that's what was normal*. (emphasis added)

Meanwhile Jacqui reflected that the absence of an "Asian influence" in her peer groups had contributed towards her lacking interest in Vietnam:

My friends throughout school were white. I had a few Asian friends, but I didn't used to hang out with them or anything. So I think *not having any sort of Asian influence*, I didn't care about where I came from. I didn't care that – okay, I knew I was adopted, I'm a product of the war. I feel I had no interest. I don't care, I'm here. This is where I live. (emphasis added)

Like Julie, other participants highlighted that having white families caused them to identify with their family members' physical appearances – rather than their own. Although Ellen had grown up with an adopted Korean brother, she also commented that:

It's so hard because you're . . . *My family's completely white*. My mum's English, dad's Irish and so my sister is long-haired, blue-eyed. You grow up thinking you're Australian and then someone says something about the Asian over there . . . [And you think:] "It can't be me."  
(emphasis added)

Ellen's comments also emphasised the perceived confluence of 'white' with 'Australian' that was evident in most participants' accounts of their early lives. In asserting their whiteness participants were also asserting their belonging within both their adoptive families and mainstream Australian culture.

Interviewees who had Asian friends or lived in communities that they considered to be multicultural did not perceive that these circumstances weakened their identification as a 'white Australian'. Chloe was perhaps most illustrative of this view. She lived in a multicultural metropolitan area throughout her school years, has a sister who is also adopted from Korea, and travelled to Korea to meet her biological family in her early adolescence. Chloe's parents encouraged both her and her sister to become familiar with Korean culture by enrolling them in regular language and culture classes with other adoptees and Korean-Australians. Despite these efforts her family life was culturally western, shaping her worldview and occasionally resulting in a cultural divide between her and her *non-adopted* Asian peers. She explained:

I just assumed that, I guess the culture of whiteness was the default and I very much felt part of that, and wanted to feel part of that and didn't really want to identify with the Korean or Asian part of me . . . And I think it wasn't a conscious thing just because I grew up in a white family so I didn't really know anything about what it would be like living, growing up in a family that was you know, from a different background.

I do remember like you were mentioning with friends who are from Asian backgrounds, having lots of conversations about food all the time. And the different foods that they grew up eating and how they were sick of it and I used to fawn and be so jealous of the food they get to eat. But at the same time, where I would be sick of Sunday roast and sick of mashed potatoes, and just like – that's luxurious, indulgent food! So yeah, I do remember having those experiences where I didn't have the same kind of . . . things that you can talk about with friends from different backgrounds.

Ellen, who also grew up in a metropolitan area, reflected Chloe's sentiments about feeling disconnected from her non-adopted Asian friends, on account of differences between their immediate families' constitutions:

I had lots of Asian friends but they've always got their families so they fit in with their own cultural entity. Whereas all I had to go on was all these white friends and these white kids and their white parents and this white society.

The finding that participants in this project saw themselves as 'white' echoes earlier studies' results relating to intercountry adoptees raised in Australia and other western countries (Park Nelson 2016; Walton 2009b, 2019; Williams 2003). Walton, for example, found that her Korean adoptee participants not only internalised, but *embodied* white identities, 'forgetting' that their bodies appeared Asian, and instead, inhabiting 'white subjectivities' that included possessing 'white' bodies (2009b:189). The experiences and perspectives mentioned here suggest that this embodiment of a white identity is in large part a byproduct of what adoptee participants in Samuels' research bluntly termed: 'being raised by white people'<sup>108</sup> (2009:83). The emerging body of work around intercountry adoptees' cultural, racial and ethnic identifications implies that the 'whiteness' of their immediate home environments can substantially impact the feasibility of maintaining other, non-white cultural identifications in childhood and adolescence. As one Korean American adoptee has asked: 'if we are assuming that a person's ethnicity is defined by a shared religion, culture, language, and more, then why would I declare my ethnicity as Korean?' (Connolly 2014, online). In this vein, the inculcation of Anglo-Australian culture through familial and peer networks privileging these ideologies, language, traditions and food, facilitated interviewees' identifications as 'white Australian' in their early years. These identifications persisted despite efforts by some adoptive parents to introduce their children to their culture of origin through classes and camps.

### **Discounting racism and living 'normal' lives**

Of course though, my participants' bodies are *not* white, and subsequently, several of them reported experiencing some form of racism or racialisation on account of their Asian appearance. In contrast, however, with the findings of other adoption scholars (Williams 2003, and Gray's 2007 discussions of the 'older generation' of adoptees for example), many appeared to regard racism as an infrequent aspect of their formative years. Moreover, their experiences of racism did not, at the time, cause them to question their belonging in Australia, or to think more deeply about their racial or cultural identity. Alice and Chloe explained how racist comments were incidental to them while they were growing up:

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<sup>108</sup> Or, as one adoptee blogger has put it, being 'adopted into whiteness' (Mila 2017, online).

And in Sydney kids are pretty racist. I mean it's like late 80s, early 90s. Little kids are a bit racist, I mean when they're five or six years old, no one's taught them to be not racist. So I copped a bit of flak for being Asian, even though in Sydney it's pretty multicultural. But I *don't think it really bothered me too much*.

And then we moved up to northern NSW again . . . And it was super white. Not multicultural . . . But it was a private school so the kids were pretty well behaved. I don't think I really got any racism. Not overt racism, not at school. I'm sure there was some underlying stuff, but *nothing that I really noticed*. (Alice, 32, emphasis added)

There has only been a few moments. They stick in my mind for the very fact that they have been rare. Thankfully I don't get it very often. There have been the odd comments or things like that . . . Growing up, *I just brushed them off*. (Chloe, 28, emphasis added)

Tahlee, meanwhile, was home-schooled and did not encounter the word 'racism' until she was a pre-teenager. She viewed her Asian appearance as a relatively inconsequential facet of her life:

Racism was never an issue for me. I only heard the term once when I was about 10 years old. Someone asked me if I had been a recipient of racism which I responded "no". Thinking back, looking Asian was fairly insignificant.

Some interviewees did report more frequent occurrences of racist treatment. However, even Julie, who had experienced racism consistently during her upbringing, did not begin to question the social significance of 'race' or how her background as an adopted Vietnamese person might be important to her until many years later. She contemplated how her awareness of 'race' and racism had changed over the years:

The funny thing was, *I didn't actually ever consciously think about it*, like I do now. It's like it's just how I was but it's not like anyone ever had a conversation with me to help me be aware that, oh, actually, that feeling's not a great feeling . . . it wasn't until I moved to Sydney when I was in my 20s that I first came across adoption as a topic and I was literally in my mid-20s until that happened. (emphasis added)

It appeared that participants had not thought deeply or critically about experiences of racism, or their own racial backgrounds, during their childhoods. Their experiences were "normalised" (Ellen, 32) and seeing themselves as white "wasn't a conscious thing" (Chloe, 28). Ellen further explained that she "certainly didn't stop to think about [racism or identity] . . . that's just how it was." Expanding upon this disposition, she recalled having felt hurt by some instances of racism, but at the time did not question why or what it could mean:

I think I realised, because I felt the shock of the things, but I don't think I realised what it meant. . . Like I suppose in my mind it was just normal. Yeah, I think that's the only way I can describe it, so I think, yeah, I knew something wasn't right, but I didn't know what it was.

Thus, most participants described being focused uncritically on the here-and-now during their childhoods – on their immediate experiences, their existing social connections with family and friends, and on the everyday situations of ‘growing up’. In this vein, Adam spoke about his ‘normal’ upbringing that decentred cultural or ethnic background in regard to his sense of identity and belonging in Australia:

It was just sort of normal childhood in the sense of normality. You know, you have nice school friends, and you have nice teachers and you have sort of a nice lifestyle. You know, there was nothing really out of the ordinary that really went astray I guess . . . you go through your friendship groups. You fall over, you get yourself back up again, you learn, you play, it was nothing out of the ordinary . . . I was in Australia doing my own thing, living my own life, growing up in a society which to me was normal.

In concert with the reflections of several participants, my own attention was seldom focused on how my Korean heritage might be significant for me during my pre-adult years. Instead, I was focused on ‘fitting in’ with peer groups and being regarded positively in social settings<sup>109</sup>. I, and others, simply assumed the dominant cultural practices of our families and surrounding communities, overlooking or downplaying the social significance of ‘race’. This coincides with an anonymous informant in Kim’s study of Korean adoptees who noted: ‘Kids just want to fit in and be normal’ (2003:71). Decentering experiences that made them feel ‘different’ (while being unable to critically reflect on those experiences at young ages, with seemingly scant or no encouragement or support to do so) was a common response amongst my interviewees. For these participants, in their formative years experiences of racism did not destabilise their cultural identifications as ‘white Australian’; it appears that this is what they identified as and aspired to be. As a corollary of this identification, however, some adoptees reported developing particular attitudes and perceptions towards their own Asian features, and those of others.

## **Renouncing ‘Asianness’**

Several interviewees described feeling negatively about realising that they looked ‘Asian’, and resentful about being associated with other Asian people. For Ellen, this negativity led to her deflecting any racist or racialising comments directed at her on the basis of her appearance:

It actually hurt . . . I remember thinking when someone would make a racist joke, how much it would hurt to realise, oh they might mean me, and I just did not want to be around Asian people for that reason. I didn't want people to associate me being Asian, so I didn't want to be around

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<sup>109</sup> Nonetheless, I do recall being aware of how strange the physical differences within my family might have appeared to observers. This engendered feelings of embarrassment, but did not cause me to question my belonging or identity as an Australian. Issues of cultural identity were largely peripheral, and in parallel with Julie’s words: “this was just me”.



Asian people or Asian things, I just wanted to be around white people and white things all the time . . .

For Chloe, it was a source of frustration to be subjected to stereotypes about Asian people and assumptions of foreignness that did not correspond with their own experiences and self-perceptions:

I think I just didn't want, like I very much kind of tried to strip myself away of any typical Asian stereotypes or anything like that that I might have fallen into and I really, really got frustrated when people would assume things about me based on my heritage.

A number of participants also reported efforts to erase or obscure their Asian features. Alice mentioned rubbing talcum powder into her skin before school to make it “less brown”, while Ellen recalled wearing sunglasses in an effort to hide her “Asian eyes”, and prayed for lighter features:

A couple of things that stand out to me, like I remember when my mum passed away and I remember I was thinking at the funeral, like, oh I had quite this obsession with wearing sunglasses all the time, because then people couldn't see my Asian eyes, and then how could they tell I was Asian – which is, I know that was just ridiculous, because you can tell . . . I remember I used to pray that I'd have a lighter skin, I used to pray that my hair would be lighter, anything to make me more white. I was just – it's insane thinking about it now – but I was desperate for it back then.

Jacqui was more overt in her attempts to ‘be white’. She continues to dye her hair bright colours and sports multiple tattoos – which she positions as very western, ‘un-Asian’ things to do. Reflecting on the meanings of these bodily aesthetic choices, she connected them with trying to achieve whiteness:

I've said for a long time. I tried to fit in to be part of this white family and you know, anyone that knows me, I've nearly always dyed my hair outrageous colours. Covered in tattoos. So I think you know, that was my way of trying to fit in. Maybe that was even a way of lashing out, I don't know. And it wasn't that I was afraid or embarrassed to be Vietnamese, not at all. But I think . . . I lived my life differently so I would fit in and I would get accepted by society I suppose.

So, despite considering themselves as ‘white’, some participants did however have moments where they realised that they did not *appear* white. These precipitated various strategies of denial or erasure focused around ‘fitting in’ and/or seeking to align how others saw them with how they felt about themselves.

I do not remember making efforts to deliberately obscure my Asian features, but I do recall moments of being embarrassed and confused by my appearance. As a pre-teen I was fascinated by

the movie *The Girl Who Spelled Freedom* (1986) for the simple fact that the protagonist was an Asian girl (a young Cambodian refugee). I was fascinated, but also faintly alarmed and embarrassed, because she looked like *me*, with thick, straight dark hair, dark eyes and a ruddy brown complexion. Was *that* how I looked to others? I did not know what to make of this, and whether it was a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ thing. Did it make me ugly, or was it okay? I did not know, but suspected the former. *I* looked foreign to myself. Seeing a ‘reflection’ of my features was disorienting, jarring, and made me feel exposed as something strange and unattractive – and therefore a potential target for ridicule or exclusion.

Some interviewees’ reactions to Asian people included forceful dislike and mild annoyance. Their recollections portrayed that, apart from making efforts to distance themselves from being seen as Asian, they also held negative attitudes *towards* other Asian people. Julie described herself prior to her late 20s as “anti-Asian”, refusing to date Asian men and desiring Eurasian, rather than fully Asian, children. This sentiment regarding romantic attachments was also reflected by Alice and Ellen, who noted that they had never been attracted to Asian men. Tahlee, meanwhile, described her frustration over behaviours which she perceived to be typical of young Asian people:

It wasn’t until I was about 19 or 20 that I actually started having some contact and acquaintance with fellow Asians. Prior to this I had experienced annoyance at them – their Asian ways, on their phones, using their fluffy cushions in the cars, no sense of personal space, and running in their groups and speaking in their language.

It is a peculiar aspect of the intercountry adoption experience to feel aversion, dislike, or even hatred towards one’s ‘race’<sup>110</sup>. Yet it is increasingly evident in the literature that this is a common occurrence among intercountry adoptees, particularly those who were adopted prior to the 1990s, and/or who have not spent much time with others of a similar racial background. For example, Williams noted an ‘internalised racism’ (2003:100) towards Asian people in her research on Vietnamese adoptees, while Walton’s work on Korean adoptees identified a tendency to ‘develop a form of racial consciousness that [associated] a Korean body with something that makes them different in a negative way’ (2009b:185).

Reflecting on the ‘cultural identities’ of my participants (in their pre-adult life stages) I was struck by the ways they described *being* white. It was as if everything about them – mannerisms, tastes, behaviours, traditions, values, language, etc. – *was* white (bar their physical bodies, which some

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<sup>110</sup> While at a function in 2017 an adoptee of Chinese heritage, in her early 50s, declared to the group I was sitting amongst that she suffered from an “intense self-race hatred”. She attributed this hatred towards her ‘colourblind’ upbringing that suppressed the significance of what ‘race’ can mean to self and others, and her frequent, lifelong experiences of racism.

participants attempted to divert attention from). Thus, it appeared that in their pre-adult years interviewees had formed a foundational sense of self that included ‘just’ acting, thinking, feeling, valuing and speaking *as if* they were white, Anglo-Australian.

### **‘White habitus’: The normalised embodiment of white identities**

According to Pierre Bourdieu, habitus is ‘a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a *matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions*’ (1977:82–83, emphasis in original). Habitus thereby informs individuals’ tastes, preferences and expectations, and generates ways of speaking, behaving, feeling and thinking that are *instinctive* and *embodied* (Goode 2015; Reay 2004; Scollon, Wong Scollon & Jones 2012; Sweetman 2003; Walker 2011).

Critically for this research, one’s habitus is produced through processes of cultural socialisation that occur during the formative pre-adult years (Askland 2007), ‘particularly in the form of familial relationships’ (Matthäus 2017:80). This ‘experiential schooling’ (Adams 2006:514) builds the repertoire of understandings, competencies, aspirations and behaviours that individuals draw upon to make sense of, act within, and navigate through innumerable cultural domains known as social ‘fields’<sup>111</sup>. One’s habitus, then, is intricately connected with both individual and collective pasts. It reflects an individual’s biography and their unique (micro) experiences and personality, as well as the behavioural and ideological norms supported and sustained by the (macro) social fields they participate in (Askland 2007:240). Habitus can therefore also be understood as the ‘individual trace of an entire collective history’ (Bourdieu 1990 in Reay 2004:434).

This account of habitus provides a useful theoretical insight as to how ‘discourses of history and culture’ (Hall 1990:226) may be embodied by socially-situated individuals – in this case, transracially and internationally adopted persons in Australia. Given how the concept of habitus connects with shared practices, values, norms, language, etc., and the sense of identification and belonging these commonalities may engender, one’s habitus therefore both generates and is generated by one’s ‘cultural identity’ (see also Chapter 3). Importantly, it also illuminates why the

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<sup>111</sup> Cargile argues that Bourdieu’s concept of field is analogous to cultures, or ‘domains of social life . . . such as corporate, artistic, educational, athletic, or gendered fields’ (2011:12). A field includes ‘prescriptive rules and norms, but above all else . . . is a contextually-grounded, systematic manner of relating’ (Cargile 2011:12). A field therefore comprises networks of power relations, rules, resources, beliefs and values that structure and regulate social interactions and social positions in ways specific to that field (Cargile 2011). From this perspective, ‘white’, middle-class Australia might be considered as a social field wherein particular representations and relationships are regulated and maintained.

majority of participants in this research identified strongly, and at the time almost imperceptibly, as ‘white Australian’ during their upbringings. As they explained, their families, peers and communities were comprised predominantly of Australians of European heritage; they were ‘raised by white people’ (Samuels 2009:83) in a “white society” (Adam, 24).

As a result, I contend here that participants developed a form of ‘racialised habitus’ (Cui 2015) resonant with Bonilla-Silva’s concept of ‘white habitus’: a ‘racialized, uninterrupted socialization process that conditions and creates whites’ racial tastes, perceptions, feelings, and emotions and their views on racial matters’ (2003:104)<sup>112</sup>. Bonilla-Silva argues that a white habitus is produced through ongoing, informal racial segregation, and involves an interpretation of largely mono-racial communities as ‘natural’ and *non*-racial – just ‘the way things are’ (2013:139). As described above, many interviewees’ communities were predominantly mono-racial, which was considered “normal” and unremarkable. For example, Hannah commented about her hometown that: “only after leaving did I realise, it’s so white. It’s such a white culture. It’s like oh, I never noticed.” (Hannah, 38)

Initially, these perceptions may appear to be the result of a ‘colourblind’ upbringing, wherein ‘racial and cultural differences are considered not to be present or are disregarded’ (Walton et al. 2014:113). Adam, for example, mentioned that his friends and family “saw no colour . . . they just saw a person”. And in the majority of participants’ homes, their ‘race’ or ethnic heritage did not seem to be discussed as potentially inhibiting or enduringly relevant to their emerging senses of self. However, in parallel with Williams’ statements about her Vietnamese adoptee research participants, the childhood identifications of my interviewees can also be ‘traced to “whiteness” rather than transcending racial and cultural self- classifications’ (2003:120, emphasis added). This was evident in participants’ descriptions of their attitudes towards their own and others’ ‘Asian’ features. For as Ellen mentioned, “I didn’t want people to associate me being Asian, so I didn’t want to be around Asian people or Asian things.” I argue here that this ‘connecting of the subjectivated subject, social evaluation processes, and affectivity’ (Matthäus 2017:77) is not a colourblind perspective, because it is grounded in the view that ‘white’ is both different *and* preferable to ‘Asian’.

The aversion that some adoptees felt towards other ‘Asians’ during their formative years can be partly explained by the persistent discourse that ‘belonging in Australia’ equates to a white,

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<sup>112</sup> Although Bonilla-Silva’s (2003) work was grounded in data from American college and community surveys and primarily concerned ‘white’ Americans’ attitudes towards ‘black’ Americans, his assertions regarding white habitus bear several parallels with the experiences of interviewees in this research.

Anglo-Celtic body and heritage. This assertion is supported by numerous studies of the Asian (and non-white) experience in Australia (Ang 2001; Edmundson 2009; Graham 2013; Luke & Luke 1999; Morris 2006; Ommundsen 2003; Schech & Haggis 2001; Tan 2006), and also bears similarities to work undertaken in the US (Kibria 2000; Pearson 2010; Wu 2002).

A socially-situated habitus works to ‘structure representations’ (Mu 2014:499) of self and others, shaping ‘categories of perceptions, principles of vision, and division’ (Bourdieu 1998:53). As Cui points out, in societies such as Australia with histories of racism and racial stratification, these representations and symbolic boundaries are entrenched in an ‘internalized racial consciousness’ (2015:1163) that perpetuates racial stereotypes, cultural preferences and racial hierarchies<sup>113</sup>. Since participants were immersed in the social field of white, middle-class Australia both in and outside of their homes, they were shaped by and embodied the principles of a white habitus that in most cases, cast ‘whiteness’ as the normative mode of belonging in Australia, and ‘Asianness’ as foreign and undesirable.

These discourses of Australianness rendered ‘Asian’ as oppositional to interviewees’ early desires to ‘fit in’ and to assert the belonging that they felt as Australians in Australian families. Consequently, in this seemingly paradoxical environment that espoused colourblindness *alongside* racialised representations, the whiteness of participants’ families, communities and selves went unrecognised, and a number of participants responded to racism or suggestions that they may be Asian with affective or behavioural strategies designed to distance themselves from this identification. They – and I – had developed ‘white eyes’ in our early years; we looked at the world from the standpoint of someone who *was* white, and reacted defensively or with discomfort (however fleeting) to suggestions from others that we were not.

Critically though, while most participants were enveloped by the logic of a ‘white habitus’ in their childhood and adolescence, habitus, being both ‘transposable’ (Bourdieu 1977:72) and ‘generative’ (Bourdieu 1990:13), modifies. That is, one’s habitus undergoes continual *reproduction and transformation* throughout one’s life, processes that are generated by former

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<sup>113</sup> For example, both Edmundson (2009) and Schech and Haggis (2001) cite the 1994 work of Australian artist Hou Leong to demonstrate the peripheral and unsettling position that Asians occupy in the Australian national imaginary. Leong produced a series of images of ‘iconic Australianness’ – such as *Crocodile Dundee*, an ‘Aussie’ pub, and an ANZAC Day march – and digitally inserted himself, a man of Chinese descent, into the pictures. This juxtaposition conjured a jarring recognition of ‘the limits of non-white Australians’ abilities to read themselves into existing national icons’ (Schech & Haggis 2001:151); Leong simply did not ‘fit’ in the pictures.

experiences and attendant social conditions (Askland 2007:240)<sup>114</sup>. The dispositions that comprise one's habitus are the products of both constraints *and* opportunities related to an individual's past experiences (Reay 2004:433). As Reay explains:

while habitus reflects the social position in which it was constructed, it also carries within it the genesis of new creative responses that are capable of transcending the social conditions in which it was produced. (2004:434–435)

In other words, individuals are informed by the conventions and dominant discourses of the social fields in which they operate (in many ways they are *not* free from social influences) *and* they may also transcend and contribute to the transformation of existing conventions and discourses. Therefore, while individuals may carry aspects of the habitus formed in their early years throughout their lives, the potential also exists for both radical and subtle changes in their perspectives and identifications.

## **PART 2 – Moving through/beyond ‘whiteness’: Participants’ cultural identities in adulthood**

### **Home is back there? Long roads, loss, and ‘outsiderness’**

Some participants' thoughts about inhabiting a white Australian identity shifted significantly between their adolescence and the time of our interviews. Jacqui, adopted from Vietnam in the mid-1970s, reported the most dramatic change in this regard. She described her perspective in young adulthood by stating: “I used to say that . . . I don't care about Vietnam. Even my mother used to say oh, you should go over and see the country and I'd go – *what for?*” (emphasis added) Now in her early forties, Jacqui identifies strongly as Vietnamese and does not consider herself Australian. She spoke of this transformation by referring to ‘home’ – how she decorates her residence in Australia, and where she now thinks of as home:

If anyone came to my home they can see it's covered in Vietnamese souvenirs, pictures. Now if you walked in my home 20 years ago you wouldn't find one thing. So I'm trying to connect with my heritage now . . . People say: this is your home in Australia. I go, no it's not. Home is back there. This is just somewhere I'm living at the moment.

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<sup>114</sup> While some argue that the concept of habitus is an overly deterministic account of human action (see Adams 2006:515), others argue the concept acknowledges a ‘dialectic of conditions and habitus’ and allows for reflexive and creative personal transformation (Askland 2007:241,242).

As Jacqui's words allude to, the re-orientation of her identity from "not caring" and having "no interest" in Vietnam, to feeling that she *is* Vietnamese and Vietnam is her home, was a process that unfolded over several decades. As discussed in Chapter 6, the seeds of interest in her background were planted in her early twenties when she had her first child. Preparing to become a mother to a child who carried her genes prompted Jacqui to begin to think about the significance of her own biological family and the continuity implicit in a biological connection.

Jacqui's adoption and heritage thus began to assume relevance for her. However, she did not progress beyond a latent interest in her biological family until many years later. Facing a situation common at the time for those adopted during the Vietnam War<sup>115</sup>, she lacked any paperwork that may have assisted in locating her family, did not have contact with other adoptees who could encourage her or suggest strategies for a search, and was told by the agency that had facilitated her adoption that there was no possibility of finding a relative. As a result, Jacqui "kept hitting brick walls" and her stalled family search was mirrored by an ambivalent attitude towards Vietnam. This was evident in her description of her first visit there in 2004:

Okay, well the first time I went, that was in 2004. That was purely for holiday. I had no interest in digging. My mother actually took me back. I didn't feel anything, I didn't get emotional. It was nice to be able to walk around with obviously other Vietnamese people so I didn't feel the odd one out. It was lovely, but I didn't . . . I connected but not. That didn't come in until later.

In the years that followed Jacqui began making links with other adoptees from Vietnam through Facebook, which would become central to her sensemaking about her adoption and identity. She described the Vietnamese adoptees she has met virtually and in person as an "extended family" of "brothers and sisters" who support, commiserate and encourage each other in searches for family, identity and belonging. Through these networks she was able to find out about genetic testing services and family search strategies as they became available and more financially accessible. And as her connections with other adoptees expanded and her search began to look more hopeful, Jacqui's connection to Vietnam deepened.

Jacqui cited her third visit to Vietnam, for the fortieth anniversary of Operation Babylift in 2015, as the major turning point in her identification as Vietnamese. There, amidst the sights and sounds

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<sup>115</sup> Many Vietnamese babies and children adopted during the war lacked records relating to the circumstances of their birth or adoption. Fronek provides a succinct yet vivid description of the tumultuous circumstances in which children were airlifted out of the country to their new homes, underscoring the difficulties children adopted during those times may face later in life:

There were rumours and panic. Records were destroyed in orphanages, officials refused to sign papers, records were falsified, information on children was lost or absent, arm bands were cut off, leaving no means to link most of these children to their family and culture. (2012:449)

of her country of birth, she met with other Vietnamese adoptees from all over the world, visited the hospital she was born in, and participated in DNA testing. She vividly described the emotion and impact of this visit:

That huge big turning point for me was last year and I just didn't want to leave. I remember saying, I actually did a TV interview the day before I left. I said I'm dreading going home tomorrow. I said I don't want to leave here, I'm thinking of all of these things I could do to hide or avoid going, but I cannot. I came home really, really depressed. I was FaceTiming my Swedish adoptive friends, I was crying all the time. It really hit me.

I think what changed was because, it was [the Operation Babylift] fortieth anniversary reunion. We had adoptees come from all over the world to meet up last year. It was amazing. It was such a wonderful feeling to meet all these other adoptees that were just like me and had similar stories. Were desperate to find family. I think because I connected with so many of them, I think that's what did it for me.

The reorientation of Jacqui's identity from 'Australian' to 'Vietnamese' was not a simple nor a quick process, but rather a gradual opening up of herself to the personal significance of her adoption, and the attendant emotions and challenges. During the anniversary gathering, numerous threads of her experience – new opportunities for locating family, a sense of solidarity and shared experiences with other adoptees, and being in and experiencing her country of birth – converged to affirm and amplify emotions and attachments around being 'Vietnamese'.

Yet in many ways this was not a celebratory reclamation of Jacqui's 'original' or 'authentic' cultural identity – a point that reveals important subtleties about adoptee identity formation. Rather, her identification (imbued as it is with emotional affiliations) is also associated with difficult feelings of loss and disenfranchisement. When questioned about where she feels she belongs, she answered:

If you asked me the question about 10 to 15 years ago, I would say I'm Australian. Now, I'd never consider myself as being Australian, never . . . I love telling people I'm Vietnamese. I say, well I grew up in Australia. They go, well that must be nice. You go yeah it is – but you think about *what I've missed out on*. (emphasis added)

Jacqui was not alone in pondering what she had "missed out on" as an intercountry adoptee. Julie, whose story was retold in Chapter 5, also relayed a powerful experience of realising what she had *lost* through adoption, and the role this realisation played in her integrating her Vietnamese heritage into her identity. Julie described this experience, which took place during her first and only visit to Vietnam:

I was just bicycling around in the Mekong Delta and not being able to speak much Vietnamese, them not being able to speak much English . . . [I saw this] older woman in Vietnam and what



she said to me was profound because it was the thing that nobody had said to me in my whole life. We always get the, “Oh, you’re so lucky” when you tell them you’re adopted, right, because they think of material gains and everything else that you get from the First World.

This woman who was Vietnamese, said to me, “*Oh, you missed out on so much.*” I was like, “Wow.” It took me to come all these years, all the way to Vietnam in the Mekong Delta in the middle of nowhere to some probably uneducated peasant Vietnamese woman to tell me . . . I’ve missed out on so much and knowing my country, my culture, my people, my food, my language. She was so spot on and I think because it was a Vietnamese person who said that to me, I’ve always just connected and thought, “I really like the Vietnamese people because they got me.” Whereas Australians, I’ve never had that. I’ve never had the Australians just get it and know what adoption really is . . . (emphasis added)

Jacqui and Julie’s present identity constructions have thus involved them recognising the *personal value* of their country of birth and its people, language and culture, and the *losses* they have suffered through an estrangement from these things. Both Julie and Jacqui expressed frustration over popular discourses that diminish the loss of biological family, language and culture, thereby simplifying intercountry adoption as unproblematic material and familial gains for adoptees. However, while Julie’s encounter in the Mekong Delta (along with other aspects of her story portrayed in Chapter 5) enabled her to embrace a sense of pride about her background, Jacqui’s feelings about what she had “missed out on” were made apparent in other ways. She explained her strong emotions as follows:

I should be saying no, I am Australian – I’m not. Without sounding rude, I didn’t ask to be put into western culture. I’m very angry that I have not been taught about my own culture . . . I feel so strongly that I’ve been stripped of my culture. I hate that, I hate it. I really do. I should be able to identify a lot more with being Vietnamese than I actually do.

Jacqui’s assertion that she was divested of her culture exposes the abruptness and magnitude of her severed connection with Vietnam, and her frustration over the sense of cultural impoverishment she now feels. This separation from Vietnamese culture has led to feelings of embarrassment and exclusion both in Vietnam and among the Vietnamese community in Australia, as she explained:

But I think each time I return back to Vietnam it’s been obviously quite confronting, but in a way somewhat embarrassing too, you know. When you speak to locals and they say oh, where are you from and you say I was born here. Oh, do you speak Vietnamese and all that and I say no, and they ask me other questions. And that aspect of it has been embarrassing . . .

I’ve got a lot of Vietnamese friends that aren’t adoptees. I don’t have a great deal to do with them, but I see them occasionally. I mean I did the work with the Vietnamese communities last year and I tried to get my foot in the door . . . I tried to, I still felt like I was an outsider because they’re all . . . They’re Vietnamese and they know – they’re either born here or born there. I really should just go being Australian. It was really uncomfortable, so in the end I just stopped going there which is quite unprofessional.

It is evident then that despite the strong emotions and values Jacqui attaches to being Vietnamese, her *white habitus*, built during the years of identifying wholly as white Australian, creates a barrier that obstructs the fluidity and adaptability of her identity. Despite identifying as Vietnamese, she cannot easily make sense of or embody Vietnamese culture, language, practices or norms in ways that are seen by others or by herself as adept or capable. Hence Jacqui's story illustrates that for intercountry adoptees with a newfound wish to live or work in, or identify strongly with their country of birth, forging robust links may entail a protracted process of learning through some embarrassment and discomfort. A lifetime of being simply 'white Australian' cannot be quickly or easily undone. Jacqui's foundational 'white Australianness' is now a site of tension that sits at times uncomfortably alongside the cultural identity she claims. Nonetheless, in the absence of Vietnamese cultural knowledge, Jacqui decorates her home with souvenirs and trinkets, proudly proclaims her Vietnamese identity, and continues her search for her Vietnamese family while maintaining contact with a network of other adoptees. She also plans to visit Vietnam again soon, and hopes to live there in the future.

Many of the threads of disconnection apparent in Jacqui's story are also expressed in existing literature, underscoring the importance of these aspects of intercountry adoptee experiences. For example, Taft et al. noted of their research participants:

all seven intercountry adoptees have undertaken life journeys as adults back to their country of birth to understand better their *cultural* origins, and their inability to establish strong cultural ties features largely in their accounts of the experience. (2013:81, emphasis in original)

Similar multifaceted themes are also present in Jane Jeong Trenka's seminal adoptee memoir, discussed here by Wills (herself a Korean American adoptee):

Treated like a foreigner in both her adoptive and birth countries, Jane's hope for a stable, essential culture and space onto which she might hold is ultimately crushed. So readers are brought to an ironic situation: Jane's American adoptive parents see her as an embodiment of anti-essentialism, but in her narrative, Jane insists on the importance of biology and origin. Then, when she tries to prove those essential ties, Jane finds herself in the position of having to learn—having to construct—those cultural connections. Again, this ironic chiasmus does not disqualify Jane's efforts or her need for essentialism; rather, it reiterates how and why the quest for essence can be unending and often heartbreaking for transnationally adopted Asian/Americans. (2016:215)

Finally, and perhaps most poignantly, the experience of returning to one's country of birth and confronting an *inability* to 'fit in', was described by a participant in Walton's research on Korean adoptees. In this extract, the participant refers to adoptees' common experiences of alienation and

disappointment in Korea, relating these instances to their own time spent in the country, as well as the *different* misapprehensions adoptees encounter in their adoptive countries:

An undeniable aspect of my experience in Korea is that of feeling and being excluded, yet again. This uncomfortable feeling hits hard because it is in our motherlands, (our rightful country) that we experience it. We fly for thousands of miles from our homelands in America, Europe, and Australia. In our homelands are misunderstood, judged, even though we are fully integrated in the culture and language. So why would we want to experience it again? It takes tremendous courage to see all this through and live in Korea . . . I stayed for six months, others stay for twice that long, and others persevere for years. Every day happens to be an awkward moment . . . We look the part, and if we keep our mouths shut we can fake it, but inevitably we are so far out of our domain it's scary . . . For us, [it involves] a series of awkward, sometimes humiliating situations. (Participant in Walton 2009b:242)

Jacqui's story, along with the extant literature cited here, reinforces that 'narrative discontinuity' and the 'marginalisation of prior histories and relationships' (E. Kim 2007:520), can have deeply felt consequences for future identifications. Individuals who were adopted in infancy must contend with a loss of cultural knowledge and a lack of remembered lived experiences in their countries of birth. This constrains attempts to embrace and 'fit in' in their country of birth, and limits how such identifications might be integrated into a sense of self. For some, as the subsequent discussion shows, these identifications are positioned as irrelevant, or as lacking in meaning relative to present lives and priorities. However, for those like Jacqui (and for a time, myself) who desire to form a strong connection with their country of birth as adults, the path towards belonging can be complicated, emotional, and at times uncomfortable. This is the legacy of a 'white habitus' acquired in childhood. Jacqui's story illustrates the long and at times tentative journey that some adoptees take in integrating an affiliation with their country of birth into their self-concept. It also illuminates how loss and separation – rather than merely gain and good fortune – can shape and underpin that journey.

### **Embracing stability: The ir/relevance of roots and 'race'**

In contrast to Jacqui, several participants reported a more stable sense of identity from childhood through to the time of our interviews. Alice, for example, considered herself "just a regular Australian in an Asian shell". Continuing to identify strongly with the "western culture and ideals" on which her subjectivity was founded during childhood and adolescence, she indicated she does not wish to 'reclaim' or 'discover' a 'Korean' part of herself. Instead, Alice expressed a continued desire to distance herself from typecasts associated with being Asian, and feelings of frustration over assumptions that were sometimes made of her based on her appearance:

And I guess I don't really like the stereotypes that are attached to Asian people as well, maybe I'm perpetuating those by not really trying, by trying to disassociate myself with being Asian . . . I don't like if people look at me and just expect that I'm not going to be able to speak English because I look a certain way. I guess that's because I do consider myself Australian. The thing that bothers me the most that they're saying things about me based on the way that I look. Not the fact that I've lived here possibly for a lot longer than they have.

She explained that cultural knowledge and competency was key to her identity; she did not feel that she had any familiarity with Korean culture and therefore did not feel an affiliation – emotionally or cognitively – with Korea. She related:

I guess, well I guess it's just culturally, because I don't know what the Korean culture is. I know I've done things to offend my Korean friends, because I don't, I just don't know what the culture is, and they expect me to know it, because I look like I should know it . . . It just doesn't really come in to my being, my psyche.

This disconnection from Korean culture was reinforced for Alice when she visited Korea in her late twenties. Despite recognising that she felt like an 'outsider' there, she did not connect this with strong emotions or a sense of loss:

So I did go to Korea actually, two years ago with my mum . . . And it was interesting. I felt, still felt like an outsider. But people would talk to me in Korean, so it just made me a really awkward outsider as well. What's wrong with this woman, she looks Korean but can't speak it.

To Alice, Korea was just another "tourist destination":

I guess [Korea] doesn't really hold any real significance to me more so than any Australian that's interested in countries like Japan or Korea, I suppose. The developed Asian countries that are fun to visit and have quirky gadgets.

Similarly to Alice, Adam had not strongly integrated his Sri Lankan heritage into his present cultural identity. He mentioned being conscious of the differences between himself and others who were socialised in Sri Lanka:

I mean, meeting some of those friends' parents, they're all very, you know, they grew up in Sri Lanka, they only came over in the last, you know, probably 15 years. You know, very traditional, normal Sri Lankans, doctors, lawyers, all that sort of stuff. And then you've got me. And I feel like an outsider, because I never grew up with that.

However, this did not appear to be a source of strong emotion or frustration for him. Like Alice, Adam seemed conscious that he had no *cultural* connection with the country. The "lack of memories" he has in Sri Lanka also appeared to underpin his inability to feel like he *was* Sri Lankan. Instead, Adam considered Australia and New Zealand (where he visited extended

relatives throughout his childhood) as his “first and second homes”. He explained his sense of disconnection from Sri Lanka as follows:

I was only born [in Sri Lanka]. That’s it. Australia is home . . . New Zealand’s my second home. And Sri Lanka’s very close to that, but I don’t have enough memories to call it any more than that . . . I think it’s because I’m only physically Sri Lankan, but mentally, and with the way that I’ve been brought up, I’m not anywhere Sri Lankan at all. I was only just born there, and that’s it. So, you know, you can’t be defined from the country you were born in, whereas the country you were brought up in.

Hence, while Jacqui’s white Australian habitus undoubtedly impinged upon her desire to claim a Vietnamese identity, for Adam and Alice, their cultural socialisation in Australia was instead key to each of them having a stable sense of belonging in Australia.

Unlike Alice however, Adam expressed feeling an emotional connection to his country of birth. He considered it more than “just another tourist destination” and described feeling a sense of nostalgia and love for the country, while also considering it a peripheral or background aspect of his life:

You know, I think, and I said this to my dad when we went over for the first time . . . it feels like home. And in the sense of, this is where I’ve come from. I don’t belong here. But I appreciate . . . the country it is . . . I think the country itself, it’s not my second home. But it’s just one of those things that it’s just very nostalgic to me, and I appreciate every time, well both times I’ve gone back, I’ve had the same feeling. And I assume I’ll have the same feeling again when I go back again and again. Which is fine, but it’s just trying to I guess make sense of the feeling knowing that I was only there for six months. So I was never in a mental position to appreciate the country for what it is until I was back when I was sixteen. So that was really, to me that was the, I guess a turning point for me knowing that I love it so much and I want to learn more about it, but it’s not a priority.

Adam’s description of his connection with Sri Lanka highlights the poignancy that returning to one’s country of birth holds for some adoptees, and the contradiction and dissonance of simultaneously feeling both connected *and* disconnected from a place that was home for a brief amount of unremembered time.

This paradoxical feeling of belonging-but-not-belonging was echoed by others. Chloe said of her first visit to Korea:

In Korea, I definitely feel like a tourist, because I am a tourist. The first time I went there I – despite being a foreign person there, which feels really weird to say – there was definitely a sense of, this is where I come from and where I belong, in some ways. It was just a weird experience, [with] people who looked a lot like me, everywhere. I wasn’t used to it.

These sentiments reflect the contradictory meanings that intercountry adoptees' birthplaces can assume for them. On the one hand many adoptees *are* tourists there, and have no memories or meaningful lived experiences on which to pin a sense of belonging or 'home'. Yet, on the other hand, Adam, Chloe and others acknowledged that visits back to their countries of birth did actually engender a "nostalgic . . . feeling" (Adam, 24) or a "sense of, this where I come from and where I belong, in some ways" (Chloe, 28). Despite these reactions, however, Adam did not appear to feel that he could claim 'Sri Lankan' as a central part of his identity. In contrast to Jacqui, his identity seemed to be rooted firmly in the remembered experiences and relationships of his post-adoption life.

Tahlee's identity had been similarly stable throughout most of her life; however, her story also demonstrated how significant life events can bring about change in adoptees' cultural identities. As noted in Chapter 6, she described her relationship with her adoptive family as very close, and her father's sudden death when she was 18 brought the family even closer. Tahlee indicated that she was not very familiar with Korean culture or food, and for most of her life had not considered her Korean background to be personally meaningful. She offered:

This is not a criticism, but aside from a book about Korea, an outfit and a few little items from Korea, that was about the amount of Korean contribution to my childhood. I considered/ consider myself an Aussie and love living here. I have tried the food a couple of times, but have difficulty with *bibimbap* (spelling?), it's still a bit unusual for me.

However, two events prompted a change in Tahlee's feelings about her pre-adoption background – she was introduced to a community of other Korean adoptees, and, in the year prior to our interview she had her first child. She described the impact of these events as follows:

I had an interesting experience which has had long term effects, to present day. My mum and I were visiting the local Indian take away restaurant, and the young lady serving behind the counter (Asian) asked me if I was adopted, straight out of the blue. Turns out she was adopted from South Korea also. We met a couple of times to chat, but she ended up moving to Sydney and we lost contact. Somehow we managed to reconnect and after a protracted process, we managed to meet again, after my boyfriend and I moved to Sydney. It was here that she introduced me to the Korean Adoptee community.

Initially it was the Facebook page and then it turned into dinners and nights out together with other adoptees. This chance meeting in the takeaway has put me in touch with a community I at first didn't appreciate, but now the years have passed, I've grown and experienced different things (overseas working holidays, marriage and motherhood), the connection and stories of reunifications, family, identity and searching is taking on a whole new meaning to me.

Previously I had no interest in Korea or anything to do with it. I considered myself Aussie through and through, the only thing was that I looked Korean. That was it. Now that I am a

mother, the journey to motherhood and learnings of my first (almost) year of motherhood, have given me an entirely new sense of appreciation and curiosity for my roots.

Starting her own family and forming links with other adoptees had also been central to Tahlee's transition from having "no interest in Korea" to feeling a "new sense of appreciation and curiosity for my roots":

Since becoming associated with the Korean Adoptee group, it has crossed my mind from time to time with questions regarding birth people, and other children they may have had . . . Plus now that I have begun treading the parent path, I'm a little more interested in where I came from. I realise a lot of people place a huge emphasis on where they came from and genetics, but I don't so much, or at least I don't believe I do. Having said that, if I was able to have the opportunity one day to introduce my boy to the country and culture, then I would be pleased to do so, along with enjoying the benefits too.

I see Korea as another potentially interesting place to visit, but given the personal connection, I can't deny I suspect I may find some benefit or soul soup (so to speak) that I may not even consciously know I am needing. Visiting is on my 10 year plan - noted to the universe, but not any solid plan to go. This is a change from not ever wanting to visit or have any interest in the language. My boy and I will hopefully be learning the language in the next couple of months, when I schedule it around uni.

Unlike Jacqui's updated perspective, Tahlee's interest in Korea was still relatively peripheral in her life, and underscored by deep bonds with her family in Australia that she had no desire to disrupt. Thus, while still characterised by stability and a wholehearted embracement of her Australian upbringing, Tahlee's identity was/is undergoing some change. This receptiveness towards exploring what Korea may mean for her and her own family is significant, for Tahlee herself *and* for wider understandings of how and why intercountry adoptees' identities may change over time. Like Jacqui, having her own child was a catalyst for Tahlee to wonder about *her* biological parents – their thoughts and feelings about her birth and adoption – and the potential relevance that Korea might hold for *both* herself and her son. It is also notable that her links with other adoptees opened a relational space where discussions of reunion, identity, and the meanings of family were common and supportive. Both Jacqui and Tahlee indicated that discussions with other adoptees were critical in prompting and supporting re-orientations towards their backgrounds.

### **Racism, tourism and (not quite) belonging**

Ellen's re-orientation towards her identity occurred in very different ways to the participants discussed thus far. She had a very tumultuous upbringing (described briefly in Chapter 5) that was marked by family breakdown, her mother's suicide, and physical and emotional abuse within her

household. Ellen also described instances of racism that have stayed with her, contributing towards an impression of “not quite belonging” in Australia. She recounted one of these instances, and the “really odd” feeling of belonging-but-not-belonging as follows:

My last partner was an Australian white male and I remember we actually got spat on one day for being an interracial couple just at our local supermarket. It’s always these little things that always just bring you back to not, feeling like you’re just not quite belonging here but you do belong here. It’s really odd.

Ellen was prompted to reflect on experiences such as these after visiting Korea in 2013 to meet her biological family. She spoke of the emotion of arriving in Korea and how refreshing it was to not “have to worry about racism”:

I think what struck me the most when I was over there, when we landed in Seoul and the pilot said, “To all visitors, welcome.” Then he said, “To all Koreans, welcome home.” To me, even now thinking about it I feel emotional . . . it actually made me cry. I guess I could actually say that, it felt like a homecoming. It was really weird. When we were there, and we were only there for a week, part of me just looked around and I was – it’s like being in a parallel universe . . . I remember walking out the door of the hotel just thinking, I won’t ever have to worry about racism here because I just look the same as everybody else. That was really freeing for me because that was the first time I’d ever been to an Asian country.

Yet, as other participants had also mentioned, Ellen still felt like a tourist in Korea, reflective of the cultural divide created by her upbringing in an Australian family:

I think that brings back to that tourist thing where when I was over there – they knew. They knew that I wasn’t, I suppose, Korean in that sense. I looked like, my features were but I suppose I probably dress differently and my mannerisms were different. They just knew . . . My parents didn’t really keep us going with all that cultural stuff. It was like we were never really Korean so we never really got to be involved in that stuff. Perhaps that’s why I feel like I don’t identify.

Ellen’s comments here also indicated how her ‘white Australian habitus’, including clothing, behaviours and other body language, continued to both shape and reflect her identity in subtle but noticeable ways.

This feeling of ‘coming home’ but ‘not fitting in’ spurred Ellen to seek out others with similar backgrounds. This opened a space within which she could talk about her experiences growing up as a Korean adoptee. She described these conversations, and the meanings that they held for her as follows:

It was just really odd and I think part of me thought . . . no one else can really understand it except perhaps other adoptees. I think that part of me really wanted to reach out and just connect with some and talk with some . . . I remember the first time I met a group of them and we sat



there and we just talked about things. How we felt about ourselves in the past or all of the little things that come up in your life and you just think you're the weirdest person. It was just incredibly validating to hear other people say things that I'd only thought about in my own head.

While making these connections, Ellen was also seeing a psychologist who encouraged her to think further about the discomfort she had felt growing up. Her experience returning to Korea, her conversations with other adoptees, and talking about these issues with her psychologist, prompted Ellen to recognise the dislocation that characterised her identity as an intercountry adoptee. She felt like “a tourist everywhere”, as she explained:

I don't think I ever realised until I was back – oh okay, so I was trying to find my identity and my cultural identity. Because I remember when I was in my psychology session and she said to me, she's like: have you ever thought about, it sounds like you're trying to find your cultural identity, or have you ever tried to find that? To me I was just like, that is a weird question to, like aren't I just like Australian? Now that I think about it, it's like oh, actually no . . . like I'm not white, I'm not totally Korean . . .

I watched this documentary by a Belgian adoptee, and he said – because he went to Korea, he goes to Korea in a documentary – and he said, you're a tourist everywhere, because you don't fit in in your adoptive country, you don't fit in in your origin country. And that was the first time I went, oh my God, that is so true, like having just been to Korea, having lived in Australia, like I don't feel at home anywhere.

In adulthood, Ellen's story has in part become a narrative of liminality (Yngvesson & Mahoney 2000:94), reflective of living in a space that is neither fully Australian nor fully Korean, but is instead ‘a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation’ (Bhabha 1990:211). This has involved exploration, discomfort and introspection, and remains for Ellen, myself, and for others, part of unfolding, not-yet-finished life stories of belonging and identifying as transracial intercountry adoptees.

## **Reconceptualising belonging and identity**

The narrative of questioning one's belonging, however, is not *the* narrative of intercountry adoption. While also subverting notions of exclusive belonging and claiming positionalities that could be considered hybrid or liminal, both Hannah and Chloe's identities appeared to be constructed around *identification* rather than *dis-identification*. Their stories as intercountry adoptees born in South Korea and raised in Australia involved revising their personal understandings of what it meant to be ‘fully Australian’ or ‘fully Korean’. They reimagined the conceptual and discursive terrain framing their cultural identifications, and through these dynamics embraced identities that seemed (at least at this point in their lives) to feel ‘right’ for them.

***“I’m just fully two things at once”***

Hannah, whose story was discussed in Chapter 6, was born in South Korea in the late 1970s and grew up in regional NSW. Although Hannah did not specifically note that she felt ‘white’ while growing up, in hindsight, she did reflect on the lack of ethno-racial diversity in her school and community, and considered herself to be a “regular Australian country girl”.

As mentioned previously, Hannah has visited Korea three times – once to attend a music conference as a teenager, again to teach English for a year with her husband in 2004, and a third time for a holiday with her husband and two daughters in 2014. She described “feeling so out of place and not liking anything” during her first visit. And, while she “learnt so much about . . . being Korean” during her second visit, she had been “really happy to come back to Australia as well”. Of her third visit in 2014, however, she reflected: “it felt like I was going home for the first time.”

Hannah was not sure why Korea had been chosen as the destination for their family holiday in 2014, as she “wasn’t into Korean stuff so much” beforehand. But when they had arrived, she described that it had felt “easy” and “like I could just fit in”. She recalled:

So we had a really nice time, just the four of us. And getting around on the subway, and just feeling like I could blend in and I knew where I was going . . . just so much of it, after 10 years, so much of it came back to me about, you know, just Seoul. Knowing where to go and stuff like that. So that felt really comfortable . . .

And since coming back . . . I have, yeah, for the first time I’ve felt like I really miss Korea, and I wish that I was a millionaire and I could visit more often, because I just feel comfortable there in a way that . . . You can kind of feel, I feel like I’ve escaped to a place that, it’s like home, but it’s removed from all the stressful things of home.

This visit instigated a change in Hannah’s identification with Korea; however, not at the expense of feeling Australian. She described instead a sense of integration and wholeness, succinctly encapsulated by a comment she posted on her blog during her holiday in Korea:

I think I’m finally feeling that connection to my birth culture that people talk about. Nevertheless, I am also dreaming about my connection with house and the bush and my Vitamix . . .

During our interview she expanded on this new integrative sense of identity, explaining that for her, being both Korean and Australian did not result in a double-consciousness<sup>116</sup> (Du Bois 2007) that produced tension, conflict or crisis. She connected this to her re-conceptualisation of *identity itself*, and a rejection of the notion that diasporic identities need to be constructed in relation to binary ideas of belonging and self:

Half of me, I just want to be in the country like I grew up, and half of me just loved living in Seoul and blending in on the subway with everyone else . . . [Donna Haraway] did a lot of research into monkeys. Basically the idea's that we have these black and white binaries of you are this, or you are that. And it's a very learnt way of perceiving the world. But she says you know, why do we have to be one or the other? We can be two things at the same time. And I guess that's a big part of my story is that I've learnt that I don't feel anxiety to be one thing or the other.

I'm definitely two things at once in lots of areas of my life . . . I'm definitely Korean. And I'm definitely just, you know, [Australian] country girl. And they're all in there together at the same time. And one doesn't mean that the other one has to be sacrificed in any way or – I'm just fully two things at once. And I guess that's the way I don't have to feel any tension about that. Because I know that's a lot of adoptees' identity issues, which way do you turn and what do you, who do you relate to? Well, there's things that I relate to on both sides, equally and at the same time. It doesn't have to be framed in terms of tension.

Hence for Hannah, being an intercountry adoptee was linked to framing and experiencing her identity in positive, productive ways that subverted rather than reproduced hegemonic conceptualisations of belonging and identity, while also speaking from a place of relative contentment and satisfaction with her identity as an intercountry adoptee. She described her chosen position vis-à-vis these dominant discourses as follows:

Sometimes I feel like an alien there. Sometimes I feel like I'm an alien here. I think it's just such a good way of approaching it where you don't have to use the language that everybody else uses to describe your situation . . . I always feel like, and I'm sure this is a product of me being adopted, of not having to use the same terms of reference or being classified in the same way. Just be *happy to be undefined*. (emphasis added)

Further, Hannah also felt that her connection to both Australia and Korea enabled flexibility and agency, expanding rather than limiting her possibilities:

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<sup>116</sup> The concept of double-consciousness, first advanced by African American scholar W.E.B. Du Bois in his 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk*, refers to a sense of 'two-ness' – of simultaneously holding irreconcilable facets of self in one's identity. Du Bois' described double-consciousness, applied to African Americans who simultaneously experience being 'Negro' and 'American', as follows:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (2007:34)

I've always found it an asset, rather than a liability, to switch around [labels] according to my own agenda. As an introvert, it's more than a comfort to become anonymous on the Korean subway or the quiet girl with glasses in class, especially when you get tired of standing out. It's not necessarily a race thing but I see having access to the liminal space between cultures as helpful, as being 'between' or undefinable has power in itself. I would like to think that I have some agency over how others see me, whether I actually do or not.

Hannah's sensemaking about her identity as an intercountry adoptee is illustrative of Hall's recognition that 'dislocation has positive features. It unhinges the stable identities of the past, but it also opens up the possibility of new articulations – the forging of new identities, the production of new subjects' (1996b:600).

Finally, it is also significant that Hannah's Christian faith and the continual support of her husband has played a vital role in her identity construction, encouraging her to focus on the creative potential of being an intercountry adoptee, and to accept the unknown or undefinable in the process. Hence for Hannah (as for other participants in this research), constructing her identity has involved multiple vectors of personal experience that have *together* influenced the ways she now makes sense of her self.

***“To be Australian does mean that you come from anywhere, pretty much”***

Chloe's current self-perceptions have also involved reconceptualising parameters of identity and belonging, albeit in different ways to Hannah. As outlined in Chapter 6, Chloe was born in South Korea in the late 1980s and grew up in a metropolitan area with an older sister who was also adopted from Korea. Unlike other participants, Chloe's parents encouraged her to maintain a connection with Korea through language classes and social events for Korean-Australians. Chloe has always been interested in knowing her biological family, and met her family in Korea when she was 12. Her friendship circles in childhood and adolescence were more culturally diverse than those of most other interviewees, and included friends from Filipino, Egyptian, Italian and other backgrounds.

Although Chloe became very enthusiastic about Korea after her first visit at the age of 12, reflecting on her identity as an adult she felt that “the culture of whiteness was the default” that she embodied while growing up. In adulthood, Chloe maintained that 'Australian' was still her primary identification, but that it was important to acknowledge her Korean heritage as part of her identity too. Explaining her current perspective she stated:

I identify . . . very strongly with my Australian identity. Mostly because that has been all I have ever known, I've never moved or experienced anything else . . . I used to actually have conversations with my former partner, where they would say things like, "We just see you as Australian, we kind of forget that you're from Korea, almost, when we speak to you."

I would actually prefer that people wouldn't do that, that is part of, regardless of whether or not – I can't change that, that's where I come from, and I do have heritage there. I think despite the fact that I strongly identify with being Australian, it's not to say that I disregard or in any way diminish the fact that my heritage is Korean.

A significant facet of Chloe's updated viewpoint was the way it had shifted to accommodate a more critical appraisal of what it means to be 'Australian'. Her renewed perspective was informed by an awareness of the larger social structures (of which she is a part), and how her own story intersects with broader social justice concerns. She reflected: "Growing up, I just was like white is the thing that you should aspire to be . . . Whereas I definitely don't think that way anymore."

Chloe's shift in perspective was closely intertwined with her professional trajectory. At the time of our interviews she was involved in social justice and environmental campaigns with a non-profit organisation, having graduated with a journalism degree in her early twenties. She described her work there, and interactions with one colleague in particular, as pivotal in reshaping her sensemaking about what it means to be an Australian of colour:

So definitely with my former boss, I've just recently switched teams within the organisation. But I was just working with her for a long time, and she has always been very politically active, particularly around race politics . . . So I think working with her and learning from her has just I guess made me have lots of realisations that I probably wouldn't have had otherwise, about the power dynamics between race in Australia. And the fact that we actually have all these really big issues and big problems in Australia that I probably wasn't aware of before . . .

I've been there for three years now, but have grown a lot I think as a person in those three years, just because of the people I've worked with and the nature of the work I do. But it's only since my former boss came on board about over a year ago, that I've really, it's kind of, you know – like when something goes off in your head and you just like think: Oh! You look at everything completely different.

As a result of these professional experiences, Chloe integrated a more critical view of 'race' and national identity into her thinking about her own identity and belonging in Australia. To her, being Australian no longer means being 'white', but instead encapsulates people who come "from all over the place". Chloe further explained that she now feels that her past perspective of seeing herself as 'white' and wishing that she was 'white' is problematic within the context of patterns of racial inequality in Australia and other western countries:

I completely disagree that colour is not an issue, it definitely is. Growing up I definitely would have had that assumption, but I think that was more to do with my internalised racism in a way. In that I just wanted to, desperately wanted to fit in. My parents were all white, and [I wanted to] be like other people who were white. It's too much of the same thing, it was almost strange when I would look at myself in the mirror and see an Asian person, and be like, "Oh, that doesn't look like the person who I feel like inside." Now, I'm learning later in life, that's a very problematic way to view my identity.

Instead, Chloe's altered perspective is that being 'Australian' can include looking Asian and having Asian heritage; she now sees this is a valid way of belonging to and within the imagined community of the nation.

Chloe also referenced the unique way in which she can position herself as an Asian Australian, despite being adopted and growing up within a 'white' family. Although she does not identify strongly with other Asians in Australia<sup>117</sup>, a recent conversation with a colleague highlighted how identity categories such as 'Asian Australian' can become increasingly porous as more expansive meanings are integrated into individuals' sensemaking about their identity. She recounted:

So, working on the race campaign at work . . . I think sometimes people forget that I'm adopted and just assume that I have all this, the lived experience that they would think someone who came from an Asian immigrant family would have . . . I would feel like a bit of a phony because I can't really talk about the issues that new Australians would face because I never had that journey or that experience and mine was very different so it did feel a bit detached. Not like: oh, my family came here and they worked so hard and they just wanted, they faced all these challenges when they came here – because that wasn't my experience at all.

But I was actually was just having a conversation with a friend and explaining how it felt a little bit fraudulent to be spearheading this campaign when I actually don't really relate to the immigrant experience, but also recognising that my experience also had its own set of challenges that might not necessarily be the same, but they still – it's still there. I think she was sort of basically saying not to feel like such a phony because everyone has their own set of challenges that they face.

Similarly to Hannah, Chloe recognised that thinking about her identity in non-binary ways has allowed her to claim belonging in Australia while simultaneously acknowledging and valuing her Australian upbringing – her Australian habitus – alongside her Korean heritage. She reflected on this shift towards a more flexible understanding of her own identity, clarifying that:

Also, I think it has to do with . . . the fact that maybe my perception of it is somewhat less binary, trying not to box myself into one or the other as much. Just realising that you literally don't need to prescribe to the culture and traditions of one particular race over the other, or anything like

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<sup>117</sup> Interestingly, no other participants expressed an alignment with the 'Asian Australian' community, echoing Chloe's sense of distance between her own story, and those of non-adopted Asian Australians.

that . . . I do identify firstly, myself as being Australian, and do think that to be Australian does mean that you come from anywhere, pretty much.

Chloe's sensemaking about her own identity/ies has also enabled her to consider wider tensions over the signifier 'Australian'. These tensions, while not destabilising for Chloe's personal sense of belonging, have nonetheless impacted her in unwanted ways. She explained:

I've been thinking about it very differently, to how I would have when I was growing up. It was not so much that I personally don't feel like I don't belong, but I feel like other people potentially don't think that I belong. Not in a malicious way, but in very innocuous questions, like, "Where are you from?" The implication being, you're not white, therefore you must be from somewhere else.

It was recently in my work, when we were doing a whole bunch of research about racial equality. There was one thing that one particular girl said, that I found really interesting . . . I think essentially it was like, if people don't think that you belong here, then it makes you question whether you do, in a way. When you get questions like that, or things like that. I don't know, there's definitely a gap in between how *I* perceive my Australian-ness and identity, and how I think that *other people* see me. (emphasis added)

This gap between Chloe's self-perception and the perceptions that others may hold of her points to the persistence of essentialist and racialised ways of viewing identity. These are evident in, for example, the attitude that a 'real' or 'authentic' Australian is 'white' with Anglo-Celtic heritage. Thus, while Chloe was comfortable claiming her belonging in Australia and recognised how her Australian upbringing and Korean heritage both contributed to her sense of self, she was also cognisant that others may view her as being "from somewhere else" and bring her belonging in to question.

Importantly, Chloe's experiences and sentiments highlight how subtleties in interpersonal interactions (even 'innocent' questions) shape how intercountry adoptees from Asian countries may continue to be othered and perceived in ways that clash with their own senses of self. Aligning with these possibilities she also spoke of a perceived shift in ongoing attitudes towards Asian Australians, noting that while they were once the target of more open forms of racism, that now more imperceptible forms of prejudice against Australians of Asian heritage occur. She contrasted this with more direct and overt racism directed at Indigenous Australians and Australians of Middle Eastern heritage:

It's . . . in a way more socially acceptable that people feel this social license that it's okay to be racist towards those groups of people. Whereas I feel like, directed towards me, or Asian people, it's a lot more covert and systemic, as opposed to hurling racial abuse, or things like that at me. Which I have had experiences with, but nothing that has traumatised me or anything like that. In

a way, it's those very subtle nuanced forms of racism when you're never really sure if they're there.

These considerations align with Alice's observations about racism in her childhood, mentioned earlier: "Not overt racism, not at school. I'm sure there was some underlying stuff, but nothing that I really noticed." Alice's remarks also echoed Chloe's assessment of a shift in attitudes towards Asian Australians: "Yeah, I mean the anti-Asianism used to be the flavor of the month. But now it's moved on to anti-Muslim." Chloe's and Alice's perspectives support the argument that some intercountry adoptees may encounter and construct their identities in correlation with these more subtly-expressed demarcations of who does and does not belong in contemporary Australia. This dovetails too with Ghassan Hage's assertion that, 'Australian racism generally is far less overt and direct, and far less easy to delineate . . . [it] disallows you to say, "hey that's racism"' (2014:233–234)<sup>118</sup>.

## **Pendulum swings**

Adoptees, like other transnational subjects who return to purported 'homelands,' confront the impossibility of true repatriation in the form of seamless belonging or full legal incorporation and may discover that their hybridity, which is marked by racial difference in their adoptive countries is, in the context of Korea, inverted, swinging them to the other side of what one adoptee calls the 'pendulum,' from 'Korean,' to 'Danish' or 'American'. (E. Kim 2007:510)

Parents who acquired 'Made in Korea' babies in the 1980s received scant care instructions. Don't treat delicately. Allow to integrate. Take special care not to acknowledge Asian-ness. My parents heeded the tag, I think. (Beeby 2008:324)

For nearly two decades I did not have much interest in Korea. It was simply a fact, like the fact that I lived in this city now, or was age x, or liked reading and music. As mentioned earlier in this chapter (see 'Renouncing Asianness') I felt a vague discomfort about my appearance. However, I certainly did not think of myself as Korean. This was a distant place full of foreign people who I knew nothing about.

Suddenly, however, at around the age of 19, Korea *mattered* to me. I do not know what prompted it; I think, after leaving the confines of high school with its attendant academic and social concerns, I suddenly became aware of myself as an individual – who I was and who I wanted to be. And I recognised that Korea and its people were a part of my history and still infused my

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<sup>118</sup> This perspective further corresponds with Bonilla-Silva's (2013) analysis of contemporary race-relations in the US – discussed at the end of Part 1 of this chapter – in which he argues that racialisation and racial inequalities have become more covert and 'slippery' in an era of 'colourblind racism'.



present in inescapable ways. Without *those people* (my Korean parents) in *that place* (Korea), I would not be here, I would not look like me, and I would not have my personality (which I could not see mirrored in anyone around me). *This mattered to me*; it was like scales had fallen from my eyes and I suddenly saw a more vivid, accurate and raw picture of myself. I wanted to know about Korea, to experience it for myself, and to examine how adoption still resonated in my life. Over several years I joined listservs for adoptees and/or their families, began corresponding with several other adoptees in Australia by private email, and joined a local Korean language school.

In the email groups I tentatively sent out messages seeking advice about visiting Korea and searching for family. Planning a visit was particularly daunting; I had no idea what I might need to pack or be mindful of, and I was very aware that I would be a complete foreigner who was nonetheless expected to know how to communicate, order food, catch transport, and act appropriately within an intricate system of etiquette that was entirely alien and mysterious. It seemed like tremendous pressure with no guidebook.

Discovering that my confusion and trepidation was a well-trodden path brought heady excitement and tremendous relief. Through these online groups, Korean-born adoptees from all over the world mused, explored, lamented, celebrated, vented and asked innumerable ‘silly’ questions. I was able to collect advice about how to book accommodation and navigate the subway system, how bothersome it was to always be mistaken for a ‘real Korean’, what the money, food and weather was like, and where one might start with trying to locate their first family. I also gained an appreciation of how truly *global* adoption from Korea was. This online community included people from across America, Scandinavia and other European countries, and a smattering of Australians. To a (very) young woman fresh out of high school, it was a cosmopolitan and connected world rich in questions, information, and diverse shades of emotion that I had never encountered before.

My newfound enthusiasm for Korea was underscored by a growing recognition that I was not fully accepted in Australia, as I did not look ‘white’, but had an Asian face and body. I felt that therefore, at best, I was an honorary Australian (Stratton 2009). I became acutely aware of being mistaken for a foreign exchange student at university, being the only Asian face in my tutorials, on the bus or at work, and the way men would sidle up to start a conversation about China/Japan, often with the opening: *ni hao!* or *kinichiwa!* (They always left disappointed, and often confused.) I reflected on Australia’s colonial history and the stories I had learnt about in school, and felt utterly disconnected from the British convicts, settlers, bushrangers, farmers, miners and crocodile hunters who personified ‘Australian’. On television, in magazines, on movie screens –

nowhere affirmed that I was considered an authentic Australian with full rights to belong. And so I did not identify as one.

As a 19 year-old I wrote about this swing in my identity away from being Australian and towards being Korean – even though I did not know much about Korea – in an email to a friend:

I guess I feel more Korean because I don't see a lot in Australian culture that means a lot to me. I know how to act in Australian culture because I've been socialised in it, and I do act Australian, but for me at the moment it's important that I recognise that I am Korean. My Korean heritage gave me the building blocks for who I am, and especially for what I look like. Having said that . . . Korean culture and society is one big mystery to me.

This desire to reconnect with Korea resulted in three visits: a short stopover on the way to another destination; a three-week sightseeing tour with a Korean language school; and a two-year sojourn there as an English teacher in my mid-twenties. However, during these visits, including the two years I lived there, I never stopped feeling like I was a foreign visitor. Without investing considerable time in learning the Korean language, I never became adept at ordering food, buying groceries or asking for directions. My experience was just like my (Anglo-Australian) husband's with one crucial difference: he was never *expected* to speak the language or to know what to do. I was stuck on an endless loop of being talked to, having to awkwardly explain that I didn't speak Korean, engaging in awkward mimes or broken English, and then feeling foolish about still not knowing what was said or what to do – or, simply remaining silent and never interacting with anyone in public. Instead of feeling like I had come 'home', I felt a growing sense of weariness at my inability to communicate with 'real Koreans'.

Language was thus a constant barrier to my participation, and my acceptance in and of, Korea. The enforced public silence and constant spectre of awkward exchanges began to feel like a 'heavy, burdensome cloak' (Goode 2015:128)<sup>119</sup>. This disrupted the idealistic hope from my early twenties that I might be able to inhabit a cosmopolitan identity that was part-Korean, part-Australian. Instead I began to feel 'disconnected, culturally foreign, and ontologically displaced' in Korea (Kim 2003:70). My 'white Australian' habitus, including my monolingual English-speaking background, obstructed my ability to feel like I was 'Korean'. Like a pendulum, my identification had swung from Australian, to Korean and now back towards Australian. But I still

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<sup>119</sup> I have also been painfully aware of my lack of cultural literacy. I do not know how to treat my elders appropriately in any but the most basic of situations; and sometimes I forget even that. Also, cooking certain dishes at one's table is common in Korean restaurants – but I am never sure when or how one is expected to cook dishes like barbecue meat or hotpot, and with some discomfort and embarrassment I usually ask my Caucasian husband to ask for instructions on our behalf. But in these situations it is not the *not knowing* that frustrates me; instead, it is the muteness and embarrassment engendered by *my inability to communicate in Korean* that causes me the most frustration and anxiety.

resisted this categorisation; for I remained wary and cynical of my acceptance in my adoptive country, too.

Where did this leave me? Through my engagement with postmodern commentaries about identity (such as Ang 2001 and Hall 1990) I developed a growing awareness of the ‘impossibility of “exclusive belongings”’ (Volkman 2003:2) for many diasporic subjects, not just intercountry adoptees. In my early thirties, and at the midway point of this doctoral project, I turned to Bhabha’s (1994) concept of hybridity – described in Chapter 3 – as a way of naming and theorising my felt sense of cultural dislocation. I felt that hybridity was a label that I could (finally!) embrace and relax in to. Where did I ‘fit’? With everyone else who considered themselves ‘hybrid’, of course! To me, hybridity symbolised solidarity, liberation and subversion (see Goode 2015). It seemed to be a way of ‘naming my own experience’ rather than submitting to simplistic, imposed ideas about cultural authenticity and belonging (Oparah et al. 2006:14). And it gave me hope that I might belong among *some* people, *sometimes*.

However, while initially relieved to discover a label for my identity, in my mid-thirties and nearing the completion of this dissertation, I felt myself retreating from this categorisation too. Unlike Ang, I have realised that I do *not* now wish to ‘hold on to [my] hybrid in-betweenness’ (2001:194). I want to feel comfortable, not uncomfortable, and accepted, not regarded with suspicion or ambivalence, or as the lucky recipient of an ‘honorary’ insider status. I am not ready to move on from these desires. The boundaries of belonging and acceptance implied by the labels ‘Australian’ and ‘Korean’ still matter to me, despite theoretical (and empirical) movements that seek to highlight the liminality of many subjects in the postmodern world. In some ways I envy Julie’s sense of symbiosis, Hannah’s feelings of flexibility and agency, and Chloe’s more expansive definitions of ‘Australian’. Perhaps therein lie valuable clues to how I might one day reconcile my adoptive status with a life and identity forged and grounded in Australia. However, like Ellen, I still feel like a tourist in Korea (a consequence of my white Australian habitus) and not-quite-accepted in Australia (owing to my history as a Korean-born intercountry adoptee). But like Sam, whose story was retold in Chapter 5, I also feel uncertain and confused; I am not sure where this leaves me. I am preoccupied<sup>120</sup> with a general and pervasive sense of dislocation – an out-of-place, not-quite-where-it-should-be, uncomfortably-shunted-aside feeling. This feeling:

shakes up . . . the illusion of autonomous families, nations, and selves on which [my] ‘I’ is contingent, gesturing instead toward the dependence of receiving nations and adoptive parents on

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<sup>120</sup> I suspect that this preoccupation has been considerably exacerbated by this very project, which compels me to constantly and sensitively look inward to see what I feel, and then sustain my gaze on this feeling, study it, and draft and re-draft words about it.

the *dispossessed* for their *self*-possession and at the irreducible distance and asymmetry involved in this relation of difference and of nonpossession. (Yngvesson 2003:17, emphasis in original)

These dependencies, dispossessions and asymmetries are things that, now seen, I cannot unsee. They unsettle and complicate my feelings about identity, belonging and adoption.

Finally, although I remain attracted to the claim that hybridity carries ‘the *ethical* and *political* power . . . to effect real, emancipatory change’ (Werbner & Modood 2015, online, emphasis in original), I am unsure how this applies to me. Although this is not neat or satisfying, I did not want to impose an artificial sense of completeness or precise theorisation onto my uncertainty. Denzin and Lincoln assert that the goal of qualitative research is to ‘study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them’ (2008:4). In my ‘natural’ setting as an internationally adopted person, and not simply a researcher, this is where I am. I therefore feel the only authentic answer to where my cultural identifications now lie is that: my story is unfinished. And perhaps, that I am in my mid-thirties and still unsure how to define or claim a place of undisputed comfort and acceptance, also speaks for itself.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has described how participants’ early cultural identities developed to mirror that of their family, peers and the mainstream population: ‘white Australian’. Paradoxical messages about ‘race’ and belonging appeared to contribute to these identifications. On the one hand, some participants’ intimate social circles tended to cast ‘race’ as irrelevant to belonging or identity. On the other, however, most interviewees appeared to experience and internalise the message that belonging in Australia *could* be delineated according to ethno-racial boundaries. This was evidenced by a rejection of their own ‘Asian’ features in order to reflect their embodied sense of self and/or to ‘fit in’, and in some instances, in expressions of dislike for or aversion to, other Asians. Far from seeing these dynamics as symptomatic of larger, racist or racialising social structures that were embedded in constructions of ‘Australianness’ and/or the practice of intercounty adoption, in their formative years participants experienced these contradictions as ‘normal’ and ‘just the way things were’. Thus, implicit in their developing sense of self was a ‘white habitus’ that compelled the ways participants (including myself) sought to view themselves as particularly *non*-racial individuals, and other Asians as racialised and different. Interviewees’ embracing of whiteness, and their unquestioned sense of belonging in Australia during childhood, formed the foundation from which their cultural identities were constructed as adults. Examining

their early experiences provided a reference point that illuminated and underscored both continuity and change in participants' unfolding narratives in adulthood.

Various approaches to cultural identity were identified among the interviewees. Jacqui's identifications had changed dramatically over the past few decades, such that she now considers herself 'Vietnamese' rather than 'Australian'. However, her story also revealed some of the difficulties and complexities implicated in embracing this identity, including a lack of familiarity with Vietnamese culture and language (a persistent theme in the literature and in the stories participants told for this research). Other interviewees expressed a strong and relatively secure sense of belonging in Australia. Nonetheless, their narratives also contained nuanced clarifications, with some interviewees reporting an emotional connection to their country of birth that transcended their cultural and linguistic differences.

Some participants, like Ellen and myself, have become conscious of a persistent feeling of 'not belonging' either in Australia or in their birth country. As my story shows, this can be a long and winding road of uncertain and changing identifications. Such journeys are undertaken within the context of hegemonic and racialised ideas about national and cultural belonging, and are not always neatly resolved. Others, however, have integrated their 'roots' and 'routes' to reach a place of relative comfort about their cultural identities. Hannah had embraced her liminality (recognising the flexibility it offered), and was "happy to be undefined". Chloe, meanwhile, indicated that her views on 'race' and 'Australianness' – and with them her sense of identity – had changed over time. A number of stories, such as Tahlee, Ellen, Jacqui and Julie's, also emphasised the *critical impact* that contact with other intercountry adoptees can have on making sense of one's identity. In general, such contact prompted an awareness of commonality (of not being so 'alone' or 'different') and empowered some participants to think about and explore more fully what their heritage might mean to and for them.

Overall, this collection of stories demonstrates to me that identity and belonging are not always static nor simple; instead, adulthood can be a time of both subtle and significant change in adoptees' identifications and sensemaking about belonging and themselves. Narratives of 'clean breaks' and 'exclusive belongings' do not seem to encapsulate these experiences any more neatly than they do in relation to adoptees' families. And yet, the implications of having one's cultural ties severed in early life were still strongly evident. Participants had to embrace, work through, carry with them, or attempt to discard the 'white habitus' they had developed in childhood. While not always painful or confusing (a number of participants were quite comfortable with their identities and happy to see themselves as 'Australian') this nonetheless emphasises that our

identities are constrained by the discourses we are a part of, while enabled by our choices, our exposure to different discourses, and experiences of commonality and community. Building cultural identity as an intercountry adoptee can be a lifelong journey, continually developed in response to diverse experiences, interactions or knowledge, and one's own individualised sensemaking.

## **CHAPTER 8 – MAKING SENSE OF IT ALL: REFLECTING ON THE IDENTITIES AND LIFE STORIES OF AUSTRALIAN INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTEES**

### **What have we learned? Bringing the stories together**

If I have any agency, it is opened up by the fact that I am constituted by a social world I never chose. That my agency is riven with paradox does not mean it is impossible. It means only that paradox is the condition of its possibility. (Butler 2004:3)

Adoption tends to generate stories rather than uncover bedrock truths. (Homans 2013:3)

The overarching aim of this research was to investigate how individuals adopted to Australia from Asian countries in the 1970s, 80s and early 90s reflect on their lives and make sense of being transracial, intercountry adoptees. I also sought to examine the circumstances, interactions and events that have precipitated changes in their perspectives, taking into consideration how they describe their cultural identities, and where and with whom, they feel they belong.

Chapter 2 provided the context for this inquiry by examining how intercountry adoption has been conceptualised, spoken of and practiced in Australia since the first adoptees arrived in the late 1960s. This discussion illuminated that adoption is a political and emotive space, wherein discourses of clean breaks, assimilation and ‘rescue’ have dominated the Australian landscape. Advocacy and reform related to domestic adoption, along with the UNCRC and Hague Convention, have prompted greater recognition among governments, practitioners and parents of the significance of maintaining connections with one’s birth country. Arguably, however, that same level of recognition has not extended to overseas birth parents, who remain ‘ghosts’ in the literature and in many adoptive families (Gunsberg 2010 in Willing et al. 2012:465). The range of literature focused on the 2005 Inquiry into Overseas Adoption in Australia, surfaced some of the tensions, contradictions and inaccuracies infusing the ‘pro-adoption’ stance of the government of the time, supported by the perspectives of adoptive parents. Major threads in the international literature concerning intercountry adoption, including psychological discourses that have tended to create public perceptions of ‘damage’ and pathology, and an increasing focus on ethics, social justice and adult intercountry adoptee voices, were also discussed. Together, these contributions bring more nuanced and critical perspectives to the field that enable critique and demonstrate the impacts of ‘rescue’ narratives and ‘colourblind’ discourses.

Chapter 3 explained the understanding of ‘cultural identity’ that was mobilised for this research. While relating cultural identity to concepts of ‘race’ and ethnicity, the discussion also established that it is not stable or fixed, but instead, multiple, fluid, and constructed through the interplay of discursive forces and psychological identifications with other social groups. Hence, Australian intercountry adoptees form their identities against the backdrop of particular discourses related to ‘race’, belonging and national culture. The intercountry adoption literature emphasises the sense of dissonance and difference that adoptees encounter in their adolescent and early adult years, as they begin to recognise more forcefully how their ‘race’ impacts the ways they are viewed and understood by others. The challenges and difficulties that adoptees can face in seeking to (re)connect with their birth culture – a culture that in many ways they do *not* connect with in the ways they are expected to – were discussed. The notion of hybridity emerged as a way of describing and theorising adoptee identities; however, this remains a concept that is embraced by some and regarded more ambivalently by others, including myself. The extensive body of work discussed throughout Chapters 2 and 3 provided substantial support for the utility and novelty of this original project, demonstrating the scarcity of research that attends in holistic ways to intercountry adoptees’ voices about their experiences over a life course.

With this in mind, the methodology described in Chapter 4 explained the biographical-narrative interview technique that was used to elicit life stories from nine interviewees adopted to Australia from South Korea, Vietnam and Sri Lanka. It also explained the way that autoethnographic data, derived from my own experiences, writing and memories, was woven in to the thesis in order to extend and explore more deeply the themes participants raised. This discussion established that these approaches resulted in a research design that sought a ‘deepened, complex, thoroughly partial understanding of the topic’ (Richardson 1997:92). This was guided *not* by the compulsion to uncover a singular or repeatable ‘Truth’, but by tenets of trustworthiness, reflexivity, and the maintenance of an ethical attitude towards research (Josselson 2007), so as to engage in ‘socially-just acts of representation’ (Ellis et al. 2011, online). The chapter further explained that the imperative to convey the scope and diversity of sensemaking as an intercountry adoptee was a central consideration for how individualised narratives were foregrounded and presented. The chapter also attended to a number of potential limitations or criticisms of the research, and importantly, engaged with the complex and impactful ethical issues involved in interviewing, interpreting interview data and producing autoethnographic contributions.

The stories, impressions and perceptions that resulted from these processes were explored throughout Chapters 5–7. Chapter 5 examined the stories of two participants, Julie and Sam, whose individual narratives raised important themes related to non/belonging, how their



perspectives on adoption have shifted over their lifetimes, and, in Julie's case, family. This was a pivotal theme in many participants' stories, and the diverse and multi-layered thoughts, feelings and experiences participants (including myself) expressed about their adoptive and biological relatives were examined in depth throughout Chapter 6. Chapter 7 focused on 'cultural identity', explaining the 'white habitus' that characterised participants' early identifications, and then exploring the varied and dynamic ways that they made sense of their cultural identities in adulthood. What follows extends the discussion from these three chapters, identifying overarching findings that relate directly to the research aims that drove this inquiry: What narratives do participants, who were born in Asia and adopted to Australia in the 1970s, 80s or early 90s and are now in early to middle adulthood, tell about their lives? How do they make sense of being a transracial, intercountry adoptee? Where and with whom do they feel they belong? What circumstances, interactions or events have precipitated change in their identities and feelings of belonging or non-belonging? And, are intercountry adoptees' life stories indeed more complex and diverse than what popular narratives suggest?

### ***Family relationships are central to making sense of being an intercountry adoptee***

Family was foregrounded in many participants' narratives, indicating that reflecting on family relationships (both biological and adoptive) is central to making sense of one's life as an intercountry adoptee. In particular, interviewees spoke of meetings and reunions with biological relatives, their thoughts about unknown biological relatives, and relationships with adoptive family members. They – and I – reflected on how these various associations *felt*, how they currently *feel*, and how important familial relationships have evolved over time. This was a critical and somewhat novel finding to emerge from this project, given that much intercountry adoption research tends to focus on: cultural, racial or ethnic identity; psychological issues and 'adjustment'; and adoptive parents' 'culture keeping' practices or *their* attitudes or motivations regarding intercountry adoption. As described in Chapter 4 (see 'Analysing and "writing up" interview data'), I had initially intended to focus on matters of 'cultural identity' in this inquiry. Hence the telling of life stories that featured intimate details about notions of 'family' was an unanticipated yet deeply constructive consequence of deploying the biographical-narrative approach.

Some interviewees spoke of what their biological families have meant, do mean, and can mean to them. These narratives gestured towards the importance of making sense of disconnections, and sometimes (re)connections, between themselves and the people with whom they share an indissoluble biogenetic connection. While seeking 'birth family' was sometimes a source of

pain, grief or longing (as Jacqui, Julie, Chloe and my own stories attest), at other times adoptees' attitudes were characterised by ambivalence and disinterest. However, these views and sentiments also had the capacity to change over time (even if only momentarily), as Adam's story of reuniting with his mother and half-brother, and Alice's story of attempting contact with her birth mother demonstrated.

It is notable that participants' accounts did not support the widespread assumption that biological families are definitively 'real' while adoptive families are somehow 'less-than-real'. Instead, participants who met members of their birth family realised that they were 'strangers' as well as 'kin'; rather than finding true and automatic belonging, the ruptures caused by adoption had radically diminished participants' abilities to communicate with and feel close to their biological relatives. Interviewees' stories underscored that intimate, robust relationships are built through *respectful* social interactions and shared experiences *over time*, and that consistent *care* and *sensitivity* counts for much in considering what 'family' and adoption means for individuals.

Several participants (myself included) also cited motherhood as an important catalyst for thinking differently about the significance of heritage and genetics. Alice was prompted to search for her biological mother after experiencing an unexpected "maternal buzz", while my son compelled me to recognise the importance of *both* adoptive relationships formed through love and care and biogenetic connections that manifest intergenerationally and have enduring emotional significance. In Jacqui's story, meanwhile, having children was only one aspect of a 20-year-long journey towards identifying as Vietnamese and seeking out her Vietnamese family. Hence, familial belonging was dynamic and complex, sometimes defined by a strong sense of belonging in adoptive families, and at other times including a *different but emotionally potent* sense of belonging, but not, in biological families. Moreover, some participants asserted that their sense of belonging was most strongly felt in the families they formed in adulthood with their partners and children.

Some interviewees' narratives provided complicated and nuanced accounts of adoptive family relationships, and in the process painted alternative pictures to the simplistic myth of 'fairytale' families where 'love conquers all'. While some interviewees did indeed indicate that they have close and happy relationships with their adoptive families (Tahlee, Adam and Alice are examples), others spoke about challenging dynamics that in some instances resulted in relationship breakdowns. Julie and Ellen also spoke of abusive home environments, and told troubling stories about the long-term effects of these experiences. In some accounts, insensitivity from adoptive family members about 'race' and adoption appeared to have impacted the various

extents to which they felt safe, respected, included and supported as adults. The variety of stories interviewees told about interactions with their adoptive relatives support the assertion that one's 'race' and adoptive status can and does matter in instances of transracial, transnational adoption. They also indicate that enduring positive relationships are *built* and *maintained* through respectful interactions that are sensitive to intra-family differences in appearance and background.

The final overarching finding of note in relation to 'family' concerns the conceptualisation of adoptive families as a *complete replacement* for biological connections (a sentiment most strongly expressed in the 'clean break' view of adoption). In this regard this modest but qualitatively rich sample of adoptee-participants evinced that 'intercountry adoption is a complex web of relations and . . . it is an open question what it will mean to the individual' (Lindgren & Zetterqvist Nelson 2014:552). There did not appear to be a formulaic or universal correlation between feeling satisfied and happy within one's adoptive family, and feeling a need to connect with biological relatives. Chloe described her adoptive parents as "incredibly supportive" during her youth, but nonetheless "always wanted" to find her biological family. Ellen experienced emotional abuse and witnessed physical abuse in her adoptive home, and yet she expressed: "I don't have a desire to get a new family or anything like that." Along with the sentiments I raised in my autoethnographic contribution in Chapter 6, these various experiences demonstrate that 'happy adoptions' and desires to (re)connect with biological relatives can and do co-exist. Hence, while biological families do not seem to be where (by default) adoptees necessarily and always '*really* belong' (Yngvesson 2003:7, emphasis in original), they can still nonetheless retain varying levels of personal and emotional significance. An adoptee may desire an enduring connection with *both* families without necessarily making a choice about which parents they prefer, or commenting on the suitability or merits of adoption. Thus, considering adoption as a simple and final exchange of families, nations and cultures is, as Eleana Kim points out, a 'crude calculation' (2007:517), because 'comparing the opportunities they've gained to the things they that they've lost – [biological] family, genealogical knowledge, culture, language, and national belonging – only points out their *profound incommensurability*' (E. Kim 2007:517, emphasis added). The stories told for this research demonstrate that engaging with biological family is a highly personal choice. It is also one that is often based on the desire to *expand* familial connections, rather than to *replace* adoptive or biological connections.

***Other adoptees are an important source of support, affirmation and belonging, and can be a critical catalyst for thinking differently about adoption and identity***

Alongside stories about family, participants also highlighted how their sensemaking about adoption was informed in positive ways by their contact with other intercountry adoptees. These connections provided support and affirmation, and prompted some participants to think about finding their birth families, or to reconsider how adoption or identity might be meaningful for them. Intercountry adoptee networks were a particularly valued source of belonging for some. Jacqui, for example, referred to other adoptees as an “extended family” of “brothers and sisters”, while Sam mentioned that they appreciated the possibility for “brotherly/sisterly” relationships with other adoptees – a possibility that had not seemed available to Sam in other networks or familial connections. These sentiments appeared to gesture towards a vector of belonging and identity that has only been surfaced sporadically in the literature – what Eleana Kim refers to as ‘adoptee kinship’, or ‘profound kin relations . . . based on common histories of displacements, alienations and complex negotiations of “foreignness” and “family”’ (2007:522). Accounts of ‘adoptee kinship’ are starting to emerge contemporaneously. For example, Walton (2019:162) has recognised these relationships as ‘communities of memory’ that do not presume ‘otherness’ or expect ‘gratitude’, but rather, value the diverse *and* shared nature of adoptee experiences.

Yet, this is not to imply that all adoptees in this study felt a consistent or simplified sense of strong attachment and belonging with other adoptees. Some participants, like Julie, Jacqui, Ellen, Sam and Tahlee, mentioned that forming links with other adoptees had not become important to them until adulthood. I too was uninterested in connecting with other adoptees until my early adulthood, when suddenly, Korea and adoption mattered to me (see ‘Pendulum swings’ in Chapter 7). Yet Adam had joined an adoptee social group in his teenage years, and Chloe had attended Korean language and culture classes alongside other adoptees as she was growing up<sup>121</sup>. Adam and Chloe’s experiences were akin to those of the ‘younger’ cohort in Gray’s doctoral research, who benefitted from the establishment of intercountry adoptee networks in the late 1990s and were ‘enabled and encouraged to explore their hybrid positions’ (2007:201). In contrast, Ellen described having some difficulties locating adoptee networks after her first visit to Korea during her late twenties.

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<sup>121</sup> Interestingly, those with siblings who were also internationally adopted did not reference how this impacted their sensemaking about adoption. Adoptee networks *outside their own family* seemed to exert a much more significant influence over their identities and thoughts about adoption.

Most participants mentioned the sense of support and affirmation they gained from meeting face-to-face with other adoptees – meetings that were often initiated or complemented by memberships in online social media networks for intercountry adoptees. This contact was critical in Julie and Ellen’s efforts to feel more comfortable with their identities as transracial, intercountry adoptees, enabling them to process and heal from racist incidents and feelings of uncertain or contested belonging. Meeting other adoptees had been “incredibly validating”, as Ellen explained in Chapters 5 and 7. Meanwhile, for Sam, interactions with other adoptees provided a sense of space, agency and relative safety, wherein they were able to express and explore issues of confusion and vulnerability.

Tahlee’s story highlighted how such connections were instrumental in engendering a shift in her perspective about her personal history and identity as an intercountry adoptee. She described having a chance encounter with another adoptee in a takeaway shop that led to connections with other intercountry adoptees both online and off. Through these associations she was exposed to conversations, thoughts and experiences that she had not previously considered important to her story. However after her son was born, these conversations began to take on “a whole new meaning” and prompted her to think in different ways about her identity, her biological relatives, and her country of birth (see Chapter 7)<sup>122</sup>.

And for Julie, moderating adoptee networks is a significant facet of her everyday life. As described in Chapter 5, these activities are a critical vehicle through which she seeks to make sense of her past, and to ‘make life better’ for herself and other intercountry adoptees. Each of these discrete stories emphasise the significance of linkages with other intercountry adoptees; that there are some things that, in Ellen’s words, “no one else can really understand . . . except perhaps other adoptees”.

Importantly, however, while ‘intercountry adoptee’ was understandably a notable identification for many of the research participants, some interviewees nonetheless reported ‘dipping in and out’ of these associations, or of recognising differences between themselves and other adoptees. Ellen expressed that her needs for support and affirmation fluctuated; she had found it “incredibly important” to connect with other adoptees after meeting her biological family, but had since felt herself “moving away from it”. Evolving and alternating attitudes were also revealed through Tahlee’s observation that although at first she “didn’t appreciate” being in touch with other

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<sup>122</sup> A chance encounter with another adoptee also prompted Ellen to search her biological family, indicating how impactful it can be to meet other adoptees, even fleetingly.

adoptees, her perspective had changed over the years as she matured and became a parent. These revelations indicate that a sense of belonging with other adoptees is not automatically enabled or consistently felt. Rather, the meanings gained from such contacts invariably differs according to individual circumstances and needs as they change over time, illuminating the heterogeneous, fluid nature of sensemaking amongst intercountry adoptees.

Nonetheless, the validation, backing and exposure to new experiential perspectives interviewees gained through their contacts with other adoptees, emerged as a consistent theme across participants' narratives. This contact was at various times and in varying ways: a healing balm; a source of affirmation and validation; an enabler of exploration or introspection; a vital contributor to a sense of purpose; a foundation for advocacy and community; and/or a resource for profound understanding and support, both online and off.

***Professional counselling and therapy was a critical sensemaking mechanism for some participants***

Some interviewees referred to the substantial impact that professional counselling or other forms of therapy had on their sensemaking about being an intercountry adoptee. This aspect was particularly central in Julie and Ellen's stories, described in detail in Chapter 5. Ellen mentioned that psychological help assisted her in various ways, enabling her to: recognise the impact of her familial experiences; work on building a healthier "foundation" for her sense of self; and examine her sense of "not quite belonging" in both Korea and Australia. Meanwhile, Julie spoke very potently about the impact of professional guidance on her self-understanding as an adoptee who had grown up in an abusive home environment.

While therapy was clearly a critical aspect of several participants' life stories, it should also be recognised that others apparently did not consider that therapy was necessary, or indeed might be helpful, for them. Alice, for example, expressed her "distrust" of professionals who pathologised her based on her adoptive status. And while other participants mentioned seeking psychological support for issues *other than adoption*, around half of my interviewees made no mention of counselling at all. Therefore, the discourse that *all* adoptees are likely inescapably 'damaged' was not supported by the narratives this group of individuals provided – notwithstanding how impactful a sense of rupture, disconnection, loss, uncertainty or disempowerment unequivocally was, for some. It became apparent that seeking professional counselling support was a highly personalised choice and experience. Nonetheless, for several participants this type of formalised

treatment was a *critical* component of them making sense of their adoption, themselves, and their relationships with significant others.

### ***Adoptee identifications are multiple and intersectional***

In her doctoral thesis on Korean adoptees, Walton observed of her study participants that there was a ‘sense of shared experience but also awareness that adoptees are not necessarily defined by being adopted but are *people* who happen to be adopted’ (2009b:294, emphasis added). Similarly, a central finding of this research is that participants saw themselves as much ‘more than . . . adoptees’ (Walton 2009a:217). Some interviewees foregrounded *professional* and *educational* experiences and positions in their life narratives, reflecting on adoption only when prompted in the interviews. Other participants indicated that their thoughts about adoption had been profoundly influenced by social interactions in *other* spheres of their life, and by *intersecting* discourses of belonging and identity.

For example, Sam spoke about other aspects of their identity that were marginalised and misunderstood, such as being gender non-binary. As discussed in Chapter 5, this deeply personal identification seemed to amplify and complicate the feelings they held about being a transnational adoptee. Additionally, their academic background, which included a PhD in the arts/social sciences, had undoubtedly influenced the critically intellectual and analytical ways in which they considered and viewed themselves as a non-binary, transnationally adopted person of colour.

Meanwhile, Chloe’s professional experiences and networks across social justice and advocacy fields intersected with her perceptions of ‘race’ and ideas about cultural and societal belonging. She mentioned how interactions or conversations with colleagues had inevitably influenced the ways she thought about her own ‘Australian’ and ‘Asian’/‘Korean’ identity, and prompted her to recognise that aspiring to be ‘white’ was “a very problematic way to view [her] identity” (see ‘Reconceptualising belonging and identity’ in Chapter 7). Similarly, my critical engagement with scholarly literature concerning ‘race’, ethics, birth family perspectives and structural inequalities that have been intricately tied to the practice of intercountry adoption, has indelibly also affected *my understanding of myself* as an intercountry adoptee.

Additionally, Hannah’s Christian faith appeared to help her to accept the unknowns and misinformation she encountered after finding her biological father and his family, and assisted her in feeling closer to her relatives:

The last bit of my narrative is the role that my Christian faith has played throughout. My papers said that my mother was a Christian and she said she would pray for me. Of course this is not 100% reliable but the only part I hope is true. I think that trusting in a God who can explain the inexplicable allows me to let a lot of things just be. I want to meet my mother in heaven but if I don't, I think I will at least learn some answers there. In my daily life, prayer is very therapeutic and helps me to seek peace and positivity. My Korean brother is Catholic and it means a lot to me that we have promised to pray for each other.

These sensemaking processes (explained in more detail in Chapters 5–7) demonstrate the dynamic interplay and shifting priorities of participants' *intersecting* personal, professional and spiritual identities.

***Participants developed a 'white habitus' in childhood, but made sense of non/belonging in their birth and adoptive countries in varied ways in adulthood***

Chapter 7 explained that many participants developed a 'white habitus' in childhood, and therefore assumed a cultural identity of 'white Australian'. This identification was supported by participants' perceptions of: themselves as 'white' or non-racial; their predominantly 'white' communities as 'normal' and just 'the way things are' (Bonilla-Silva 2013:139); and other 'Asians' as foreign, dissimilar and in some instances undesirable. As children they seemed to see the world through 'white' eyes so that a 'normativity of Whiteness and the subsequent non-normativity of those who [were] visibly non-White' developed (Docan-Morgan 2016:101). They broadly mirrored their parents, peers and the mainstream population in values, tastes, mannerisms, and language.

This finding points to the pivotal influence that adoptive parents exert on their children's identities (Docan-Morgan 2010), and the fallacy that intercountry adoption automatically advances a multicultural family or society. For such families may be multi-racial, but achieve multi-culturalism less easily. The original stories included in this project support the assertion that very young internationally adopted children do not come from their country of birth with an 'essential' culture that stays with them throughout their childhood (see also Gray 2007 and Williams 2003); rather, 'culture' is built through intricate and often subconscious interactions, practices, values and worldviews experienced in the home. The privileging of certain practices, values and worldviews (tied to particular bodies) in broader communities then further substantiates (or undermines) individual cultural identifications. Given their familial and societal environments in the 1970s, 80s and 1990s, it was abundantly clear that participants (myself included) were unlikely to develop a cultural identity other than 'white Australian' in their formative years. Yet this affiliation did not necessarily become problematic; some adoptees were



very comfortable with this identity, seeing themselves as “just a regular Australian in an Asian shell” (Alice, 32). This thereby exposes (albeit incidentally) that construing intercountry adoption as a way of advancing a ‘multicultural Australia’ or a ‘multicultural home’, is a naïve oversimplification.

It is worth mentioning here that certain participants’ ethno-racial backgrounds did intersect with and influence their adult family relationships. Some, like Hannah and Chloe, began to notice and reflect on how their relatives dismissed or disrespected the experience of being an adopted non-white Australian. Apart from this original data, the difficulties and disconnections such circumstances may cause between adult adoptees and their adoptive family members is also echoed in the literature:

The sad thing about it is that once you take the lid off it, you can’t go back. It’s a can of worms. In some ways I wish I could be so ignorant again; you know that ignorance is bliss. My mom knows that there is something terribly wrong in our relationship on a gut level, but she doesn’t know what. She’s blinded by her privilege. I try to engage her and understand that whiteness is about being totally blocked off and not having to look at anything you don’t want to, and I keep bumping my head against this, and it’s impermeable. It’s an obstruction I can’t get through. (Interviewee in Park Nelson 2007:201)

My engagement with the literature and with my participants’ narratives has led me to believe that cultural losses implicit in intercountry adoption should be *acknowledged* and viewed in sensitive, genuine and compassionate ways. Merely assuming that internationally adopted children will continue to identify with an ‘essential’ culture from their country of birth, or conversely, that any cultural discontinuity is unproblematic and unimportant, overlooks personally significant and impactful dislocations and losses. For example, I feel that I will never be able to be ‘Korean’ *in the same way* that someone raised in Korea or with Korean parents will be – no matter how hard I try. My version of ‘Korean’ – if or when I identify that way – will always be different, minimal, often awkward, and marginalised<sup>123</sup>.

In adulthood participants’ cultural identities manifested as a sense of identification and belonging with various social groups, and developed in divergent ways. Changes, where they occurred, were prompted by a number of life events or experiences. These catalysts included: engagement with theoretical, academic or professional discourses around ‘race’, identity and/or adoption; conversations and interactions with other intercountry adoptees; motherhood; therapeutic conversations and treatments; and visits to one’s country of birth. Sometimes these aspects of

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<sup>123</sup> I was recently asked to contribute a ‘Korean perspective’ during a celebration of different cultures at my son’s daycare, and, embarrassingly, found myself unable to do so.

participants' lives were intricately interconnected, amplifying and converging to engender a change in perspective or feeling. In some cases these changes were sudden, and in other cases a gradual shift occurred across a number of years or even decades (see, for example, Jacqui's story in Chapter 7.) The diversity and often long-term nature of interviewees' explorations of cultural identity points to the *personalised* and *changeable* nature of identity as an intercountry adoptee, while also accounting for the possibility of stable and uncomplicated experiences.

Visits to one's country of birth posed a significant catalyst for change in some participants' ideas about themselves and their place in the world. Some interviewees were struck by a feeling of belonging, comfort or similarity – even when it was juxtaposed with discomfort and difference – that they could find in their birth country. Julie, meanwhile, recognised for the first time that Vietnamese people possessed positive characteristics such as resilience and strength, and learned, through her interactions in Vietnam, that her adoption had resulted in a *loss* of culture and belonging. On occasion, however, being in one's country of birth reconfirmed the alienation that some participants felt from their first culture and nation. This was reflected in Sam's statement that despite living there for several years as a teenager: "I feel ambivalent about being 'Korean.' If it's an identity, I don't know what it means" and Alice's claims that: "I guess [Korea] doesn't really hold any real significance to me more so than any Australian that's interested in countries like Japan or Korea, I suppose." I too found that living in my country of birth only served to underscore my *disconnection* from Korea.

These accounts communicate that visits to one's purported homeland *can be* but are not *always* 'transformative' or desired by intercountry adoptees; they may be a source of some ambivalence, and a reconfirmation of the substantial ruptures precipitated by intercountry adoption. Throughout many adoptees' lives, a 'white habitus' formed in childhood, together with a lifetime of experiences occurring *elsewhere*, with *other people*, and in *another culture*, continue to affect the ease and comfort with which they can engage with their 'birth culture'. As Gilbert argues, in situations where one is removed from family and culture in early childhood, 're-membering will always be a potential site for problems because of the bodily and cultural dysphoria created by the removals processes themselves' (2012:14)<sup>124</sup>.

The narratives told and interpreted throughout this thesis demonstrate that belonging in one's country of birth as an intercountry adoptee is contested, sometimes (but not always) complicated,

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<sup>124</sup> Although Gilbert's (2012) research concerned a different study population – Indigenous women of the Stolen Generations in Australia – these words are also apposite for describing the discontinuities and disruptions in intercountry adoption.

and always personal. These results align with existing research by illuminating the discomforts, ambiguities and frustrations that can result from returning somewhere that is often positioned in societal discourses as ‘home’, but which is unknown in any practical and experiential sense (Gray 2007; Kim 2003; Taft et al. 2013; Walton 2009b).

### ***Making sense of intercountry adoption is lifelong, complex and diverse***

Infusing all of these lifestory threads is the recognition that, for adoptees themselves, making sense of intercountry adoption is a lifelong experience. It is also complex and multi-dimensional rather than simple and static, both discursively/politically and individually shaped, and a space where extremely diverse and highly personal relationships, feelings and understandings play out. This original research has brought to light disparate life stories that portrayed both dramatic and subtle changes in adoptees’ cultural identities, familial relationships, and reflexive sentiments about one’s cultural, racial and biogenetic heritage. Shifts in sensemaking occurred into participants’ forties, often resulting from multiple and converging experiences. Some interviewees also described *ongoing* and *unresolved* periods of exploration and uncertainty. These dynamic fluctuations reinforce that adoption is not simply a status nor a mere event, and provide strong argument for the provision of well-resourced post-adoption services that attend to the range of challenges and experiences that *adult* adoptees may encounter as they *continually* make sense of what it means to be a transracial, intercountry adoptee (see also Walton 2012). Helpful services may include: formal or informal networks with other adoptees; resources to assist with visiting one’s country of birth or searching for or reuniting with biological relatives; and support for navigating difficult relationships with significant others, dealing with racism, healing from trauma, or exploring how adoption may impact one’s behaviours, emotions and sense of self. The findings this thesis contains also address Grotevant’s earlier acknowledgements that:

... the identity process for adopted persons may follow a course that includes an initial state of unawareness or denial followed by disequilibrating experiences that may throw the person into a state of crisis, doubt, or exploration. Following a time of searching and/or self-questioning, the fuller content of one’s adoptive situation can be woven into the broader emerging life narrative. This process may repeat itself over the life course, each time bringing the potential for renewed and expanded integration of one’s sense of self, cognitively and affectively. This hypothesized process deserves research attention. (1997:18)

It follows then that the stories presented in this thesis are merely glimpses of identities narrativised at a particular point in time. Participants’ identities, and the ways they make sense of their adoption, may alter over time as they incorporate new experiences, reach new life stages, develop relationships and encounter wider discourses. Even as I write this I am acutely conscious

that my own perspective has been indelibly impacted by undertaking this research, and is likely to change significantly in the years to come. As Cherot, an American Korean adoptee, posits:

our very lives, as adoptees, are unfolding before our eyes and what we have shared before may be transforming again and again. Thus, the ‘snapshots’ here should not be read as static but as living and possibly transforming insights into situations that we have had imposed upon us and experience firsthand. Who else can speak from such a unique and complex position? (2009:122)

Finally, it is critical to note that the life stories so generously told for this thesis were not simply about ‘fairytales’, ‘rescues’, ‘clean breaks’, ‘damage’, or indicative of an unrelenting yearning for ‘real’ family. And yet, many traces of these concepts, situations and circumstances appeared in several of the stories, albeit in different ways, and to varying degrees. Adoptee life narratives – and therefore identities – are clearly individual and diverse, while also maintaining shared and collective aspects. To claim that adoption *is* ‘this’ or ‘that’ in a way that excludes and silences contrasting accounts only serves to divide and disempower adoptees. There is no one narrative that fits all.

## **Where do we go from here? Recommendations for further research**

This thesis points towards a number of pertinent areas for further inquiry. Investigating the ways adoptees’ relationships with their adoptive family members evolve and shift, and their changing orientations towards the meaning of ‘family’ could yield important insights about how adoptees make sense of their unique familial landscapes. Again, this is not to pathologise nor privilege adoptive or biological families, but moreso to surface adoptees’ ‘voices’ about a domain of experience that this original research suggests is very impactful. What happens in adoptive family breakdowns? What are adoptees’ experiences and perspectives on their relationships with their biological family members? What role do microaggressions or insensitivities play in transracial, intercountry adoptive families?

The findings of this research also suggest that adoptee communities, both offline and on, are an important but relatively unexplored area of inquiry. Walton (2009b, 2019) provides an insight into the transitory but communal environment of KoRoot, a guesthouse for Korean adoptees in Seoul, finding it to be an ‘accidental community of memory’ characterised by mutual understanding, camaraderie and a shared history of being born in, and adopted out of, South Korea. Heaser (2016), meanwhile, examines how social media enables connections and support among Korean Australian adoptees and empowers them to share their stories and learn from those of others. An in-depth examination of the interactions that occur in particular online and offline sites, and the

value participants gain from them, would also be an illuminating and worthwhile avenue for future investigation.

Shame and detachment, or a general and pervasive sense of non-belonging, are also themes that arose in this research that are not often discussed from an in-depth qualitative standpoint. How does a sense of shame and/or non-belonging manifest for adoptees in different situations? To what do adoptees attribute these feelings? A number of narratives told for this inquiry also gesture towards the utility of an intersectional lens in adoptee research. How and why does it matter in particular social, cultural and historical contexts that one is queer and adopted, a woman and adopted, disabled and adopted, or part of a particular 'race' (in a particular context) and adopted? The bulk of the extant literature concerning intercountry adoption in Australia focuses on Asian adoptees; exploring the experiences of those born in European, South American or African countries may add further depth to our expanding knowledge of intercountry adoptee experiences in Australia.

Finally, the age range of the participants in this research is both a limitation and a strong indicator of future research possibilities. Participants in this inquiry were adopted to Australia as infants in the 1970s and 80s (with one participant adopted in the early 1990s). What are the experiences of younger adoptees who arrived in the late 1990s and 2000s? Research in Australia has not yet explored in-depth how younger adoptees' experiences, and the discourses and practices surrounding them, have shifted – or remained the same. Nor is there much literature available that is specifically focused on adoptees who arrived in Australia at older ages. Research conducted by Scarvelis et al. (2017) into the experiences of 30 Thai adoptees who arrived in Australia from Rangsit Children's Home in the late 1980s and early 1990s, aged between four and 10, is an exception. Moreover, profound shifts (that sometimes occur) in participants' sensemaking about their adoption and identity in middle age suggest that examining the life experiences of those in their forties, fifties, sixties and beyond might also provide valuable insights into the *lifelong* journey of intercountry adoption.

These possibilities demonstrate that there are numerous avenues for future research into how intercountry adoptees from a variety of backgrounds and age ranges navigate identity and belonging. This thesis makes an important contribution towards continuing these conversations and advancing more nuanced renderings of intercountry adoption in scholarly, public and private domains.

## What have I learned? Reflecting on my/our stories

As an individual, researcher and intercountry adoptee, writing this thesis has been an immensely disorienting experience, akin to venturing out of the calm of the ‘eye of a storm’ and into the chaos and danger of an emotionally-charged tornado of divergent opinions, perspectives, complexities and experiences (Yngvesson 2003; see also Wall 2012). My standpoint has become increasingly political during this long and draining process, throwing the narrowness of my past perspectives into sharp relief. I have become progressively conscious of the implicit and constant presence throughout my life of narratives that cast intercountry adoption as a ‘lucky’ form of ‘rescue’ for which I should hold much gratitude. I *am* grateful for many people, things and opportunities in my life; but I do not believe that my gratitude should be expected as atonement for receiving a ‘gift’ that I did not deserve but which was nonetheless so generously given. This expectation is a tremendously oppressive burden that functions to keep adoptees in their ‘place’ of pleasing and placating others. It is likely that at the heart of my adoption was an unfortunate and immensely painful set of circumstances in which a woman carried a child for nine months and then felt unable to care for it, sending it with heartbreaking finality into an institution and then halfway across the world – a situation that governments in both my birth and adoptive countries felt was the ‘best’ solution for an ‘unwanted’ and ‘illegitimate’ child. And, also at the heart of my adoption was a western couple’s desire to parent a child – rather than a desire for relieving poverty or oppression – belying the myth of pure and noble altruism that so often goes hand-in-hand with constructions of ‘rescue’.

For me, loss and love and being ‘thrown’ and ‘caught’ (see Chapter 6) are inseparable sides of a coin. They are incommensurable; they will always co-exist. It is intensely frustrating to me that intercountry adoption can be considered *so good* (see Part 2 of Chapter 2) when it: so commonly precipitates complex and very personal journeys; is so inexplicably connected to uneven relations between rich and poor, brown and white, married and unmarried, and mothers and men both within and across nations; and so often involves the ‘death’ of one’s biogenetic and original cultural connections. These things are forgotten in narrow and glowingly positive narratives, but they are *no small things*. They are people (real, valuable people), difficulty, pain, loss, injustice and disconnection. Some individuals may choose or find for themselves that these things are not an experienced or meaningful part of their *own* story – and this is a valid perspective. But for society (and significant others) to tell adoptees that this *must not* and *cannot* be part of their sensemaking about their fractured histories and genealogies is terribly disrespectful and disempowering. It disciplines and diminishes adoptees and their first families by circumscribing

their narratives and their abilities to explore complicated and impactful issues in safe and accepting environments.

It is pertinent to re-state that, from my perspective, intercountry adoption is a sensitive, complex and highly personalised and politicised domain. It is a ‘wicked problem’ – an issue that: is difficult to define to the satisfaction of all stakeholders; has many interdependencies and is multi-causal; is not based on a stable set of circumstances; has no clear solution; is socially complex; and does not sit within a single government or entity’s responsibility (Australian Public Service Commission 2018). As Baden et al. (2015) suggest, intercountry adoption exists within a social ecology of interconnected people, and their nations, governments and cultures. Stories more complex than simply foregrounding the merits and ‘success’ of intercountry adoption need to be told in order to truly address the ongoing plight of children who are born into poverty or oppressive social structures (which sometimes prevents those who would otherwise choose to parent their child from being able to do so). Such stories would also acknowledge, and not delegitimise, the losses and relative disempowerment of adoptees and their first families.

For me, the most important questions are not whether intercountry adoption is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ or should be ‘supported’ or ‘not supported’. Rather, the important questions include: How can we minimise instances of parents feeling that they cannot keep their children for reasons of poverty, oppression or stigma? How can we recognise the loss, disempowerment and trauma implicated in adoption for some birth families and adoptees, while also holding open a space where positive emotions can be felt and expressed? When intercountry adoption does occur, how can adoptive families, cultures and countries deeply, genuinely and sensitively respect and value birth families, cultures and countries – and therefore their children? How can the racialisation and marginalisation of intercountry adoptees of colour be acknowledged and mitigated? Attending to these questions may help with ‘making life better’ for many, diverse individuals touched in profound and personal ways by intercountry adoption.

In Chapter 1 I cited an article written by Latty (2016), a domestic adoptee in the US. I was deeply affected by it because it was one of the first times I had read a non-scholarly article that wrote about both the joys of adoption *as well as* what Latty called ‘the darkness, the underbelly, or the unspeakable grief lying just below the surface of a child who has been severed from their home and family of origin’ (2016, online). In place of a one-dimensional rendering, she provided a picture of complexity, contradiction, hope, love, grief and loss:

I found my original family in my early twenties and for the last fifteen years, I have experienced wild anxiety, deep joy, profound grief, complex gratitude, rage, fear, alienation, belonging, contentment. I have made primal noises and shapes alone on the floor of a studio apartment when my mother stopped answering my letters after two and a half years of knowing her. I have gotten to watch new siblings grow into stunningly kind, caring, creative, bold, and generous young adults. And I recently reconnected again with my original father for the first time in nearly ten years. Perhaps it will be different this time. Perhaps it will stick. I hope so. (Latty 2016, online)

I indeed encountered complex, contrasting and changing narratives about self, identity, belonging and adoption in the data I gathered for this research. It seems fitting to end this thesis with words contributed by the research participants. Some of these words have been cited in earlier chapters; however, I feel they are worth re/stating here for the incisiveness with which they reflect my/our shifting perspectives. They point to how difficult and personal some of the questions raised by intercountry adoption can be, and the uncertainties, ambiguities, tensions and contrasts in our lives and stories as intercountry adoptees.

They found a woman who matched the details of my birth mother, sent her a letter, and then followed up with a phone call. She denied having ever given up a child. Later they followed up with another phone call to clarify her identity, she told them they had the wrong person and hung up on them. I am disappointed but not at all surprised by this outcome. I'm not one of the adoptees that has yearned to be more Korean or has felt misplaced in Australia. However, I am surprised at the kernel of hurt, right in my chest, when I think about this. It only lasts for half a second and only when I dwell on it but it is not something I ever expected to feel. I also feel lucky, I'm happy to have the family and life I do. I should keep things in perspective. And I think that's something no adoptee will ever be able to reconcile. At least we aren't alone in that fact . . . (Alice, 32)

Everyone has their challenges, and I don't think being adopted is the cause of it, it just contributes to it . . . It's very tricky. I try not to think about it too much. It'll send me crazy. (Hannah, 38)

I lived my life not realising the grief that I had and that deep, deep intense grief of, I miss my mother so much but yet logically, it didn't make sense because how can you miss someone you didn't even know? (Julie, 43)

I think the fact of my adoption, which was always known to me, remained simply a fact until a few years ago, when I realized that the fact of being adopted can in no way address the meaning of being adopted . . . The meaning of being adopted . . . signifies a question, one that I don't know how to answer, and don't even really know how to properly pose. (Sam, 31)

It's a complicated thing and I guess I don't really know how I feel and it just is because I don't know any different. (Ellen, 32)



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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1. Recruitment message

#### **Invitation to participate – Dislocation and belonging: Investigating the cultural identities of intercountry adoptees through narratives about self<sup>125</sup>**

I am a PhD student at the University of Newcastle, Australia, and an intercountry adoptee from South Korea. I am seeking intercountry adoptees from any country of birth to participate in research into the identities and life stories of Australian intercountry adoptees.

If you are aged 18 or over, were adopted to Australia, and may be willing to participate in one or two interviews (in-person or via email, phone or Skype), please read the attached Information Statement and contact Liz via direct message or email: [Elizabeth.Goode@uon.edu.au](mailto:Elizabeth.Goode@uon.edu.au), or the research supervisor Dr Judith Sander via [Judith.Sandner@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:Judith.Sandner@newcastle.edu.au).

The researchers are very grateful for any adoptees willing to share their story and experiences for this project. All interviewees, if they so choose, will receive a \$20 Coles-Myer voucher.

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<sup>125</sup> The research title provided on the recruitment documents reflects the narrower scope of the project in its earlier stages.



## Appendix 2. Participant Information Statement



Dr Judith Sandner  
School of Design, Communication & IT  
The University of Newcastle  
Callaghan NSW 2308  
T: +61 2 4921 7474  
E: [Judith.Sandner@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:Judith.Sandner@newcastle.edu.au)

### **Information Statement for the Research Project: Dislocation and belonging: investigating the cultural identities of intercountry adoptees through narratives about self**

Dear Potential Participant,

You are invited to participate in the research project identified above which is being conducted by Dr Judith Sandner, Ms Liz Goode and Associate Professor Phillip McIntyre at the University of Newcastle. The research is part of Ms Goode's PhD studies at the University, supervised by Dr Sandner and Associate Professor McIntyre.

#### ***Why is the research being done?***

The purpose of the research is to investigate the ways in which adult intercountry adoptees consider their cultural identities. The researchers are interested in how intercountry adoptees' sense of identity may change over their lifetimes, their perceptions of Australian national culture, and how communicating with particular types of people, such as other adoptees, may impact their sense of identity and belonging.

#### ***Who can participate in the research?***

We are seeking people aged 18 or over who were adopted to Australia from overseas as infants or children.

#### ***What would you be asked to do?***

If you agree to be involved, you will be asked to participate in interviews with the student researcher, who is also an intercountry adoptee. The interviews may be in-person, or by email, phone or Skype, depending on your preference. During the initial interview, and potentially a follow-up interview, the researcher will ask you to tell them about your life story and about the people and places that you feel you identify with.

If there are any personal documents that you feel reflect your identity or experiences at a particular point in your life, such as emails, letters, journal entries, personal stories, poems, etc. written at a time in your life that you are willing to discuss, the researcher may also ask your permission to access a copy or relevant excerpts. Any third parties mentioned in these documents will not be identified, and you will retain any ownership and intellectual property. Whether you allow access to such documents is entirely your choice.

#### ***What choice do you have?***

Participation in this research is entirely your choice. Only those people who give their informed consent will be included in the research. Whether or not you decide to participate, your decision will not disadvantage you in any way. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw from the research at any time up to the point of publication without giving a reason. At no stage will you be identified in the research.

***How much time will it take?***

The initial interview may take around two hours. A follow-up interview may be around one hour. Email interviews will take place over a number of emails, and the time required for this will vary between participants according to the length of their responses.

All interviewees will receive a \$20 Coles-Myer gift voucher as reimbursement for the personal time allocated to participating in the research project.

***What are the risks and benefits of participating?***

The researchers acknowledge that intercountry adoption can be an emotional issue. You may stop an interview at any time if you feel that you do not wish to continue. If you feel you would like some support, a list of post-adoption support services offering telephone, email or in-person counselling can be found here: <http://www.intercountryadoption.gov.au/post-adoption-support/state-territory-support/> and here: <http://www.lifeworks.com.au/icasupport.html>.

There are no other known risks to you participating. You may withdraw from the research at any time up to the point of publication, and will not be made identifiable in any way during the research process or any written reports.

While we cannot promise you any benefit from participating in the research, participants may benefit from the opportunity to tell their life stories and to contribute to research and understanding about intercountry adoption, particularly from the point of view of adoptees themselves.

***How will your privacy be protected?***

Any information collected by the researchers which might identify you will be stored securely on the student and chief researchers' password protected computers and/or in a locked cabinet in the chief researcher's secure office at the University of Newcastle. This information will only be accessed by the researchers unless you consent otherwise, except as required by law. Data will be retained securely for at least five years and then disposed of securely in line with the University of Newcastle's policy provisions.

The information collected from the interviews will be de-identified by coding responses with pseudonyms before it is analysed and reported. Any information that could identify you will be removed and pseudonyms will be used when quotes are included in the research report. Interview recordings may be transcribed by a professional transcription company bound by a strict confidentiality agreement, or the student researcher will carry out the transcribing.

***How will the information collected be used?***

No interviewees will be identifiable in any reporting of the research.

You will be given the opportunity to review, edit or erase the interview recordings or transcripts, and may request a summary of the research results by indicating this on the Consent Form, or by emailing Ms Goode or Dr Sandner. Due to the timeline for this research, it is anticipated that summaries of the research will be available after November 2017.

The results of the research may be reported in academic journal articles and conference papers. The research results, including de-identified extracts of interviews, will also be included in a PhD thesis. There is also the potential to have summaries of the research reported in the popular press and discussed by the researchers in the media. Non-identifiable data may also be shared with other parties to encourage scientific scrutiny, and to contribute to further research and public knowledge, or as required by law.

***What do you need to do to participate?***

Please read this Information Statement and be sure you understand its contents before you consent to participate. If there is anything you do not understand, or you have questions, contact the researchers via the details listed below.

If you would like to participate, either:

- Complete and return the attached Consent Form to Ms Liz Goode via email or Dr Judith Sandner via the School of Design, Communication & IT, The University of Newcastle, Callaghan, NSW, 2308

OR

- Contact Ms Liz Goode or the research supervisor Dr Judith Sandner to arrange an interview time and preference (e.g. in-person, email, Skype or telephone). At the scheduled interview Ms Goode will arrange for you to sign the Consent Form or read the Consent Form to you and record your informed consent on an audio recording device.

If you have any questions or would like further information please feel free to contact the researchers. Thank you for considering this invitation.

Yours sincerely

**Dr Judith Sandner**  
Chief Investigator  
E: [Judith.Sandner@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:Judith.Sandner@newcastle.edu.au)  
T: 02 4921 7474

**Ms Liz Goode**  
Student Investigator  
E: [Elizabeth.Goode@uon.edu.au](mailto:Elizabeth.Goode@uon.edu.au)  
T: 0420 489 981

**Associate Professor Phillip McIntyre**  
Co-investigator  
E: [Phillip.McIntyre@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:Phillip.McIntyre@newcastle.edu.au)  
T: 02 4985 4522

***Complaints about this research***

This project has been approved by The University's Human Research Ethics Committee, No. H-2016-0014. Should you have concerns about your rights as a participant in this research, or you have a complaint about the manner in which the evaluation is conducted, it may be given to the researcher, or, if an independent person is preferred, to the Human Research Ethics Officer, Research Office, The Chancellery, The University of Newcastle, University Drive, Callaghan NSW 2308, Australia, telephone (02) 49216333, email [Human-Ethics@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:Human-Ethics@newcastle.edu.au).



## Appendix 3. Consent Form



Dr Judith Sandner  
School of Design, Communication & IT  
The University of Newcastle  
Callaghan NSW 2308  
T: +61 2 4921 7474  
E: [Judith.Sandner@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:Judith.Sandner@newcastle.edu.au)

### Consent Form for the Research Project:

#### **Dislocation and belonging: Investigating the cultural identities of intercountry adoptees through narratives about self**

Dr Judith Sandner (Chief Investigator)  
Associate Professor Phillip McIntyre (Co-Investigator)  
Ms Liz Goode (Student Researcher)

I agree to participate in the above-named research project and give my consent freely.

I understand that:

- the project will be conducted as described in the Information Statement, a copy of which I have retained
- I can withdraw from the project at any time up to the point of publication and I do not have to give any reason for withdrawing
- My personal information will remain confidential to the researchers
- A spoken interview may be transcribed by a professional transcription service who are bound by a strict confidentiality agreement
- I retain ownership and intellectual property of any personal documents provided for the purposes of this research

Please circle the response(s) that apply to you. I consent to:

- |   |     |
|---|-----|
| • Participating in an in-person interview which will be recorded with an audio recording device   | Yes |
| • Participating in a telephone or Skype interview which will be recorded with an audio recording device   | Yes |
| • Participating in an email interview   | Yes |
| • Allowing the researcher to access copies or excerpts of personal documents that I choose to provide (such as emails/letters, personal stories/reflections, journal entries, poems, etc.), and that I feel reflect my identity or experiences at particular times in my life | Yes |

I have had the opportunity to have questions answered to my satisfaction.

I would like a summary of the results at the conclusion of the research

Yes

**Print Your Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Your Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Contact details (for the researcher to arrange an interview):**

\_\_\_\_\_