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Familiarizing the Stranger:
Asian American Adoptees and 'the American South'

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
in Asian American Studies

by

Katelyn Camile Hancock

2018

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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Asian American Adoptees and ‘the American South’

by

Katelyn Camile Hancock

Master of Art in Asian American Studies
University of California, Los Angeles, 2018
Professor Grace Kyungwon Hong, Chair

Based on interviews I conducted with four adult Asian American adoptees, each of them adopted into predominantly white families and raised in the regional U.S. South, I argue that both transnational/-racial adoption and ‘Southern-ness’ are analytics for a queer-interpellative *relationality*. That is, adoptive and Southern relations register of homologous structure of queer intimacy, each characterized by attempts to establish white-familial normativity through transformation of ‘the strange’ (and ‘the stranger’) into ‘the familiar.’ For the interviewees, ‘Southern-ness’ is a performative mode evincing a peculiar arrangement of explicit hospitality and implicit judgment and structuring and fortifying Southern relations, familial recognition, and community belonging. As adoption, specifically transracial adoption, entails a ventured process of *racial* transfiguration—the literal familiarizing of the racial stranger—the experiences of Asian American adoptees in a Southern context not only registers this peculiar tension between strangeness and familiarity but allows us to examine how this tension is racialized by attempts to manage the adoptee’s racial difference in order to make her familial and familiar. I trace how the interviewees articulated themselves with, and against, such notions of Southern-ness and have negotiated their place, as transracial adoptees, in a strangely familiar world.

The thesis of Katelyn Camile Hancock is approved.

Victor Bascara

Purnima Mankekar

Grace Kyungwon Hong, Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2018

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Preface

I interview Tiffani at a Starbucks in Cullman, Alabama, an approximate midpoint between Birmingham and Huntsville. Northbound on I-65, the route is familiar to me, an arterial topography of deciduous groves, country slades, and the brazen tidings of a literal highway gospel. *In the beginning GOD CREATED*, heralds one towering bulletin; another thereafter proselytizing *Where are you going? Heaven or Hell*—like an eviction notice, or a salutation. From what seems like miles below, I survey them with a prickliness that is almost indistinguishable from a certain fondness, reverence even. Call it an affective and visceral *knowingness* toward what, and where, we identify with yet are unidentifiable to, are protective yet cautious of, at once. At Starbucks, I survey the space: smaller than some but otherwise as any other, with baristas in standard green and seasonal red aprons. A young Latina woman assists us at the counter, and I disarm a little. Soft indie and inchoate murmurs even out the tenor of the room, occasionally interrupted by the hiss of a milk wand. There's a solitary Asian man (at least I *read* him as so) tucked away in the corner and reading, likely, other things than a stranger's Asian-ness. And then there are Tiffani and I, face to face at the end of a communal table: four non-white bodies in a silo upon a county seat, like an errant set of Matryoshka nesting dolls. I imagine a child disassembling the toy, her dismay upon the last carven figurine within Mother within Grandmother within Great Grandmother. The eyes are all wrong, but is the wrongness in the shape or the paranoia?

Throughout the interview, I am aware of an older woman with white hair a table over on Tiffani's right. She is close enough to hear us, to hear me probe Tiffani's memories of racism 'Southern-style,' which is to say, or so I've heard, exceptional. I listen (*Does she?*) as Tiffani recounts "passing through" a Klan demonstration in Rainsville, Alabama, as an eight-year-old child:

I remember I panicked because I thought, ‘Oh, my gosh, are they going to kill my parents [because] I’m in the backseat?’ So, I went to the floorboard immediately and tried to hide because I was terrified. And, I remember my parents went, ‘What are you doing?’ I was like, ‘I’m hiding!’ They said, ‘You don’t need to do that.’ Plus, my dad, you know, being a big cop [was] like, ‘You don’t need to do that. You’re totally protected.’ I remember feeling such pride for my parents, that they would stick their neck out for me, so to speak.

Are you listening? Which one are you? I won’t know, as she fiddles with the porcelain demitasse, occasionally glancing across the table. If Tiffani notices my discomfort, she doesn’t voice it. “What is ‘the South?’” I ask Tiffani, as I have asked the others before. Hers is people, the good and the bad. The latter are “who I call the rednecks,” she clarifies, “the good people are the non-rednecks, the bad people are the rednecks.” *Which one are you?* The white woman with white hair is gone.

Now, some 2,000 miles from home, though I am trained against simple narratives, I envy Tiffani’s clarity, that she can, and so clearly, know family in a feeling called ‘love’ that’s not *just* a color like white. *What does it actually mean to love white people?* I began with a question, believing that intellectualizing a ghost is the most effective means of killing it for good. But it is one that just begets more, culminating in but one circuitous non/answer: it’s complicated. Yet, per Avery Gordon, “[t]hat life is complicated”—and, for adoptees of color, the question of loving white people is, in fact, a fraught question of life (and death)—is “nonetheless a profound theoretical statement,”¹ a simple platitude that nevertheless resists simple explanation. Tiffani’s

¹ Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, 2008), 3.

home is ‘the South’ and the entire moral arc of the universe barreling toward Fort Payne. I can try to unsettle that narrative, but to claim I know better is a lie.

Tiffani’s memory bespeaks a familiarity with and distancing from whiteness within and without the truck. The Ku Klux Klan without the car are bad white people, wherein the vehicle acts as a very literal blockade separating the bad white people from the good ones inside. Yet, Tiffani, too, as a non-white child within the car acts to mediate the racial dynamics of the space. For a person raised in an environment already imagined as exceptionally racist, adoption (as an iteration of child rescue and white saviorism) does not end with the signing of formal legalese nor arrival of the child. Rather, the child is constantly arriving into a conferred whiteness that presents itself as not-racist via the child. In the car, there is a reconsolidation of whiteness via the performance of ‘goodness,’ in which all of the scene’s subjects play a part: her parents, Tiffani, the demonstrators, and now myself. Notably, while I am sure Tiffani experienced a concern for her own safety, she articulates her fear as fear for her parents. That fear, once the threat is managed and reassured, turns to pride for her parents. Here, I consider both the fear and pride for the white parents as circumscribed by expectations that adoptees (of color) demonstrate gratitude and gratefulness for their adoptions, and to situate that expectation within the adoptee’s always-deferred and precarious alignment with whiteness. The arrival is always happening.

The contradictions of the memory spill into the present moment, as even as I am critical of the sequence, I understand it. That is, my own assumptions about the South, or particular parts of the South, are activated. As I listen to Tiffani, I am acutely and uncomfortably aware of my surroundings—that I’m in Cullman, Alabama, and that I, too, am seeking a preemptive protection, that I feel somewhat relieved to be in a Starbucks, surrounded by, I hope, good white people.

Introduction

Based on interviews I conducted with four adult Asian American adoptees, each of them adopted into predominantly white families and raised in the regional U.S. South, I argue that both transnational/-racial adoption and ‘Southern-ness’ are indices for a certain kind of *relationality*. That is, adoptive and Southern relations register of homologous structure of queer intimacy, each characterized by attempts to establish white-familial normativity through transformation of ‘the strange’ (and ‘the stranger’) into ‘the familiar.’ For the interviewees, ‘being Southern’ often organized upon a cultural injunction to explicit congeniality and implicit judgment, at once. That dualism animated a particular code or etiquette of civil intimacy, acknowledged (rather popularly) in terms of its official ‘hospitality’ yet nonetheless tempered with implicit restraint. Southern-ness therefore signaled qualities of affectivity and performativity, wherein the writ to be ‘nice,’ ‘gracious,’ ‘neighborly’—to be, for all purposes, *good*—functioned to discipline Southern belonging. What I refer to throughout as ‘familiarity’ is, thus, an interpellative, affective, and performative mode administering the strange/-er to and through such techniques of social subjection. The confluence of Asian transnational/-racial adoption and, particularly here, the white-Christian ‘South’ evinces the *racial* productions and implications of familiarity and its regulations and repressions. I argue that the management (per a ‘colorblind’ repudiation) of the adoptee’s *Asian-ness*—an embodied signifier of difference and conspicuous reminder of her ‘strange’ origins—is a crucial imperative of white-Southern adoptive kinship. As such, attempts to familiarize (or, literally, *adopt*) the Asian stranger produces certain simultaneities, wherein the Asian American adoptee is both consonant with, and disruptive of, Southern whiteness and white-Southern relationality.

Critical adoption scholarship, particularly ethnographic and interview-based studies, about Asian American adoptees tends to focus on productions and experiences of identity.² (Few studies of Asian American adoption contend with regional, place-based analyses and virtually none therein on the South, specifically.) That bibliography certainly and importantly informs my own here. However, I depart from it (and, I hope, contribute to it) in theorizing Asian American adoption, and the particular experiences of the four participants, as an *affective*³ analytic revealing the queer effects of certain “moments of intimacy”⁴ in the South and the precarity of the white-familial ideal. Still, the relational consonances between Asian trans-national/-racial adoption and the white-American South are, admittedly, not readily legible. Per the contentious space of ‘Dixie’ within national memory, especially concerning its relations of race, the adoption of Asian children by white Southerners is, itself, largely counter-intuitive to popular and academic discourses about the South, as well as about Asian Americans and our experiences. ‘The South’ is perceived as exceptional to the U.S. nation, at times romanticized for its ‘quaint’ white parochialism but more often demonized as the endemic repository of American racial violence and trauma.⁵ Moreover, as a white/Black schema has enduringly inflected Southern racial politics, while, conversely, a bi-

² Eleana J. Kim, *Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010); Kim Park Nelson, *Invisible Asians: Korean American Adoptees, Asian American Experiences, and Racial Exceptionalism* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2016).

³ Purnima Mankekar elaborates on Gilles Deleuze and Brian Massumi to differentiate ‘affect’ as “distinct from feeling (the domain of individual subjectivity) and emotion (the domain of the linguistic).” As such, affect is not relegated to psychic or emotive “tropes of interiority,” as affects do not originate, nor inhere, within individual subjects; rather, they produce subjects and are themselves “engendered through the encounter of bodies with each other and with particular objects.” They are “a kind of contact zone” of sociality, facilitated, and collecting affective saliency, via public circulation and socio-temporal impactful-ness; Purnima Mankekar, *Unsettling India: Affect, Temporality, Transnationality* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015), 13; Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 3.

⁴ Shannon Sullivan, *Good White People: The Problem with Middle-Class White Anti-Racism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2014), 24.

⁵ Jigna Desai and Khyati Y. Joshi, “Discrepancies in Dixie: Asian Americans and the South,” in *Asian Americans in Dixie: Race and Migration in the South*, eds. Khyati Y. Joshi and Jigna Desai (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 4.

coastal paradigm has persistently configured narratives of Asian America, the figure of the Asian American ‘Southerner’ (adopted or not) “quickly...disappear[s] from understandings of the South as well as the Asian American Studies ‘canon.’”⁶ Yet, the narrativity of ‘the American South,’ like the historicity of Asian American adoption, has long revolved around the peculiar and, at times, anguished intimacy between familiars and strangers, in which race, historically, has hailed, and hailed from, the unresolved tensions of their identification. Indeed, in Southern Gothic fiction, ‘the South’ itself is rendered a “warm, luxuriate familiar”⁷ that is concomitantly unsettled by manifestations of the uncanny—frequently embodied by literal apparitions (phantasmagoric strangers, if you will) and ever an allegory for the Southern-familiar’s repressions of race, violence, and trauma. Conversely, in what Jennifer Rae Greeson terms “U.S. national literature,” ‘the South’ configures the “geographic and deviant Other” by which evolving “idea[s] of the nation-state” are defined.⁸ At least as it has been collectively imagined, then, ‘the South’ evinces, and is evinced in, a strange intimacy that is actually rather congruous with the relational structure of trans-national/-racial adoption, itself, in essence, all about taking something (or someone) marked as strange and making it familiar.

At the mid-century inception of the Cold War and its proxy ‘hot’ wars in Asia, U.S.-Korean adoption, particularly, would help initiate shifting fortifications of whiteness, laying the groundwork for a now-globalized program and reproductive industry structured around taking exoticized strangers and making them family. At a moment in which, domestically, “internment and immigration exclusion legally defined Asians as the nation’s racial enemy” while ‘foreign’ Asian bodies were being violently incorporated through U.S. imperialist wars, ideologies of Western

⁶ Ibid., 1.

⁷ Thadious M. Davis, *Southscapes: Geographies of Race, Region, and Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 1.

⁸ Jennifer Rae Greeson qtd. in Davis, *Southscapes*, 6.

benevolence, and brutal regimes of modernization,”⁹ the adoptions of Korean ‘orphans’ by white-American families functioned to facilitate emerging programs of racial liberalism, national belonging, and U.S. expansion.¹⁰ That is, Cold War U.S.-Korean adoption entailed a dynamic racial project for the U.S., wherein the figure of the Korean ‘orphan’ facilitated crucial ideological labor. In *To Save the Children of Korea: The Cold War Origins of International Adoption*, Arissa Oh asserts the capacious and often arbitrary manipulation of the ‘orphan’ category:

A child could be—and often was—made into an orphan through a simple administrative act by an orphanage director or a social worker, or into a ‘social orphan’ when released for adoption by a living parent. Whether genuine or not, orphanhood was an essential narrative precondition to adoption.¹¹

That is, a prospective child’s ultimate absorption into white Americanness, then—indeed, her very adoptability—was a contingency of the very discursive construction of a de-historicized (and largely deracinated) orphan-hood, which, in turn, facilitated a legal and cultural trajectory of other categorical and racialized sites of mediation: ‘refugee,’ ‘immigrant,’ ‘citizen,’ ‘model minority,’

⁹ And via the provisional integration of Black men and women into the domestic labor force and the U.S. military; Jun, Helen, *Race for Citizenship: Black Orientalism and Asian Uplift from Pre-Emancipation to Neoliberal America* (New York and London: New York UP, 2011), 4.

¹⁰ South Korea entailed “the largest development project in the world after the end of the [Korean War], with the United States being the primary orchestrator of the nation-building project—a principal objective of which was to create a viable anticommunist state.” The estimated 100,000 displaced children of the Korean War thus collectively represented “a possible weapon that the communists could seize upon in the ideological battle to discredit the United States and its cold war expansionism.” Displaced Korean children, and the American servicemen who were depicted as ‘child rescuers,’ reinforced narratives of U.S. humanitarianism and moral exceptionalism and, thus, functioned to justify military occupation in Korea and elsewhere in Asia. Furthermore, the hundreds to thousands of so-called ‘GI babies,’ the ‘illegitimate,’ multiracial children of Korean women and presumably American servicemen, threatened the new South Korean government’s ideological investments in racial purity and national homogeneity. Both the U.S. and the then-nascent Republic of Korea (R.K.) thus benefited from early adoption practices, which served to evacuate the ‘undesirable’ children of Korea from the purview of its borders and responsibility, while solidifying a neocolonial intimacy between the U.S. and the R.K. and engendering domestic and international support for U.S. anti-communist and imperialist interventions; Arissa Oh, *To Save the Children of Korea: The Cold War Origins of Adoption* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2015), 13.

¹¹ Oh, *To Save the Children of Korea*, 164.

and ‘adoptee.’¹² According to SooJin Pate, the process of rendering the ‘social orphan’ adoptable—or, marketable—commenced at the biopolitical site of the orphanage, often with ‘normalizing’ surgical and disciplinary procedures to ‘correct’ any physical abnormalities and produce, per Foucault, docile bodies.¹³ Pate writes, “An effective way to assure their compliance and docility was to fashion Korean social orphans into dolls,” which entailed the literal erasure of embodied difference, “making them appear indistinguishable from one another.”¹⁴ Furthermore, a mid-century Korean blood politic and nationalistic climate precluded the mixed-race children of foreign (presumably, American) G.I.s and Korean women from national recognition. As such, mixed-race children constituted a “highly visible social welfare and publicity problem” for the nascent South Korean government—the proposed solution to which almost exclusively entailed overseas evacuation to the US—as well as for “the newly hegemonic United States, which was concerned about maintaining a reputation as the embodiment of democratic ideals in the ‘free world’” despite its own domestic regimes of racial violence, segregation, and exclusion.¹⁵ Here, then, South Korean confluences of genealogical, racial, and national identifications converged with a U.S. neocolonial project of humanitarian rescue and an official Cold War grammar of ‘colorblind’ anti-racism.¹⁶ U.S. media coverage of multiracial G.I. babies and, increasingly, the ‘full’ Korean children who were adopted by mostly white American families commonly highlighted racial difference insofar as it accentuated the moral benevolence of the U.S. military and primacy of the American family.¹⁷ Thus, the erasure of race—the most conspicuous signal of

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

¹³ Pate, SooJin, *From Orphan to Adoptee: U.S. Empire and Genealogies of Korean Adoption* (Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P, 2014), 110.

¹⁴ Pate, *From Orphan to Adoptee*, 89.

¹⁵ Eleana J. Kim, *Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging* (Durham and London: Duke U P, 2010), 48.

¹⁶ Oh, *To Save the Children of Korea*, 104

¹⁷ Nelson, Kim Park, *Invisible Asians: Korean American Adoptees, Asian American Experiences, and Racial Exceptionalism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers U P, 2016), 4.

difference within white adoptive families—was critical to the preservation of white heteronormative familiarity. Vaguely religious doctrine converged with nationalistic alignments—what Oh conceptualizes as “Christian Americanism—inspiring a largely white, conservative Christian-American public to not only embrace but trenchantly launch U.S.-Korean adoption in the 1950s and early ‘60s.¹⁸ Christian Americanism concomitantly and paradoxically invoked an Orientalist sensibility and colorblind politic that functioned to inscribe a process of spiritual-like transfiguration upon the figure of the salvageable Korean ‘orphan,’ sentimentally configured in the American imaginary as a pitiable object of Asian neglect, ‘Eastern’ pathology, and Communist corruptibility.¹⁹ The ‘rescue,’ vis-à-vis adoption, of the miserable Asian orphan by the white Christian-American family was therein configured as a literal and symbolic crossover into American hegemony, wherein white love would willfully subsume racial otherness. In the contemporary white-adoptive South, whiteness remains a crucial, if uneasy, contingency and racial difference both collateral and crucible of ‘the South’ and its social relations. Here, the Asian adoptee’s racial ‘strangeness’ is subjected to management yet is nonetheless necessary to Southern-whiteness’ reproductions of the familiar and familial.

Methodology and Introduction of the Interviewees

The four interviewees are adult (ages 24 to 49 at the time of being interviewed), self-identifying Asian Americans, each of them adopted and raised by predominantly white families in areas that are commonly identified with the regional U.S. ‘South.’ Per that criteria, I recruited them through prior connection, as well as the following informal Facebook ‘Groups’ for Asian American adoptees: *Adoptees from Asia (AFA)*, *Korean American Adoptees*, and *Association of*

¹⁸ Oh, *To Save the Children of Korea*, 81.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 83, 152.

Korean Adoptees (AKA). Primarily concerned with an analytic of ‘race,’ rather than ethnicity or national origin, I used the racial umbrella-term of ‘Asian’ to recruit adoptees rather than specifying any particular ethnic identity. Three of the interviewees are Korean American and one Filipinx American. While I did not necessarily intend that particular ethnic ratio, I did anticipate an imbalance due to my own access to other Korean adoptees (being one myself); the historic prevalence of adoption from Korea; and, per Eleana Kim, the emergence and vitality of a “recognizable and self-conscious” Korean-adoptee collective online within the previous two decades.²⁰ Nonetheless, it is a discrepancy and a limitation of scope that I am cautious of throughout, and in attending to the complex racial productions of ‘Asian’ adoption, I do not suggest that differences in ethnic identity and identification have no interface with race, racialization, and colorism to affect asymmetrical experiences for Asian American adoptees.

I interviewed the participants in the late fall of 2017 and early winter of 2018. While each interview included questions pertaining to certain major themes—namely, adoption, race, and ‘the South,’ they otherwise were structured as oral histories of the participants’ everyday lives and relations growing up in their immediate families and local communities. Suffice it to say, the interviews were extensive in their scope and depth and the interviewees generous with their memories, insights, and knowledges—only mere fragments of which I am able to include here. Per their permission, I use their actual first names throughout.

Amanda (she/her) was born in Gwangju, a city in the South Jeolla Province of South Korea, between 1986 and 1987. Adopted at approximately two-and-a-half years old, she migrated to the U.S. in the fall of 1989 and grew up in a suburb (Vestavia Hills) of Birmingham, Alabama. I

²⁰ Eleana J. Kim, *Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging*, 5.

recruited Amanda through a long-standing connection: she and I have known each other from an early age, having lived a few houses apart on the same street and attended the same elementary and secondary schools. She has an older brother who also was adopted from Korea. Amanda strongly identifies as an immigrant, an identity that became particularly prescient following the Trump Administration's assault on the Deferred Action for Child Arrivals (DACA) policy. I interviewed her in New York, New York, where she currently lives with her husband.

Jae (they/them/their) was born in Quezon City of Metro Manila in the Philippines in 1988. They were adopted in 1990, when they were approximately 18 months old. Their early childhood was spent in Connecticut and in rural Janesville, Wisconsin, before they and their family re-located to a suburban neighborhood (Greystone) of Birmingham in 1997. Like Amanda, I recruited Jae through prior connection, having met them in undergraduate visual art studies at Birmingham-Southern College. Jae has a younger brother who also was adopted from the Philippines. Jae furthermore identifies as queer, non-binary/transmasculine—an identity that is, “at this point in time, the most important to [them] other than being Filipino.” I interviewed them in Boston, Massachusetts, where they currently reside.

Erin (she/her) was born in Seoul, Korea, in July of 1996. The adoptive daughter of a Southern Baptist pastor and an advocate for children with special needs, she was raised in Scotts Hill, a small, rural town in west Tennessee. I recruited Erin through Facebook. She has a younger brother who was adopted from Hong Kong and an older one domestically adopted. Unlike the other participants, she noted having exceptionally detailed records from Holt Korea and Holt in Eugene, Oregon, surrounding the circumstances of her relinquishment and adoption:

I think I'm pretty lucky with all the information I have on my case. My [birth] mom was 26 or 27 and my dad was 32.... My mother was in a car in Seoul. The driving

was really rough, and she went into labor two months early. When I was born [at 11:11], I had a hole in my heart, and I was four pounds and two ounces. The doctors basically were telling them all the different heart problems I may have, and I think my parents decided that they were going to give me up for adoption, and they specifically requested that I be adopted to the U.S.

Having filed a search request through Holt when she was studying abroad in college, she discovered that her birthmother had since passed away. I interviewed Erin via Skype. She now lives in Jackson, Tennessee, where she attended college.

Tiffani (she/her) was also born in Seoul in January of 1969. Adopted at three-and-a-half through Holt, she came to the U.S. in 1973 and grew up in Huntsville, Alabama. Her late father was a state trooper and late mother a nurse, both of whom she endearingly described as “country as turnips.” They also had a biological daughter, Tiffani’s sister, who passed away when Tiffani was a senior in high school. When she was 21, Tiffani moved to Atlanta, Georgia, living there for fourteen years before re-locating again to Huntsville to raise her daughter. In 2009 she attempted a birth-family search but was “disheartened” by not only the lack of information but also “the withholding of information that [she] had to really, really push to get.” Tiffani disclosed herself as a survivor of trauma, surviving not just the loss of her adoptive family but abuse as an infant in Korea:

This does not have to be off the record. This can be shared because I know other people have probably gone through things like this, and there’s no shame in it. I remember, specifically, being with my boyfriend, and having a flashback that I was three-and-a-half, and I was being molested. But, I knew, it was so clear. I was three-and-a-half, not four, three-and-a-half, and that was the age that I was abandoned.

So, I really, really feel that connection that a family member probably dropped me and (quote) ‘abandoned’ me to save me from [those] circumstances.

I interviewed Tiffani in Cullman, Alabama.

On a final note, and as I contend with in the following section “Tracing ‘the Imagined South,’” what is popularly understood to be a coherent region of the United States—that is, “assumed to share some kind of cultural and religious,” as well as historical and geopolitical, similitude²¹—is, in fact, a highly contestable formation, and that includes the disputability of its geographic borders. I thus acknowledge that ‘the South’ extends beyond the scope of what is captured here, and that “certain, but not all, spaces within [the] geographic region are associated with the legacies of Southern history and culture(s).”²² Alabama and Tennessee, as states that are included in both the U.S. census’ designation of the region and the socio-cultural discourses of ‘Dixie,’ ‘the Old South,’ ‘the Deep South,’ and ‘the Bible Belt,’ are ‘Southern’ spaces, but they are not total unto themselves nor to other geographic areas of the South.

Tracing ‘the Imagined South’

The meaning of ‘Southern distinction’ is contentious amongst the interdisciplinary practitioners of U.S. Southern studies and of Southern life-worlds themselves. As a site of sociological, cultural, and historical inquiry and intrigue, the definitive contours of ‘the American South’ are elusive, crooking along a jagged way, deviating and multiplying, such that endeavoring to wield its profuse, layered, and often competing geographies requires sifting through multiple souths: ‘Old’ and ‘New,’ white and Black, evangelical and secular—and their relations to one another. Per Khyati Y. Joshi and Jigna Desai, the South assumes “different meanings based on

²¹ Joshi and Desai, “Discrepancies in Dixie,” 3.

²² *Ibid.*, 4.

whether its definition is based on historical, social, or geopolitical parameters.”²³ In *Southscapes: Geographies of Race, Region, and Literature*, Thadious Davis’ analytic of the ‘southscape’ contends with the “the South as a social, political, cultural, and economic construct but one with the geographical ‘fact of the land.’”²⁴ And, as Leigh Ann Duck argues in *The Nation’s Region: Southern Modernism, Segregation, and U.S. Nationalism*, ‘the South’ (as ‘the Orient’ has to ‘the Occident’)²⁵ constitutes an “other” space of projective fantasy to, and within, the nation.²⁶ Such approaches to ‘the South’s’ *spatial difference* illuminate the region’s circulation within a complicated discursive nexus, one that is certainly informed by the actuality of *place* but is not necessarily tethered to it. In simpler terms, understanding the interviewees’ place within the South (and the place of the South for the interviewees) means contending with the South as it has been and continues to be complexly imagined.

I asked the interviewees to define the South for themselves, and, indeed, they each advanced multiple, and at times contradictory, understandings of the South, as well as of self-identifying with varied meanings of Southern-ness. Perhaps in its most pedestrian of circulations, the South refers to a geographic region of the continental United States, albeit demarcated through certain historical signifiers (e.g., states that were formerly slave states or states that comprised the Confederacy during the American Civil War). The notion of Southern-ness as such—that is, a matter of (mere) geographic happenstance, or, as Erin articulated, “just [growing] up in a Southern state”—was evident in the interviews, at least initially. Jae, for instance, resisted the idea of cultural

²³ Ibid., 3.

²⁴ Davis, *Southscapes*, 2.

²⁵ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

²⁶ Leigh Ann Duck, *The Nation’s Region: Southern Modernism, Segregation, and U.S. Nationalism* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 2009), 2.

distinctiveness, defining the South as, literally, “[s]outh of the Mason-Dixon line. Geographically.” They elaborated,

[S]outhern-ness, again, is just geographical.... And, honestly, everyone’s like that, most people are like that, whether they live in the city or the suburbs or out in the country. Most people like the same thing and desire the same thing forever because that’s called security or safety or whatever it is. But there’s something about having a life that is—You already know what it’s supposed to look like, which is we tailgate at so-and-so’s house, and someone always brings *this* corn casserole...and this is the Piggly Wiggly we go to...and this church always does this thing. It’s just very...particular, which is not a southern thing. It’s just a place thing. And, I know it’s not a southern thing, like, wanting particular things that way, because, everywhere I go, and I get to know people, they’re like, “Well, I always go to this place” or “We always do things this way.” And, it’s always the same. You can just exchange out the restaurant or the names of the establishments.

Jae’s resistance to particularize such cultural traditionalism—“We always do things this way”—to the South, and to define the South as any more or less than a purely geographic fact, is understandable, as any singular definition is vulnerable to oversimplification. Yet, notably, the interviewees were aware of and verbalized other meanings, illuminating the geographic as a launching point for the social, political, and cultural. That is, to articulate the South as a geographic concept is to signify, already, a *something-else-ness* constituted from entanglements of fact and fiction, the mythologies of an imagined space and material contradictions of a lived, and living, place.

The South is constituted by innumerable geographies of disparate sub-cultures and distinct life-worlds, as well as by the multiple, and often contradictory, discursive contexts and representational economies in which such particularities are ever situated. Tiffani posited a distinction between perceptions of “the Southern” generally and “the Alabaman” specifically, reflecting, “[People] think of Southern peaches and Scarlett O’Hara, but then when they think of Alabama, they think dueling banjos and the Hatfield’s and McCoy’s and just toothless people and wife-beater shirts.” And, in fact, Tiffani’s distinction between multiple constructed ‘southscapes’ articulated via allusions to two classic, albeit disparate, literary and filmic representations of ‘the American South’—*Gone with the Wind* and *Deliverance*, inflect bi-modal, and seemingly oppositional, ‘Souths’ that have long pervaded U.S. media: on the one hand, a romantic, yet bygone, South of whimsical tragedy and, on the other, a pathological, and inevitably failed, South of grotesque deviance. Both iterations have functioned not only to temporalize “the South” as regressively and aberrantly asynchronous with the nation,²⁷ and to do so via certain spatializations of race and class, but also have bolstered notions of the South as a coherent and largely homogenous space. Nevertheless, disrupting the coherence of any one state, city, or locale within and without, the interviewees articulated discrepancies of Southern-ness that were variable to specific locations, as well as the cultural character and demographic composition therein.

Imagining “Country”

Raised in Huntsville, Alabama, the state’s fourth most populous city, Tiffani experienced it as “smaller and closer knit in one respect,” wherein she was one of “the only non-Black, non-white [kids]” in the area, and, on the other hand, a “melting pot” [of] different cultures and different

²⁷ Joshi and Desai, “Discrepancies in Dixie,” 4.

people [with an] international influence”—a partial effect of Huntsville’s industrialisms as an army, aerospace, and biotechnology arsenal—rendering it “not your typical Alabama town.” That Tiffani’s experiences and perceptions of Huntsville seem asymmetrical demonstrates just that—the incongruities that are evinced in the contradictory and dynamic sedimentations of places and their worlds within. At 21, Tiffani relocated to Atlanta, Georgia, living there for approximately 14 years before settling again in Alabama. Relating it to Huntsville and the South broadly, she explained,

[Atlanta is] still Southern, but it’s just so culturally full and vibrant, you know, culturally developed.... It’s different, too, in the way that there are little suburbs, but it’s not the small-town-Alabama feel. It’s more the larger-city type of feel. It’s more urban. Even in the suburbs there—I mean, it’s still Southern in the way that you can still do business and get to know people.... You can do things together easily, so it’s easy to meet people, but they’re not as much in your business as in Huntsville, the smaller towns in Alabama. They’re not concerned whether your sister’s boyfriend slept with whoever. Who cares, you know? That was a relief, too, because I felt like I [was] looked under a microscope in a small town.

What’s notable about Tiffani’s observations of Atlanta, and Huntsville by comparison, are their respective perceptive and *affective* proximities to certain modalities of metropolitanism and a purported lack thereof. Tiffani describes Atlanta as “still Southern” in its specific quality of neighborly intimacy, *but* subjectively less so. That is, it is exceptional to the rest of the South not only in terms of its volume and density of population but also and even more so in its cultural “development,” which ascribes itself onto the notion, and *feeling*, of Atlanta and its suburbs as “more urban” and Huntsville and other “towns” in the South as more rural or country,

comparatively. Certainly, with a diverse population of 5.8 million in 2018—the ninth largest metropolitan area in the U.S.—Atlanta is quantifiably “urban”²⁸ by U.S. census standards, or a designation for areas, incorporated or not, of at least 50,000 inhabitants.²⁹ Currently, Huntsville’s population, in comparison, is approximately 193,000, with 905 people per square mile, unquestionably less concentrated and populated than Atlanta but nonetheless “urban” by categorical definition.³⁰ Yet, regardless of definitional technicality, ‘the urban’ and ‘the rural,’ per literary and queer theorist Scott Herring, and as Tiffani’s observations perceptively underscore, are as much phantasmatic, affective, and subjective sites as they are “geographically verifiable” contexts.³¹ Furthermore, as semantic formations for mapping and explicating certain social phenomena and desires, ‘the urban’ and ‘the rural’ participate in dyadic opposition to one another, their respective meanings not only materializing from that which the other is not but moreover foreclosing that which the Other can never be and through prescriptions of that which the Self should not be.

According to Thadious Davis, ‘the rural,’ and its idiomatic twin ‘country,’ persists as the “dominant physical expression of the region” in the American imaginary, a “signifier of the South” that “has not been completely undermined,”³² despite the well-established reality of much of the South’s de-/urbanization and suburbanization, as well as the endurance of rural communities and

²⁸ ‘Urban,’ as noted in Scott Herring’s *Another Country*, is commonly treated as synonymous with ‘city,’ as the *Oxford English Dictionary*, for instance, defines “urban” as “pertaining to or characteristic of, occurring or taking place in, a city or town.” Herring, however, cautions against their interchangeability, as ‘the urban,’ he argues, is not necessarily confined to the city nor ‘the rural’ to the country, particularly in terms of their implications as spatial-aesthetic and -epistemological categories; Scott Herring, *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2010), 7.

²⁹ Herring, *Another Country*, 7.

³⁰ “Huntsville, Alabama Population 2018,” World Population Review, <http://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/huntsville-population/> (accessed November 26, 2018).

³¹ Herring, *Another Country*, 9.

³² Davis, *Southscapes*, 10.

locales across other regions of the U.S. Jae invoked their preconceived perceptions of Alabama as a child in rural Wisconsin before their family relocated to an affluent suburban neighborhood, Greystone, in Birmingham:

Have you seen the show *Roseanne*? That's what Wisconsin was like...where we lived. And Greystone is not like *Roseanne*...at all. I was used to that and expecting that and thinking, 'Alabama: there's going to be cows. It's going to be exactly like Wisconsin except hotter.' It was not at all, and I was disappointed but also really impressed with [its] modernities.... It was more like malls that had several stories, and, where I grew up in Wisconsin—like, strip mall situation, single, one-story.

Of course, as a five-year-old child, Jae's expectations of Alabama, or any new place period, inflect expectations of habit and familiarity at a specific time of development in their life, an early childhood affinity that has endured unto the present: "I think that Janesville in my 'heart-memory' is my hometown. It's in Wisconsin." They further noted, "I wasn't expecting Alabama to be bad. I was expecting Alabama to be more like home," recalling disappointment that Birmingham did not, in fact, mirror the tight-knit, largely farming community that they were accustomed to in Janesville. Nevertheless, stereotypes of 'the South' as lacking in certain modernities or entrenched in a petrified condition of pre-modernity—and that circumscribe, especially, 'the Deep South' or 'the Bible Belt,' as recursive iterations of 'the Old South'—continue to circulate the imaginations of non-Southerners and Southerners alike.

The interviewees elaborated upon encounters with non-Southerners in other areas across the U.S., illustrating the ascriptions of such representations of 'the South,' and 'the South *as rural*,' not only onto certain places but onto particular bodies and their affective and aesthetic productions as well. "I'm not wearing overalls, and I'm wearing shoes," Amanda quipped, reflecting on run-

ins with born-and-bred Northeasterners and New Yorkers, more specifically: “I always joke about that, like, ‘Yeah, we wear shoes—I’m wearing shoes!’” She elaborated,

They’ll be like, ‘Oh, well, you seem to have adjusted well outside.’ They think that the South is very—and it is in a lot of ways—insulated and cut off from the world and close-minded...hasn’t progressed, you know? Some people will almost congratulate me for...adjusting to living in New York, as if it was some feat...[but] I don’t feel like I had to adjust at all.

Notably, then, perceptions of the South’s regressive asynchrony and oppressive parochialism configure presumptions of the Southerner’s own lack of competency and functionality in spaces that are imagined as progressive, enlightened, and dynamic or, that is, “outside” of the South, New York City being a prime, if not *the* quintessential, U.S. example. Moreover, per Joshi and Desai, insofar as the South’s “failure” to achieve modernity is, circuitously, projected onto the “individual Southerner’s own backwardness and inability to transcend...Southern culture,”³³ a Southerner who manages to “adjust” to non-Southern places and spaces is deemed exceptional and, as Amanda’s example attests to, commendable. “I think it was other people’s ideas of Southern-ness,” Jae explained, “which would be not cosmopolitan, people are backwards hicks, and/or people are complacent middle-class suburbanites who...just...are not progressive,” reflecting on, at times, having felt compelled to disassociate from Southern-ness. Such oft-deployed *embodiments* of the region—as Jae recites, in and of “backward hicks” and “complacent suburbanites,” inscribe the South’s abject temporality and spatiality through and onto its discursive encodements of race. Either personification—and its specific quality of backwardness or complacency, respectively—

³³ Joshi and Desai, “Discrepancies in Dixie,” 4.

function toward ‘the South,’ and ‘the Southerner,’ as quintessentially white and normatively anti-metropolitan, and vis-a-vis particularly gendered and classed inflections. Of note, in fact, is the *recursion* of whiteness via its differentiation and disarticulation of ‘white trash,’ which, as I argue, is central to Southern modes of relationality and the management of racial difference.

The South’s ascribed *rural* essentialism, and ‘the rural’s’ own racial and class designations, coalesce, particularly, in the figure of “the hick,” which, as an old-English colloquialism tracing to *hikke* or “awkward provincial person,”³⁴ is now a symptomatic ailment of “white trash,” personifying popular discourses about the region. Emerging in the 1850s and 1860s to fortify the abolitionist cause, ‘white trash’ was first deployed by Northerners to emphasize chattel slavery’s creation of a class of poor whites who—denied the opportunity to work, and to therefore cultivate moral sensibility, an attribution of the Southern plantation’s preponderance of Black slave labor—were supposedly so depraved of social mannerisms and “degraded” in intelligent character as to efface distinctions of whiteness and Blackness altogether.³⁵ Thus, as an “outgrowth” of Black enslavement, the canopic “white trash”—and its subsequent iterations in “hicks,” “hillbillies,” and “rednecks”—“was ‘a uniquely southern phenomenon,’” continuing not only to effect the *geographic* connotations of the term but also *racial* connotations of geography.³⁶ That is, as critical race philosopher Shannon Sullivan writes of the multi-constitutive implications of race and class, place and space, “[Simply] to be a white person from the South of the United States is to risk being considered white trash.”³⁷

³⁴ “Hick,” Online Etymology Dictionary, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/hick> (date accessed November 26, 2018).

³⁵ Shannon Sullivan, *Good White People: The Problem with Middle-class Anti-racism* (Albany: Suny Press, 2014), 35.

³⁶ Sullivan, *Good White People*, 36.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 36.

Imagining Race

Tiffani recollected an encounter in Sacramento, California, on business travel:

I remember walking into [a] store, and...I said, 'What time do y'all close?' They were like, 'Oh, my God, where are you from?' You know, until I opened my mouth, they totally thought, 'Hey, you're from California,' because, you know, I totally blended in until I said, 'What time do y'all close?'

Not only does Tiffani's anecdote signal, on the one hand, certain assumptions, and, indeed, truths, about the racial constitution of California's own demographics—that is, as a U.S. state and a hub of Pacific-Rim transnationality with a well-known history of Asian migration, California *is*, in fact, residence to a considerable Asian and Asian American population, such that, per Tiffani, Asians “blend in,” or are commonplace, to its everyday landscapes. But, on the other hand, it also reveals presumptions about ‘the South’s’ spatio-racial normativity as white, and perhaps Black to a lesser extent, but definitively *not-Asian*, despite the geographic fact of Asians in the region, historically and contemporaneously. And, as Amanda's aforementioned jesting gestures toward, to be a person, generally-speaking, *of* the South in places and spaces that are not—and to be deemed ‘well-spoken,’ ‘educated,’ ‘progressive,’ ‘worldly,’ ‘respectable,’ ‘shoe-wearing’ or any such features that are stereotypically antithetical to Southern-ness and Southerners at that—is to divert expectations, unsolicited as they may be and typically tend to be; though, to be *Asian American* of the South in places and spaces that are not—and *are*, is to collapse expectation altogether, at least momentarily. “They always are like, ‘Is there much more of a minority community there?’” Amanda recalled of fielding (in ever humorous stride) the curious probing of non-Southerners upon learning that she was raised in Alabama: “I’m like, ‘Yes! In every state, there are people from probably every country, [of] every ethnicity, in some pocket somewhere.’”

[I'm] like, 'There's a Hyundai in Montgomery, you know—there's Koreans there.' ...Everyone's always super shocked."

The question itself anticipates the South in accordance with its (and the U.S.-nation's) paradigmatic white/Black color line, in which the region is conceived of in terms of a majority white body-politic. Further underwritten, though, is its tacit appraisal of the South as *exceptionally* racist (deemed a feature and function of its cultural 'backwardness' and temporal 'lagging') and, thus, antagonistically unsustainable of non-white people and life; that is, it inquires not just *Are there minorities?* but implicitly begs *How could there be?* considering the South's history of violent and explicit cultures of anti-Blackness, particularly, and white supremacy, generally. And, in Erin's words, that "history follows the South" and its individuals, generating varied implications for white and non-white Southerners in and across other areas.

Oft-cited as "the primary site of American racial trauma,"³⁸ the South is popularly demonized as an isolated and insulated repository for the country's residual and abject racisms and its 'exceptional' racists—acting to circumscribe the U.S.-nation's amnesia around its own historical disavowals, as well as support claims to non-Southern spaces and subjectivities as "post-racial" and, thus, "not-racist." Accordingly, its emplacement in a narrative of distinction, as hyper-conservative, -religious, and -racist vis-a-vis the nation writ large, renders the imagined South culturally hostile toward, innately incompatible with, and functionally unsuitable for people of color, *unlike*, that is, *other regions*. Yet, not just the South's paradox to the nation but the Asian-subject's *particularized* incongruity to the South configures our racial "common sense" of Asian Americans' existence, or a perceived lack thereof, in the region.

³⁸ Joshi and Desai, "Discrepancies in Dixie," 4.

Despite Asians' longstanding presence and documentation there (and the South's own history of trans-Atlantic connectivity), as well as rapid rates of contemporary migration beyond the West Coast and the Northeast, Asian Americans are largely precluded from both 'the South's' own image(s) of itself, as well as elided in the U.S.'s imaginings of 'the South.'³⁹ Whereas Southern distinction is oft-articulated through spatio-temporal tropes of nativism, isolationism, provinciality, and historicity, 'Asian America' is commonly understood through inverse motifs of foreignness, migration, globalization (There is, indeed, a Hyundai in Montgomery), and contemporaneity:

[The] Asian American as perpetual foreigner and alien is always seen as a recent immigrant, and therefore associated with contemporary times, while the South is perceived as an anachronistic and isolated region; this renders the two—the Asian American and the South—allegedly mutually exclusive and incongruous.⁴⁰

The Asian thus signals "alien" transnationality, while the South invokes a "fixed premodern moment" in the telos of the modern nation.⁴¹ Amanda continued, "Yeah, every time, it's 'Oh, I thought you were from somewhere else,'" a presumption fraught with compounded innuendos of Amanda's racialized 'alien-ness' in terms of both regionality and nationality. For Asian Americans in and of the geographic South, the implication of their discursive opposition to the imagined South is and has been, largely, that of a regional epistemic erasure and representational occlusion. And, as I argue, the Asian American's 'strangeness'—and the Asian American

³⁹ E.g., Chinese "coolies" and Mississippians, South Asian peddlers, Filipino lascars, and Vietnamese refugees in Louisiana, etc.; *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴⁰ Joshi and Desai, "Discrepancies in Dixie, 1.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

transracial *adoptee*'s approximation to that estrangement *and* white familiarity at once, function to regulate the latter's ever unsettled incorporation into white-Southern belonging.

The intention here is not to argue the empiricism of the South's racism or individual Southerners' bigotry and biases. As moments and themes thereof were common to each of the interviewees' experiences and lives (and as a recurring feature of my own), I desire neither to vindicate the South as *not racist*, structurally and intimately, nor posit its more localized cultures and institutions as, necessarily, *not-hostile* environments for individuals and communities of color—and in a myriad of implicit configurations and explicit enactments. Furthermore, to chalk the reality of U.S. racism's systemic breadth and structural depth to an apologist sensibility of “Everywhere is racist, and there are racists everywhere!”—a deflection I have heard tell, though not exclusively, amongst Southerners (including myself)—is simplistic and insufficient. While the statement itself is not false per se, its sentiment supplements ahistorical notions of racism as an insulated and isolated, individual and inevitable, strictly local and not simultaneously global, phenomenon. Rather, then, of critical imperative here is the racial and racialized discursivity of ‘the American South’ *in relation to* ‘the American nation’ as mutually constitutive spatial projections. Moreover, their co-constructive constitutionality is useful for situating the experiences and subjecthoods of adopted persons who are racially other/-ed yet interpolated into whiteness through incorporative modes of kinship, and within certain contexts that are imagined as hegemonically white and *not-Asian* while propagated as hyper-racist and thus, implicitly, *anti-Asian*. All of that to say, “exceptionalism” and other grammars circumscribing the South's textual ‘distinction’ to the nation; the Asian American's ‘discrepancy’ within the South; and the adoptee's ‘contradiction’ thereto all, are of multiple and simultaneous contexts that, conjecture or not, configure certain truth effects for people, their lives, and their affiliations.

Tracing the Lived South

Mutually entangled formations of place and identity illuminate processes of simultaneity and contradiction—each and both, at once, hegemonically sedimented yet contestably unsettled. That is, they are themselves local and global processes, and effects thereof, that manifest in tout consonance and conflict of our available social scripts and material conditions. Thus, identity is subject/-ed in place even as it is not affixed to it. While the interviewees’ ambivalence, at times, to claim ‘Southern-ness’ (i.e., as Southerners) might suggest their internalization of the South as it is discursively imagined and projected, it hails, at once, their recognition of the South as it is viscerally lived and discerned through multiple subject- and epistemological- positions. “I used to identify very strongly with being a Southerner,” Jae observed, “but now I mostly identify with being...Asian American who was raised in the South. Like, that as a thing, a whole thing: Asian American raised in the South.” Their distinction of “being a Southerner” versus “being Asian American raised in the South” implicates dissonances between ‘the South’s’ racial discursivity and ‘the Asian American’s’ preclusion therein, per, that is, representations of a certain oppositional, yet cogently legible, narrativity. However, neither ‘the South’ nor ‘Asian America’ is strictly spatial metaphor, but each is also a contested site and negotiated term of the everyday, inhabited and claimed by *real* people. As such, that “whole thing,” as Jae articulated, is neither necessarily intelligible to dominant narratives nor coherent to and within itself but registers the multidimensionality and heterogeneity of people being and living in the everyday.

Difference and Multidimensionality

While Jae articulated themselves as an Asian American who was raised in the South, they were intentional about identifying, specifically, as Filipino or Filipinx American, a term of diasporic affiliation that they have cultivated in recent years; “I’ve always kind of identified as

Filipino, but, now, I say ‘Filipino,’ and I mean it differently than I did as a child,” they explained. That is, as a child Jae’s ideas of what ‘Filipino’ meant were largely abstract and arbitrary, accorded to “rando [sic] Filipino stuff” (e.g., children’s folktales) and nominal gestures like being able to “hum [the Philippines’ national anthem] for you” and “draw [the flag] for you.” Of run-ins with other Filipino/as while on vacations, they recalled

just feeling so foreign. Not foreign as in a foreign country but a foreign experience, of it being weird and strange. They were just so friendly to me, and I found that very off-putting—and then the sort of look of...’Oh, you don’t understand us’...[and], then, switching to English, ‘Did you not ever learn? Did you only ever speak English?’

Having since “connected with Filipinos, specifically queer and trans Filipinos” via, primarily, the Internet, they described such relationships as “healing” and relieving of the pressure to enact certain perceptions of “authentic” Filipino ethnicity and identity, including linguistic and heteronormative expectations:

None of them...people I have been talking with, are adopted. But, their experiences align more with mine in that they only speak English and that they’re queer. ...There’s less shame and guilt to it—and fear of, like, I have to put on this facade of Filipino-whatever-the-hell-looks-like.

Furthermore, although “shame” and “guilt” were salient effects of whiteness’ (overt and covert) preponderance in their family and community environments, Jae attributed them as well to a particularly (non-adopted) *East-Asian* centricity, which colored their interactions with other

Asian Americans in Birmingham, specifically, and their perceptions of Asian Americans, broadly-speaking. “In high school I was really big on being ‘Asian American,’” they reflected,

but...it’s because I didn’t know other fucking Filipinos.... I always felt totally dissed by the East Asians, and I never understood why. I thought it was just because I wasn’t ‘Asian’ enough, and I attributed it to having white parents and being adopted. That might’ve been part of it but also because the other Asians I knew were East Asians for the most part, and I didn’t look like them.... I didn’t have any point of reference...to contextualize those differences until, honestly, the past couple of years.

In lieu of a legible Filipino and Asian identity, Jae clung to distinctions of socio-economic class, as that “seemed more concrete, more relatable for people to identify me with, and something that...there were [apparent] rules to versus” ethnicity and race,⁴² which, for them, were terms of abstraction and alienation growing up amongst white- and relatively fewer Asian-Americans (even fewer of whom were Filipino, not to mention adopted and/or queer). Jae’s experiences of both inter- and intra-racial encounter bespeak composite tensions and compounded marginalities that interrupt the cohesiveness of certain rhetorical ‘sites’: ‘The South,’ ‘the Asian American,’ ‘the immigrant,’ and, I’ll add, ‘the *Asian American* adoptee,’ here specifically. Thus, though I refer throughout, in strategically broad terms, to the *trans-/racial* experiences of *Asian American* adoptees, the interviewees’ claims to such experiences, as well as to their particular identities and affiliations, refract multiple contexts and saliences of difference and affinity, including of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and class.

⁴² Notably, the abstraction of whiteness and its concomitant disarticulation of racial and ethnic difference through differentiations and realignments of class is operandi modus of white spatial hegemony.

Furthermore, as social ‘difference’ is not just itself a context but is *of* context, claims to the multidimensionality of identity and experience are always, too, claims to the particularity and locality of place. Jae, Amanda, and Tiffani (as well as myself) each lived on the suburban periphery of a mid-size metropolitan city of Alabama (Birmingham and Huntsville, respectively). By contrast, Erin was raised in Scotts Hill, Tennessee—a town of less than 1,200 people and approximately a two-hour’s drive to Memphis on the east and Nashville on the west. “Out where we lived,” Erin described, “everyone has a lot of space, so we had, like, 22 acres all around us, and it was just a real farming town. You had to drive 15 minutes to the next town, and Walmart’s 20 minutes away.” ‘Country,’ for Erin, was not a metaphor. And, though all of the interviewees posited the perceived whiteness of (and the preponderance of white people in) their specific environments, Erin’s was perhaps the most *visibly* acute. People of color, as she remembered, were not a regularity to the everyday physical nor social landscapes of Scotts Hill:

The only Black person...I encountered for a long time was this...girl on my softball team. There were Black people in the next town over, but I never saw them. I was never around a large group of Black people until maybe...college, which is crazy.

Moreover, contact with non-adopted Asian Americans was relegated to “a Chinese restaurant in the next town over.” Notably, though, unlike Jae, whose interactions with Asian-American Alabamans were mostly confined to non-adopted persons of non-Filipino descent, Erin did cite periodic encounters with other Korean-American adoptees in Scotts Hill as well as the nearby town of Henderson, which had “a bigger Korean adoptee community.” Such emergences and encounters, however sporadic, underscore the cross-locality and trans-regionality of adoption—and, historically, that from Asia (and Korea, more specifically)—as an emergent method of family- and kinship-building. Nevertheless, for Erin and the other interviewees, ‘the Southern’ and its

places of discursive narrativity—be them ‘rural,’ ‘urban,’ and/or ‘suburban’ of cultural characterization, empirical quantifiability, and/or racial coded-ness, are neither strictly phantasmagoric nor impermanently sedimented. Erin’s mere presence in rural Tennessee already unsettles its spatialization as normatively white, even as the non-white body’s *hyper-visibility* functions to reinforce whiteness’ normativity. As particular and contradictory, then, *places* and the interviewees’ *emplacements* therein are always contradictorily and particularly recovered.

Southern Culture(s)

The interviewees’ definitions of what ‘Southern-ness’ and ‘Southerner-ness’ are, as claims to place and identity, often were of a particular *cultural* valence and distinction. For E—, “being a Southerner” meant “just” that she “grew up in a Southern state with a certain culture.” Yet, ‘culture’ itself, let alone ‘Southern culture,’ is a contentiously, if strategically, broad term and, as such—be it to describe an entire people or geography—is vulnerable to oversimplification and reductivism. “I don’t like telling people I’m from Tennessee or that I’m Southern [because] I don’t like the history that follows the South,” Erin continued, “I was just raised in Tennessee. I’m not culturally Southern, hopefully not too much.” Her reluctance to identify culturally with the South resonates in tension of its history of violence against indigenous and immigrant peoples of color (which is to say, a cultural history that continues to haunt its present), as well as a refusal to be written unto that history or, that is, to be articulated as a mere ‘product’ of Southern culture by virtue of having been “raised in a Southern state.” Such ambivalence is understandable considering that popular discourses about Southern ‘culture’ tend to veer toward either its romanticization or demonization, both of which construct the South as a homogenous, discrepant, and static object. However, per cultural materialist Stuart Hall, culture is, at once, historically tethered and of its own as-yet unsecured moment:

It belongs to the future as much as to the past. 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 essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power.⁴³

Thus are claims to—and disavowals of—Southern cultural distinction and identity always situated in multiple *inseparable* terrains of fact and fiction, history and mythology, discourse and materiality.

I deploy ‘culture’ in recognition of its hybridity and simultaneity, as, according to cultural theorist Lisa Lowe, an ever “dynamic and open material site” that is permeable to processes of social dominance and contestation, such that the cultural is always implicated in and by the political.⁴⁴ While there exist definitional plenitudes and multi-disciplinary utilities of ‘culture,’ I use the concept itself throughout to suggest, in condensed form but not-simple terms, the everyday worldview(s) of individuals and constituencies of people (be the latter of informal or institutional substantiation), which inform and regulate our relationships to and identifications with space, place, time, and each other. Commencing with suppositions of culture’s hybridity and permeability, instead of homogeneity and fixity, renders mired debates of (Southern) cultural ‘authenticity’ moot and irrelevant. Rather than contribute to them here, I engage with the interviewees’ own dis-/articulations of themselves with and against their notions and experiences of cultural Southern-ness, as, that is, mediating worldviews. Doing so retrieves the ‘Asian

⁴³ Stuart Hall qtd. in Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 1996), 64.

⁴⁴ Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 69, 81, 83.

American adoptee' from simplistic readings of her/their subjectivity as a mere effect of Southern cultural alienation and marginalization and recuperates the interviewees' experiences and insights as particular sites of critique. In other words, as Amanda emphasized, to grow up as an Asian American adoptee in a Southern community, "you know you're different; you are different; you experience things differently. While you [may be] accepted in that community, you still see things a little bit differently. You have a completely different lens."

Culture, of course, is not reducible to its particular components and practices of community, food, art, language, history, religion, etc.—nor, for that matter, is it synonymous with its everyday people and 'high' practitioners—but is "a little of each and all at the same time."⁴⁵ Nonetheless, I isolate three cultural 'tropes' or 'sites' that were cited across the interviewees' definitions and experiences of the American South, each of which contributed to their understandings of Southern 'culture' per a particular kind of *relationality*—food, football, and family.

Food

"When I think about Southern culture, I think about lots of food, like potlucks...casserole," Tiffani reflected, "and I think about fellowship, religion, you know, breaking bread with someone and...with family." Across the interviews, food was often cited as a significant component of Southern-cultural life, whether a specific preparation of food, like barbecue and casserole, or the forms, features, and phenomenons of sociality and "fellowship," per Tiffani, that foods both engender and occlude. Tiffani and Jae, specifically, invoked food to articulate various claims to

⁴⁵ Blanca G. Silvestrini, "The World We Enter When Claiming Rights: Latinos and Their Quest for Culture," in *Latino Cultural Citizenship: Claiming Identity, Space, and Rights*, ed. William V. Flores and Rina Benmayor (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997).

cultural ‘heritage.’ “Oh my gosh, everything my dad cooked was just better than anything you could buy,” Tiffani recounted,

Even when [my daughter] was a baby...she wouldn’t eat baby food. She would only eat my dad’s...sweet potato casserole. That was a staple that my dad was known for and his turkey and dressing and his pecan pie and his biscuits—I could go on and on, all this Southern food...anything that he cooked was amazing.

Though Tiffani’s father excelled at cooking, it was a skill he was “thrown into...early on” as the eldest of seven children, whom he helped to raise after their father’s (Tiffani’s grandfather’s) suicide. The descendants of sharecroppers in Alabama and small business-owners in Georgia, respectively, Tiffani’s father and mother were “post-Depression Era people—very frugal, honest, hardworking people” of “humble beginnings.” As a child Tiffani would hear tell family narratives of kin who would “wake up...at the crack of dawn and [work] in the cotton fields until the sun went down.” While she identified her parents as “very middle class” financially, they were nonetheless, as she put it, “country as turnips”—and conspicuously so, such that they would recall to Tiffani “walking into a [car] dealership and people not helping them because they didn’t look like they had money.” For Tiffani, ‘country’ evoked the familial ethos of frugality and humility by which she was raised and disciplined—“My parents limited...us to three gifts each [at Christmas], and they often gave the reason, if I wanted something, ‘Well, you know, there are poor children [who] don’t even have food on the table’”—and that she described as the inheritance of working-class “sharecroppers and farmers...literally in the country.” Thus, a narration of cultural identity, ‘country’ represented the family’s connections to a particular class heritage. As such, it registered, too, a certain mode of familial relationality, wherein food constituted a mnemonic of kinship in terms of both affection and discipline.

“Food is actually really important for a lot of people and cultures and heritages, and that’s an excellent way for people to share about themselves,” Jae mused, “but it can be kind of painful if you don’t feel connected.” They specifically recalled a ‘Heritage Day’ in the fifth grade, in which classmates prepared and shared cuisine representing their family heritage—a multiculturalist event that “is supposed to be really exciting.” Yet, for them and other adopted persons, “heritage” is a complicated and decidedly not-straightforward question. “I was like, ‘I don’t know what to do because we don’t live near any Filipinos, and you, parents, don’t know how to make any of that food,” Jae recalled, “so my mom suggested, ‘Well, even though you’re Filipino, you’re American, so we’ll make apple pie.’” For them, the experience was especially painful, illuminating the everyday significance of food for grappling with, simultaneously, uneven globalized and localized notions of identity, connection, and belonging: “I remember feeling empty and really sad that I didn’t have something that I could point to, because I was so visibly different than my classmates who were all white American southerners.” Still, they reflected, too, on the fondness of and connections to *place* that barbecue, specifically, facilitated for them growing up—or, as an “Alabamian, Birmingham-ian,” as well as with southerners across the Southeast, “just being able to connect with people about their favorite barbecue joint and why.”

According to Jae, however, barbecue and other purported food staples of the regional Southeast are not a “unifying” feature of cultural Southern-ness:

Everyone’s own understanding of ‘Southern-ness’ is very particular to *where* in the South. Their understanding of Southern-ness is *that* corner of town, which is very different [from mine]. Grits are awesome, but that’s not a unifying feature. I love barbecue—not a unifying feature.”

As Jae hesitated to confirm Southern culture (or the South for that matter) a substantive *thing* beyond projections of geographic enclosure, certain traditions—and a broad cultural climate of *traditionalism*—that others have often propagated as uniquely ‘Southern’ were, for them, “particular” to place but unspecific to the South. That is, people “like the same thing and desire the same thing,” they elaborated,

There’s something about having a life that...you already know what it’s supposed to look like, which is ‘we tailgate at this time at so-and-so’s house, and someone always brings this corn casserole, and this is the mac-and-cheese we bring, and this is the Piggly Wiggly we go to....’ It’s just very particular, which is not a ‘Southern’ thing. It’s just a ‘place’ thing...wanting particular things that [particular] way.

Nonetheless, there was one exemplary ‘Southern’ tradition to which J— begrudgingly copped: “Maybe football, the SEC.”

Football

A highway patroller issues a violation to the patrolled—“Roll Tide”; “Roll Tide,” the violator sheepishly parrots; A groomsman toasts, “Y’all don’t even know he was a virgin until he was twenty-eight and now—Roll Tide,” much to the mortification of the bride and groom who begrudgingly lift their flutes (Roll Tide); A carpool mother bids farewell to the kids with a “Roll Tide, y’all,” then greets another, “Roll Tide, Mama Grey”; young and old, Black and white, blue-collar and white- all Roll Tide the other, their difference transcended and intimacy cemented in the concise syntax of tradition. *Roll Tide* aired on Entertainment Sports Network in 2010.⁴⁶ The 45-second advertisement features such a montage of motley Southerners (presumably Alabamans)

⁴⁶ “2010 ESPN Alabama Roll Tide Commercial,” YouTube video, 00:45, Posted [December 25, 2010], <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oQYQT35djtc>.

in various contexts, each and all united by the call-in and call-back of ‘Roll Tide’—the trademark hallmark of Alabama Crimson Tide athletics and particularly University of Alabama football. Although parody, the ad—and the phrase itself—is intuitive to Alabamans, whether fans or not, or anyone who is familiar with SEC collegiate football, regardless of their team or conference. A nationally revered institution that is at the forefront of the Southeastern Conference (SEC) and is near synonymous with the state itself, “Alabama football is the pinnacle of college football.” Per Jae,

I thought leaving Alabama...no one actually believes that, but a lot of people up here in Boston [who] have never been to Alabama, don’t know anything else about Alabama...have major respect.... Back when I was doing substitute teaching, people would introduce me [as being from Alabama], then random faculty members would ‘Roll Tide’ at me. I was like, ‘That’s weird. I was an Auburn fan when I grew up there.’

Notably, though, the game itself is not an optic of the commercial, as its subject is, indeed, not football but the culture of camaraderie which circumscribes and arguably exceeds it. That is, ‘Roll Tide’ is not mere ‘sports banter’ but a *relational* index, its invocation and reciprocity signaling one’s belonging to an institution that is deemed imperatively ‘Southern’ by virtue of transfiguring strangers to kindreds. “It’s very strange—like, football is cool, but it’s not that awesome, [so what] is going on here?” Jae continued, “Athleticism, superior athleticism, even though [the players themselves] are not all from Alabama. They’re from all over the place, which is another interesting understanding [of Southern-ness]—belonging to a Southern institution.” Of course, neither collegiate football nor its cultures of fandom are exclusive to Alabama or the Southeast (or the U.S., for that matter). Nonetheless, its prominence and religiosity in the South is

such that it is not-infrequently a prideful claim and function of familial, state, and/or regional cultural identity.

The traditionalism encompassing football in the South can be tribalistic. “I grew up...an Alabama fan,” Amanda declared, “from an early age, I remember being like, ‘We’re Bama fans.’” Her love of the Crimson Tide was a “deep ingrained” legacy of familial identity, a tradition that was not just shared across “most of the family” but attributed to relatives who were alumni of the University of Alabama, including distant cousin and Alabama kicker Lane Bearden. “Anyone who’s a pretty decent Alabama fan knows who he is because he played a particular game,” Amanda observed, “I only met him once [at a grandparent’s sibling’s funeral], but I remember being like, ‘This isn’t family—This is this superstar football player!’” The tradition was so ingrained that Amanda remembered, as she was considering undergraduate colleges, asking her parents about attending Auburn University, home of the Auburn Tigers and Alabama’s state rival: “They were like, ‘You wouldn’t be allowed back in this house.’ ...I think it was half-joking, but mostly true—‘You would be a traitor.’” Albeit banter here, the rhetoric of treason elucidates the regionalism underwriting football as a cultural institution of the South, and one which can elicit “possessive and phantasmic”⁴⁷ bonds of collective identification that exceed mere team allegiances to confer and reinforce notions of ‘Southern’ social belonging and kinship. For Amanda, such powerful “social feelings”⁴⁸ traced to the intimate space of family, as yet another institution that mediated the interviewees’ understandings of Southern-ness.

Family

⁴⁷ Duck, *The Nation’s Region*, 11.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

Cultural components like food and football were but mere indices of, per Amanda, “a general sense of family and closeness and certain [kinds of] relationships...the way you identify with other people,” a sentiment corroborated across the interviewees’ articulations of ‘Southernness.’ “Southern people, I guess, are very clannish and don’t even realize it,” Tiffani postulated, describing “Southern culture” as nostalgically reminiscent of “food and gatherings,” or the idea of “breaking bread with...the family.” Erin, too, cited a “deep sense of community in the South,” though with decidedly less optimism: “I guess, in my community, if you were a Johnson or a Smith or whatever, you were automatically accepted into different [local] cultures. [...] Southern culture [is] just very tribalistic. [...] It was like everybody who looked like them or was a part of that family—they had the power to minimize you....” Amanda further authenticated such notions of a “tribalistic” and “clannish” South, which was beset with the *performativity* (at least) of “family values”: “You’d always hear stories about so-and-so, like ‘Oh, I have to go see this person in the family that we hate.’ Almost to a fault, you’re fiercely family-oriented, whether you [want] to be or not. It [is] expected that you’re happy to go see your family.” Each of their descriptions refract both the centrality of ‘the family’ to the Southern-community structure and ‘the South’ itself as a relational emergence of ‘familiarity.’ That is, familiarity functions as the very incorporative technique that defines the South per its relations to the non-familiar or strange/r. Through such terms, then, the South is conceived of as a spiritual and body-political ‘family.’ As Tiffani’s aforementioned invocation of the South as “breaking bread with family” operates on both literal and allegorical terrains, the phantasmatic bonded-ness of the South as and of a familiar and familial relationality exceeds intimate kin to encapsulate the imagined community writ large. Furthermore, read accordingly, the Asian transracial adoptee’s particular emplacement in the Southern context is simultaneously consonant with that context and disruptive of it, a point I return to momentarily.

“It’s a very religious area,” Tiffani noted, “you can say, ‘God bless you,’ and people are like, ‘Oh, thank you.’ It’s not like, ‘How dare you, how do you know that I’m Christian?’” The assertion, here, of the South’s Christian normativity resonates with the region’s recognition as the American Bible Belt, a religious euphemism that is “both a product of [its] history and an oversimplification of it.”⁴⁹ That is, though popular assumptions of (areas of) the South’s hyper-religiosity may “overstate the reality” and contribute to notions of Southern exceptionalism, per Joshi and Desai,

Christianity is [nonetheless] hegemonic within social and cultural practices across the South (and all of the United States); specifically, mainstream culture is dominated by evangelical Protestant churches and moral values. The normative presence of Christianity is encountered in the everyday lives of Southerners both past and present.⁵⁰

Tiffani was not the only one to invoke the South in terms of its religiosity or the prominence of religion (specifically white Protestantism) and the church to its affiliative structures of family and community. Across the interviews, Southern Christian evangelism was cited as a feature and function of local social and intimate relations. That is, convictions and practices of evangelical white Protestantism not only configured familial relations but the church-body itself often figured into the family and community apparatuses, such that the delimits of the three—church, family, and community—were, at times, indeterminate. As such, and particularly in terms of their regulatory imperatives, each was an essential appendage of the other. Jae reflected,

⁴⁹ Joshi and Desai, “Discrepancies in Dixie,” 4.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

[Religion] played a pretty big role...within our nuclear family, the way we related to one another and interpreted events: 'God wanted it this way'...'It's because God is good that these things happened.' [...] I don't think that we were nearly as religious as a family until we moved to Birmingham.'

While their's was especially devout and "convicted" (to use the language of the Church of Brook Hills whereat Jae's family practiced), religion "was more of a social kind of thing" for Amanda: "I was really active in church. I participated in extracurricular church activities regularly, but that was more...to have friends and to do stuff and, you know, to have a camp to go to in the summer or Bible study to go to one of the nights of the week." Nevertheless, that church fulfilled a sociable function did not mean it was voluntary nor necessarily enjoyable for Amanda, particularly after her parents "just stopped going" due to a "falling out": "I was pretty young, and I was still forced to go with my grandparents every—single—Sunday. I hated it, and it felt really awkward because I was the only kid there without parents. Even though my parents existed, they just chose not to go and forced me to go." As it was "the thing to do and what their parents did," church-going thus contributed to the pretense of 'proper' relations of family and community, underwriting the expectation that Amanda continue to go and be seen there in her parents' absence. The pretense of familiarity, or what she described as "saving face," was also an unofficial stipulation of the church-context for Erin, and especially so as child of a Southern Baptist pastor. "We were always at the church," she recalled, "and if I ever didn't want to participate in anything—there was just never a choice of whether or not I was going to do it. For me, religion was never a choice." She continued,

My parents never really explained the 'why's' of religion, but they just forced it upon all of us. [...] I grew up thinking that different was bad and that all eyes were

on our family because we were the pastor's family but also just being different...being an adoptive family and [my younger brother and I] being the only non-white people at our church.”

As Erin's recollections refract, contexts of church and family were more than adjacent operatives in the Scotts Hill community; they were dynamically collusive, producing transmissions of surveillance, regulation, and, for the hyper-visible like Erin—adopted, Asian, and the pastor's kid no less, vulnerability. Contradictorily, such regulatory aspects were rendered impressionable by a culture of repudiation, otherwise and officially defined in terms of its racial 'colorblindness' and 'hospitality.'

To invoke familiarity per a term of performativity is not to conflate it, nor its specific relations and relationships, with artificiality or inauthenticity. Neither 'Southern-ness,' as I theorize it here, nor Southerners, as they otherwise would describe themselves, are necessarily disingenuous, though the South's re-/productions of social relations per a certain "clannish" and "tribalistic" modus operandi did affect a common perception of insincerity. For Amanda, in fact, being 'Southern' translated to not "being 100-percent genuine" in everyday context:

Being 'Southern' means you have an expected behavior to be 'nice' (quote-unquote) to people whether you like them or not. It's not genuine. Now, that's not for everybody, but there's this understood [expectation]. You see somebody at the grocery store back at home, you have to say 'hello.' Even if you hate each other, you have to say 'hello' to each other. [...] You have to be this certain way, in general, having this 'Southern hospitality,' and that doesn't mean that you're genuine. 'Nice' is not a good word. 'Nice' is an expectation.”

Erin, too, defined ‘Southern culture’ in similar terms, observing that “[it’s] like you are very...fake to someone’s face just for the sake of saving face. It’s all about who your family is. If you go to church, it’s just to be seen. It’s all about saving face and who your family is.” Nevertheless, she also described the local community as “full of people who are really well-meaning.” Tiffani echoed, “[It’s] the ‘help-your-neighbor’ type thing. You know your neighbors. You know your neighbor’s business. You know everything, but you still offer to help them in times of need.” Thus, per various affectivities—“nice,” “well-meaning,” “neighborly,” and “hospitable”—the interviewees observe a generally conciliatory etiquette that structures and regulates the familiar and its Southern relations. That etiquette is pretensive not in its vacuous superficiality but, conversely, in its fraught restraint of the unspoken. Per Amanda’s hypothetical, the exchange of ‘hello’s’ between two people who otherwise and knowingly “hate” one another is enacted through an affirmative negation, the ‘hello,’ at once, a repudiation of their unsaid enmity and an acknowledgment of it. Moreover, as an “expectation” of civil etiquette, the exchange of niceties here is as much incorporative, or familiarizing, as it is regulative—intimating the estranged individuals through not just a collective knowing-ness of the unspoken but a shared compliance to it. ‘Familiarity’ (and its alternative iterations), then, effects a certain mannered-ness that, while not disingenuous per se, is social—relational—and, therefore, performative. And, in a milieu of Southern relationality, the adopted Asian—approximated to both white love and racial enigma—is a figure of contradiction that unveils, or ‘speaks,’ the implications of familiarity and its repressions. Race has been, and continues to be, the unsaid interdict that simultaneously fuses and fissures the delimits of the familiar and the strange.

The popular notion of ‘Southern hospitality’ continues to circumscribe American imaginings of the region, contributing to the myth of its imagistic and whimsical innocence that

seemingly contradicts its history of racial violence and trauma. Yet, what is oft-neglected by the former myth is how the very mnemonic-regime of ‘Southern hospitality’ is politicized in and by the latter history. Black servitude, after all, was the unseen labor which afforded an Antebellum aristocracy the “leisure to be hospitable.” An embodied signifier of white gentility, the figure of the African-American servant has constituted the “perpetually present and perpetually excluded” outsider in the genealogy of Southern hospitality. Both intimated and alienated from within the discursivity of whiteness, per the labor of ‘hospitality’ and its imperatives of etiquette, she historically “confirmed the solidarity, superiority, and community” of white identification. “A master discourse about race in America” upon its cultural inception in the nineteenth century, then, Southern hospitality’ was, namely, about whiteness—its borders of propriety and intimacy. I argue that it is, still. “Nice,” as Amanda astutely surmised, “is an expectation,” a modality of ‘etiquette’ which continues to configure the conscience of Southern whiteness, though to a contemporary imperative of incorporation (i.e., adoption) versus that of exclusion. As a “code that binds the dominant and subordinate,”⁵¹ etiquette is always already a function of regulation, historically *preserving* “social distance” between the familiar and the strange.⁵² Within the Postbellum “white home”—where, as Lillian Smith wrote, children gleaned “the intricate systems of taboos, of renunciations and compensations, of manners, voice modulations, words, feelings, along with our prayers, our toilet habits, and our games”⁵³—domestic etiquettes between white family and African-American ‘help’ were ultimately disciplined to the South’s public cultures of apartheid and exclusion. In other words, Southern-cultural whiteness was defined through certain relational etiquettes (including ‘hospitality’) that maintained a rigid racial partition between the ‘familial’

⁵² Sullivan, *Good White People*, 27.

⁵³ Lillian Smith qtd. in Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 94.

(literally- and metaphorically-speaking) and the ‘stranger’ within. As it were, racial difference was not an implicit disclosure of whiteness to be managed and incorporated but, rather, an explicit function of white hegemony to be legally, spatially, and socially circumscribed, to be kept, that is, ‘strange.’ Accordingly, etiquette was serviced to white exclusivity—the very “making of whiteness” itself through Black abjection. In the contemporary white-adoptive South, whiteness remains a crucial, if uneasy, contingency and racial difference both collateral and crucible of ‘the South’ and its social relations. Here, the Asian adoptee’s racial ‘strangeness’ is subjected to management yet is nonetheless necessary to Southern-whiteness’ reproductions of the familiar and familial.

Whiteness

“Composition was white,” Amanda described, “Environment was, you know, all the same white-ness. I mean there’s really not a better way to describe it.” Like Amanda, the other interviewees cited the racio-spatial composition of their environments in terms of white preponderance and homogeneity. “I was the only non-white, non-Black person in my elementary school,” Tiffani recounted, “and I was the only non-white person in the entire church.” Jae, too, recalled the whiteness of the congregation at the Church of Brook Hills: “They were all white, from what I remember. Were there families that were not white? Maybe, not that I saw on the Jumbotron.” As “adoption was a big deal in the church, more since [a particular pastor had] adopted several children” internationally, quite a few of the families that J— referred to were technically, like theirs, adoptive families of multi-racial composition. (Like Jae, in fact, Amanda and Erin were raised with siblings who also were adopted from Asia.) Critically, then, despite the visibility of other people of color, as well as familiar relations with other Asian Americans, the interviewees’ collective memory of family and community—indeed, of ‘the South’ itself—was,

so to speak, really white. Their impression(s) here arrests not just whiteness' spatial preponderance (i.e., via a lot of white people) but the relational structure of its hegemony, one predicated upon a performative theater of 'goodness' and its covert disavowals. Yet, contradictorily, the propagation of whiteness is a function of its multiple repudiations—here, namely, the exarticulation of the adoptee's racial difference per an assimilatory 'colorblind' politic.

As a few of the interviewees recounted, a 'colorblind' politic often configured the structure of interracial relations, including between themselves and white familiars. "[I]t was kind of like race didn't exist to them," Jae recalled,

and it was, maybe, a point of pride for them that they didn't consider my race. Many of my relatives still are proud of that. They'll say, 'We don't see you and your brother's race. We love you,' which is logically saying, 'If we saw your race, we would not love you.' But, by extension, they meant, or didn't realize they meant, that [they] don't see race because race is a problem. You can't not be white because that's inherently bad.

Familiarity was predicated upon white normativity and the "problem" of race—the most conspicuous signifier of difference within the multi-racial adoptive family—managed through renouncement of its existence. Of course, not acknowledging race does not, cannot, disappear it; and, paradoxically, its erasure, or attempts thereof, all the more affected the interviewees' alienation from community and, at times, family. According to Erin, Scotts-Hill community locals, particularly other church-goers, were generally silent on "race issues"—but only insofar as people of color were 'agreeable' and markers of racial difference kept inconspicuous:

I guess the main theme of growing up in that church was no one ever brought up how my brother and I were different until we did something they didn't agree with, and then they brought up how we were Asian or just not the same. Like, if they had to repeat themselves, or if they didn't understand what we were saying, they would be like, 'You should just go back to where you came from.' My younger brother—he came to the U.S. at four, so he still spoke Cantonese, and he was really hard to understand. I think I was the only person who took time to listen to him, even in our family. People would just get so frustrated with him and make fun of him super fast and call him names.

Racist anti-Asian comments circulated within Erin's immediate family, as well—inconstant reminders that belonging was not without its conditions. She recalled, "If my brother ever messed up, whether it was a homework problem or a life choice, [our dad's] go-to gut reaction was to say, 'I can take you back over to Hong Kong just as fast as I brought you here' and 'Why don't you just go back over there.'" Their eldest brother, domestically adopted and white, would hurl insults like "Third World Trash" and, literally, "alien," deriding that the youngest was not a formal U.S. citizen. "It alienated my brother," she reflected, alluding not only to such intimate and blatant racism but to its normalization per a general pretense of *all-rightness*:

My mom is really soft-spoken. She just wants everyone to love each other, so when it came to these issues—if I ever came home and told her how these boys were making fun of me [because] I was Asian or people said things to me, she would always just try to make me laugh, or she'd just try to be like, 'Well, Erin, they just don't know.' I always felt like she defended them more than me. [...] My dad would always just get mad at me, and he would say, 'Erin, you just need to let it go.' He

cared more about the fact that people were watching our family [because] he was a pastor and that it would reflect badly on him.

While, per Jae, “not [being] white” was “inherently bad,” so, too, was being labeled a racist.

“As far as racism was concerned,” Jae explained,

it was kind of like ‘Don’t breathe a word of [explicitly] racist things’ because it was so taboo. Everyone was so quick to sweep it under the rug, like, ‘We acknowledge it’—as in we’re *saying* we acknowledge it [but] not actually [dealing with] what that means—‘It’s in the past. It was bad, and you shouldn’t be mean to people who are Black because I have lots of nice Black friends and those other nice people who are—wherever they’re from,’ right?

Explicit acknowledgments of ‘race’ and differences thereof were considered culturally ‘taboo.’ That is, ‘race’ itself was often conflated with ‘racism,’ such that to merely mention the former was to risk an indictment of the latter. Yet, critically, as the threat of the taboo is less about moral depravity than it is social transgression, racism was largely considered ‘bad’ not because it was harmful to people of color, including the adoptees, but because it was *uncouth*, imperiling the delimits between white transgression (i.e., being considered racist and, thus, white trash) and ‘good’ white Southern-ness/-ers. As Shannon Sullivan writes, white “social etiquette [is] needed to internally discipline whiteness,” as white trash are “uncannily familiar to proper white people because of their shared race, and this murky point of contact is why white trash have to be forcefully expelled from whiteness.”⁵⁴ Thus, more egregious than racism itself, which essentially

⁵⁴ Sullivan, *Good White People* 31, 32.

amounted to being “mean” to “nice” non-white Southerners, was its capacity to disturb the order and orderliness of proper white familiarity.

Conclusion

I have argued that adopted and Southern *relationality* intersect upon a simultaneous conjunction. That is, both manifest in phantasmatic tension (and relations) of ‘the strange’ and ‘the familiar,’ their emergence not only effecting a delineation of the two (or attempts to do so) but effected through an incorporative process of *familiarizing the stranger*—that of a strange intimacy. For the interviewees, ‘the South’ signaled expectations of a kind of performativity, in which adherence to informal etiquettes of ‘niceness,’ ‘neighborliness,’ and ‘hospitality’ functioned to regulate Southern belonging and establish white-familial normativity. Yet, ‘the South’ manifested, simultaneously, through a collective *knowingness* of what, and *who*, is excessive to such social informalities. And, in either context of Southern or adoptive kinship, which is all but distinguishable for Asian transracial adoptees of the South, whiteness was a crucial, if uneasy, contingency. Read through certain modalities of strange intimacy—adopted Asian to adoptive white family; adoptive white family to Southern whiteness; and Southern whiteness to its very disarticulation—racial difference becomes, at once, collateral and crucible of the South and its social relations. Here, the Asian adoptee’s racial ‘strangeness’ is subjected to management but is nonetheless necessary to Southern-whiteness’ reproductions of the familiar and familial. Yet, the experiences of Amanda, Jae, Erin, and Tiffani—at times, consonant with but just as often disruptive of the regulative relational apparatus of white-Southern familiarity—provide the very analytic of critique revealing the tenuousness and queerness of the adoptive South. Adoptee epistemology is, at once, troubled and invigorated by complications and contradictions of

uncertainty, abjection and precarity being its elusive and most critical object-lessons. May it stay strange.

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