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Difference as Self:

A Qualitative Analysis of Guatemalan Adoptee Identity Navigation

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Master of Arts

in Sociology

by

Christopher J. Malafronti

Committee in charge:

Professor Alicia Cast, Co-Chair

Professor Denise Segura, Co-Chair

Professor Hannah Wohl

September 2022

The thesis of Christopher J. Malafronti is approved.

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Hannah Wohl

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Denise Segura, Committee Co-Chair

_____

Alicia Cast, Committee Co-Chair

July 2022

Difference as Self:

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been witnessed by you and have had the joy of witnessing you. I believe a better world is

possible because of y'all, and that is the most precious gift I have ever received.

    This project is dedicated to that chosen family, The Redwood Collective.

ABSTRACT

Difference as Self:

A Qualitative Analysis of Guatemalan Adoptee Identity Navigation

by

Christopher J. Malafronti

Sociological research has long documented the ways in which individuals make sense of who they are and where they belong in the world. This thesis seeks to take up this age-old question and apply it to the experience of transnational adoptees from Guatemala. Transnational adoptees, due to their unique experience of moving across normative familial, racial, cultural, and national borders–all at the same time–must navigate their transgressions of these social identities in order to construct a sense of self. In other words, Guatemalan adoptees occupy unique positions within their adoptive families due to their non-biological but very real familial ties; within the US racial system, sometimes cast as (honorary) White, and other times as people of color; within Latinidad because of their divergent lived experiences from other Latinx folks; and a unique connection to their country of origin, with claims to both their birth cultures and adoptive cultures.

To better understand these experiences, this thesis makes use of the social psychological concept of reflected appraisals that help explain how one's sense of self is based in how we perceive and imagine others to perceive us. Additionally, this thesis theorizes the formulation of the Other, the alienation and ostracization of individuals who do

not meet a socially constructed, normative identity. These constructs help illuminate how the transnational adoptee's sense of being and belonging is different from non-adopted individuals, as well as from that of their White counterparts, communities of color, and their national kin.

I identify and analyze four instances in which my 33 respondents feel as if they "don't fit in"–when they are positioned as an adoptee Other, a racial Other, a cultural Other, and a national Other. Each of these instances are associated with Othering experiences and reflected appraisals, moments when the adoptee's difference is made salient to them. Adoptee Othering is located in the doctor's office and other biologized interactions, in adoptee microaggressive encounters, and in their comparing themselves to non-adopted persons. Racial Othering is experienced during racial microaggressive questions, racialized gendered experiences of exotification, and via explicit racism. Cultural Othering is made salient through Guatemalan adoptee's relationship to Spanish language, being institutionally forced to identify as Latinx, and when navigating their relationship to Latinidad. National Othering is brought up when the transnational adoptee is made aware that they were born somewhere outside of the US, when they have to consider their relationship to immigration, and when interacting with Guatemalans living in the US.

Through an analysis of these experiences, I show how Guatemalan adoptees challenge normative understandings of identity categories. I find that they confound social roles–despite their membership in adoptive families and adoptive communities, their role as child, brother, friend, or student, Guatemalan adoptees are set apart from others in their predominantly White communities because of their adoptive and racial differences. I also identify how Guatemalan adoptees disrupt our understandings of achieved and ascribed

identities. As they move across (and between) race, Latinidad and national borders, Guatemalan adoptees challenge us to reexamine our assumptions around fixed categories, revealing (il)logics of identity politics in the 21st century and the continued relevance of racial, cultural, and national fault lines that undergird identity formation and navigation in the age of color evasiveness (Annamma et al. 2017), post-raciality, and diversity, equity, and inclusion.

At the same time that transnational adoptees teach us about identity formation, they are personally challenged to make sense of their identity differences. Throughout this thesis, by centering their lived experiences, I show how Guatemalan adoptees constantly navigate their seemingly tenuous claims to family, race, culture, and nationality. Seemingly tenuous in that it is socially normative categories of fixed identity that adoptees have internalized (reflected appraisals) and are reinforced by external interactions (Othering) that tell them they are different. This perpetual sense of difference (or at least, the uncertainty of when they will need to defend of legitimate their sense of self to others) is unique to transnational adoptees and essential to understand how they move through the world on a day-to-day basis.

I conclude with a theorization of the adoptee third-space in relation to "coming out of the fog." I argue that the adoptee third-space is a psychic-social location that the transnational adoptee finds themself returning to over and over again due to their constant Othering and sense of difference. I suggest that their continued presence in the third-space is one way in which transnational adoptees might connect their individual lived experiences to the structural oppressive systems that allowed for their in-betweenness in the first place. This presence and connecting of the dots is akin to "coming out of the fog," to borrow a phrase popular in the adoptee community, adoptee's coming into critical conscious.

As the only study, to the author's knowledge, that offers empirical qualitative evidence of Guatemalan adoptee's experiences, the contribution is significant to both critical adoption studies and Latinx/Central American studies. Through my theorization of identity formation processes and the ways that Guatemalan adoptees challenge our understanding of identity categories, as well as my concluding thoughts on liminality, this thesis also makes a significant contribution to social psychology and social identity theory.

Keywords: Transnational adoption, Guatemala, social identity theory, liminality

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0.   OVERTURE

I started this work as a gift to myself. Growing up as a transnational adoptee I felt extremely isolated, racially and experientially. It was not until I went away to college that I began to see myself reflected in those around me. That was when my intellectual curiosity turned to the study of race. In the field of Critical Mixed Race Studies (CMRS) I found a resonance with my own experience of being in-between. The CMRS literature would serve as the foundation for my undergraduate thesis on the experiences of Chinese adoptees.

At that time, I felt resistance to studying my own experience, that of Guatemalan adoptees. I was terrified that I would not or could not do justice to what I knew to be a complex and traumatic experience; I was not sure I could hold it all. As I immersed myself in the adoption literature, it became ever more apparent that any contribution studying Guatemalan adoptees would be significant. To date there are only a handful of academic studies that take up the topic of Guatemalan adoption (See works by Rotabi in social work, Briggs in history, Dubinsky in anthropology, and Posocco in philosophy), and none that center the voices, perspective, and experiences of the adult Guatemala adoptees themselves.

As more and more transnational adoptees in general, and Guatemalan adoptees in particular, come of age, it will be important that we critically examine the ideologies, structures, and relationships that brought forth such a system as transnational adoption, and to attempt to understand the experiences of those adoptees so as to better support their growth and development. We are also tasked with helping adoptees to understand their lived experiences, supporting their "coming out of the fog." This paper is my contribution to that end, that we might continue to center adoptee voices, learn with and from them, and challenge our preconceived notions of what we take for granted as normal.

I.   INTRODUCTION

A. *Outline of the Paper*

Sociological research has long documented the ways in which individuals make sense of who they are and where they belong in the world (Wright Mills 1970 [1959]). My project seeks to take up this age-old question and apply it to the experience of transnational adoptees from Guatemala. Transnational adoptees, due to their unique experience of moving across normative familial, racial, cultural, and national borders–all at the same time–must navigate their transgressions of these social identities in order to construct a sense of self. Unlike other racial minorities in the US though, the transnational adoptee is often raised with little to no guidance on how to negotiate their racial, cultural, or national identities, not to mention the same goes for their adoptee identity. In fact, opportunities for adoptees to explore their sense of self are mediated by their positionalities and the opportunity structures that dictate their lives (i.e., gender, class, age, sexuality, geographic location, race, etc.) (Shiao & Tuan 2008).

For this thesis I sought to understand the ways in which adult Guatemalan adoptees have come to understand their sense of self and place in the world. Theoretically, I draw upon the identity formation and identity negotiation literatures in social psychology, critical race theory and racial formation theory, abolitionist theory, as well as critical adoption studies. My thinking has been particularly impacted by the works of Angela Davis and Miriame Kaba, Laura Briggs, Diane Nelson, Kimberly McKee, Michael Omi and Howard Winant, as well as my work in community with the transnational adoptee abolitionist group The Redwood Collective. In this thesis I explore the Othering experiences and reflected appraisals that emerged from interviews with 33 adult Guatemalan adoptees, specifically looking at four distinct (and intersectional) aspects of their identity experiences: being an

adoptee, being racialized, navigating exclusive notions of culture, and being foreign born. As the only study, to my knowledge, that offers empirical qualitative evidence of Guatemalan adoptee's experiences, the contribution is significant to both critical adoption studies and Latinx/Central American studies.

I set out to disentangle the various Othering experiences that Guatemalan adoptees contend with daily. Guatemalan adoptees occupy a unique position within their adoptive families due to their non-biological but very real familial ties; within the US racial system, sometimes cast as (honorary) White, and other times as people of color; within Latinidad because of their divergent lived experiences from other Latinx folks; and a unique connection to their country of origin, with claims to both their birthplace and adoptive communities. Throughout their youth and into their adult lives Guatemalan adoptees must navigate these identities and the borderlands that reflect these intersections, moving through feelings of not being enough, constantly having to explain their difference, racial and experiential isolation, information gaps, narrative burden, self-segregation and racial gaslighting.

To better understand these moments, this thesis makes use of the social psychological concept of reflected appraisals that help explain how one's sense of self is based in how we perceive and imagine others to perceive us. Additionally, I theorize the formation of the Other, the alienation and ostracization of individuals who do not meet a socially constructed, normative identity. In terms of adoption, this is anyone who is not biologically related to their family; in racial terms this is anyone who is not White; with regards to culture, this is anyone who is not ethnic-enough; and for nationality this is anyone who is not born in the US. These constructs help illuminate how the transnational adoptee's sense of being and belonging is different than that of non-adopted persons, their White counterparts,

communities of color, and their national kin. I conclude this thesis with a discussion of the mediating factor of the life course, by naming limitations, and possible future directions for research on identity, adoption, race, family, and belonging. I also engage in a discussion on the notion of "coming out of the fog" and its relationship to the social-psychic third-space that adoptees find themselves constantly being returned to via their interpersonal interactions and reminder of their difference, the instability/questionability of their identities. This is a significant theoretical contribution that begins to elaborate one way that adoptees begin to gain critical consciousness, connecting their individual experience with broader systems.

B. *A Note on Terms*

The modern practice of transnational adoption, the legal transfer of a child from one family to another across national borders, began in the US over 65 years ago (Herman, 2008). In that time, numerous terms have evolved to capture the experiences and concepts related to adoption. In this paper I use the term *transnational* adoption, as opposed to international adoption, following the insights gleaned from Elana Kim's work that locates the field of adoption studies as ever more "attuned to the global circulations engendered by adoption as a form of child migration," and identifies the ways that transnational adoptees "have instigated a range of subsequent mobilities–of information, people, goods, and services–from and to the so-called sending and receiving nations that are shaped by (and, in turn, shape) new globalizing trends and transnational processes (Kim 2010: 10)." By locating adoptees in the transnational, we are encouraged to think through the ways in which the practice of transferring a child from one nation to another, and the subjectivity of the adoptee themself, is always implicated in our emergent transnational, globalized world. They are transnational subjects much in the same way that their national kin who migrate to the US are, moving

across borders, and effecting culture in both places. Said another way, we are tasked with paying attention to the ways that systems are condensed in the practice and identity of transnational adoptees. Guatemalan adoptees could not exist without the histories and systems of colonialism, imperialism, neoliberalization, and globalization, which are present externally and internally to them.

Additionally, I occasionally refer to my subjects as *transracial* adoptees (TRAs) (also referred to as interracial elsewhere in the literature), though I mostly defer to transnational, as studies have shown that the majority (80%) of transnational adoptees are also transracially adopted (Baden et al. 2012; Anderson et al. 2015), and this was true for all my participants. I use the term transracial intentionally, and in its original definition, to refer to an adoptee who is a different race than the guardians who raised them.

More recently there has been a rise in the use of "adopted person" to describe someone who was adopted. In this thesis I opt to use the term adoptee to denote an adopted individual. Whereas "adopted person" implies that the act of being adopted happened to the subject, "adoptee" conveys a new identity that is born of that experience. I believe that the latter returns some degree of agency to the adopted individual and opens possibilities for an identity and culture to be built from there, although I recognize the lack of agency that adoptees had when they were separated from their families, and the political stakes in naming that process rather than claiming it.

Throughout this work I have chosen to capitalize the W in White when referring to White or European Americans (following Appiah 2020 and Okihiro 2016). I have done this intentionally to name and prioritize the socially constructed nature of race (Omi and Winant 2014). It is important to recognize and situate the existence of a White race because

Whiteness is constructed as the norm, relative to which others are racialized (Ferreria Da Silva 2007). For a long time, in most fields of study, Whiteness has slipped under the critical eye because it has operated from the privileged position as the norm and thus been rendered invisible.

There is continued debate in adoptee circles around what to call the individuals who brought us into the world. In this piece I will use "birth family," "birth mother," and "birth father," when referring to these relationships, as these are the terms that I am most used to using in my life. Until a more crystalized consensus emerges around the usage of "birth" "first," or "biological" family (etc.), I feel it is best to defer to whichever the individual adoptee is most comfortable with. To this end, I have not edited any quote where my participants use these terms to reflect my preference.

I would be remiss not to also note the ways in which adoptees have traditionally been socially constructed as children in need of saving. In popular media (e.g., *Harry Potter*, *The Queen's Gambit*, *Matilda*, *Modern Family*, etc.) the adoptee is constantly portrayed as a child that needs to be saved from their circumstances (Koff 2020). This trope is pervasive, and many academic texts that write on adoption and adoptees reinforce this by taking adoptive parents as their sources of data. My work diverges from these accounts, rather, working with the adoptee as an agentic adult, able to make their own choices and understand their own experience, joining a small but emergent chorus of such projects. Therefore, throughout this piece when I refer to adoptees it is almost always in reference to my adult Guatemalan adoptee participants, as they recount their own life histories.

C. *US/Guatemalan Adoption*

Historical Sketch

Guatemala has a dark and riddled history. From 1944-1954 the country experienced what is commonly referred to as the "Democratic Spring." During this period the country underwent various progressive social reforms, including agrarian reforms that would have a lasting impact on the country's trajectory. One of these reforms was to appropriate large tracts of unused land that were owned by the elite of the country and to redistribute the property to the *campesinos*, the unlanded, often indentured, farmers. This nationalization of private property angered the elites and companies who had a vested interest in both retaining their land as well as the maintenance of a population of landless-poor, bound to the exploitative farms and plantations that were being broken up. With the assistance of the CIA, internal forces staged a coup of the democratically elected government in 1954, effectively reverting the country back to the way it had been prior to the progressive revolution (Schlesinger 1984; Gleijeses 1991; Grandin 2000).

Six years after the coup and the installation of a military dictatorship, the 36-year-long Guatemalan Civil War (*Conflicto Armado Interno*) broke out in November of 1960. Over the course of the next four decades Guatemalan society found itself in a state of disarray as the various Guatemalan dictatorships sought to put down numerous guerrilla armies and their supporters. During this time, an estimated 150,000-200,000 Guatemalans would die, 50,000 of whom were forcibly disappeared by the state (Nelson 2009). Another million (1/10th of the total population at the time) would be internally displaced (Jonas & Rodríguez 2014). Arguably the most gruesome years of the conflict were between 1982-1984 when Efraín Ríos Montt, an evangelical military dictator, led a campaign of genocide against the Maya indigenous population in the western highlands of the country (Rothenberg 2016). By the mid '90s the Guatemalan government engaged in UN mediated peace talks with

URNG (Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity), the umbrella guerrilla army. In December 1996, the internal armed conflict came to an end with the signing of the peace accords.

I share this account to briefly outline the context in which transnational adoption from Guatemala emerged: a social fabric torn apart by years of conflict, with millions of displaced individuals torn from their traditional forms of familial support (Rothenberg 2016); the movement of individuals from the rural to the urban centers that were somewhat safer in the late years of the war (Jonas & Rodriguez 2014); an environment of distrust between the populace and their government, and a government that distrusted its population, refusing to provide basic social services; the country's elite pining to join the international community, desperate for foreign investment, ready and willing to implement IMF and World Bank economic restructuring policies (Robinson 2003). This social milieu gave way to opportunities for corruption and exploitation.

<u>Typologies of Adoption</u>

In order to continue to situate transnational adoption in the Guatemalan context it is important to have a broader understanding of how adoption, as a system, functions more generally. There are two axes of adoption that we can draw out: one is based on where the adoptable child will be placed, and the other is the legal process that will facilitate the adoption. In terms of placement, domestic adoption is the legal transfer of a child from one family to another within a nation; transnational adoption is that same legal transfer only across national borders. With regards to the legal processes, judicial adoption (the public option) is any adoption that requires that a case go in front of a judge or court to be approved. Its alternative was extrajudicial (also known as notarial) adoption, a process that allowed for

private lawyers to facilitate adoptions without judicial oversight. Notarial adoption only existed in Guatemala (Rotabi et al. 2008).

Placement:	Domestic Adoption	Transnational Adoption
Legal Process:	Judicial Adoption	Extrajudicial / Notarial Adoption

Speaking to the Guatemalan context, judicial adoption is a long process that requires that a family court judge make a ruling that the child in question is an orphan or has been abandoned; prior to this ruling, the court is bound by law to make a concerted effort to identify and locate the child's parents or any relatives who might take the child in. This process can take anywhere from 2-3 years, in which time the child is often being housed in state-run orphanages (Siegal 2011b).

In 1977, *The Law Regulating Processing by Notaries of Matters under Voluntary Jurisdiction*, introduced notarial adoption to the world. This law effectively privatized adoption in Guatemala, allowing for a single lawyer, representing both the child and their prospective adoptive parents, to facilitate the process from start to finish. These lawyers did not need judicial approval for the adoption to be finalized (CICIG, 2010). Whereas judicial and domestic adoptions were capped at a certain rate, for these private transnational adoptions the lawyers could charge whatever amount they deemed reasonable for their services. Rates varied over time but estimates range anywhere from $20,000–30,000 USD in 1995 (about $36,000-55,000 USD in 2022) to $25,000-50,000 USD in 2008 (about $32,000-65,000 USD in 2022) (Siegal, 2011a, 2011b; CICIG, 2010; Bunkers et al., 2009).

The domestic and international adoptions that the general US public is familiar with are judicial adoptions. Although some combination of domestic-judicial and transnational-

judicial adoptions did take place in Guatemala, the vast majority were notarial (private) and transnational adoptions.

As a result of the internal armed conflict, prior to the 1996 peace accords, and at the height of the conflict in the mid '80s, a number of children were made war orphans, and others were forcibly removed (disappeared) from their families and given up illegally for adoption as a part of the military's agenda of genocide against indigenous Maya populations (Rothenberg 2016). There are no reliable statistics, but any number of these children were adopted, both transnationally to Western families, and domestically to Guatemalan citizens, including to military officers and other Guatemalan elites (CICIG, 2010). Because of the rampant fraud in Guatemalan transnational adoption (Siegal 2011a; CICIG 2010) it is impossible to say whether or not my participants are direct victims of illegal adoptions unless they have somehow confirmed it themselves (through searches and successful reunions, negative DNA tests with purported birth parents, etc.) (Nolan 2019). With this in mind, this study concerns itself with those adoptees processed through notarial adoption and does not emphasize the legacy of the war (while still recognizing the tragedy of the disappearances and trafficking enabled by the Guatemalan military and legislatures during and after the internal armed conflict).

It is evident that the system of notarial adoption, the privatization of adoption in the hands of lawyers, and the success that it saw, particularly post-signing of the peace accords in 1996, were the result of both political and structural factors that existed in the country. Not only did the ever-neoliberalizing Guatemalan state fail to provide social services that could meet the needs of its populace–in this case, poor and poverty-stricken families with young children and single mothers–rather than meet these needs, the government outsourced

services to a private sector wherein lawyers could make a small fortune (Briggs 2012; Robinson 2003; Dubinsky 2010). Likewise, by removing obstacles to adoption by removing state oversight, the Guatemalan State actually made it easier for it to implement its agenda of cultural genocide via the forcible removal of children (CEH 1999), in what we might call an early application of lawfare (Irani 2017). Notarial adoption ran from its implementation in 1977 until 2008 when transnational adoptions were shut down from Guatemala to the US. Adoptions between the two nations is still suspended in 2022.

The Transnational Adoption System in Guatemala

While a more in-depth analysis of the emergence of transnational adoption as a practice in Guatemala lies outside of the scope of this paper, several points about the transnational adoption system in Guatemala in relation to the US are important to note. From its implementation in 1977 to its closure in 2008, an elaborate system developed so that Guatemalan adoption could meet the rising demand for adoptable infants, placed on it from international, prospective adoptive parents based in countries like the UK, Italy, Spain, Sweden, Canada, and the US.

Options to adopt transnationally from Central and South America started to dwindle in 1996 when other Latin American countries began adopting a "UNICEF model" of transnational adoption. This model centered on keeping the child in their birth country and was in line with the newly written and signed Hague Convention on the Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption (henceforth the Hague or Hague Convention) (Siegal 2011a, 2011b). As one of the countries that did not sign or ratify the Hague, Guatemala slowly but surely became the only option to adopt from in the Latin

America and eventually transformed into a highly contested site where (prospective) adoptive parents, lawyers, and agencies all fought to keep the country open.

Adopting from Guatemala was exceptional in more ways than one. It was renowned for the speed with which an adoption could be started and finalized (between 4-9 months), the age of the children at the time of placement (anywhere from between newborn to 6 months), and the fact that most adoptable Guatemalan children made available to prospective adoptive parents were kept in foster care (privately run and funded by the lawyers) rather than orphanages (CICIG, 2010).

Additionally, there were very few restrictions put on prospective adoptive parents when adopting from Guatemala. They were not required to receive the child in-country (though many did travel to Guatemala and even visited their child mid-process), there was no limit on how old they could be, and single parents were allowed to adopt from the country. All these factors explain how a country of 13.5 million (in 2007, the peak year of transnational adoptions from the country) became a top sending country to the US, alongside countries like China (1.3 billion in 2007) and Russia (142 million in 2007). It is estimated that at its peak, 1 in every 110 children born in Guatemala were put up for adoption (Schuster Institute n.d.).

In its exceptionality, adoption from Guatemala produced approximately 30-40,000 transnational adoptees (Adoption Statistics n.d.) to the United States. My 33 participants, along with myself, are a small subsection of this larger transnational movement of mostly infants from the Global South to the Global North. In the paper that follows I think through their subjectivity as adults as they navigate their incorporation into the U.S.

D. *Theoretical Framing*

Adoptees have a unique experience when it comes to navigating their various identities because they fail to meet many normative standards (in the United States) at once. The norm is to be biologically related to your family, the norm is to be raised by people of the same race as you, the norm in majority White communities is to be White, the norm is to be raised in the country that you were born in. In all these ways the transracial, transnational adoptee fails to meet normative standards, and thus has to navigate explaining to others, and importantly, to themselves, who they are and why they are the way that they are. Other studies have looked at the microaggressive questions (Baden 2016) that adoptees are asked along with the narrative burden (Homans 2007; Godon, Green, & Ramsey 2014) that is placed on them, having to constantly explain their story to strangers. Here, I hope to take a closer look at the mechanisms that underlie the adoptee's experience of being made an Other.

To do this, I take up two concepts, the first is reflected appraisals, the ways in which we as individuals understand ourselves based off of how we think others perceive us (Cooley 1902; Rosenberg 2017 [1992]; Gecas 1982; Felson 1985; Cast et al. 1999), the second is Othering, the ways in which individuals are actively made aware of their differences by their interactions with people. I intend to explore how in both "real" interactions, instances where adoptees are made to be different because of their status of being adopted and their racial difference, and "imagined" perceptions, instances where the adoptee reacts to the way they think that others are seeing them, the adoptee must engage in a process of constant identity negotiation that goes beyond what the average individual has to navigate. Previous research has looked at the ways that race is constructed via reflected appraisals (Khanna 2010), with particular attention spent on multiracial individuals (Khanna 2004; Sims 2016).

I argue that because transnational adoptees are constantly put into these Othering

scenarios, where their identities are always questioned, they seek out ways in which they can

create a complete(r) sense of self. It has been shown that this can look like an arrival at an

identity that mirrors that of the TRIAs co-ethnics, an alignment with the people of their

country of origin, an engagement with their White adoptive family's heritage, the investment

in an adoptee identity, a racial 'third space,' or any combination of the aforementioned

(Baden et al. 2012; Shiao and Tuan 2008; Hübinette 2004; Blair and Liu 2020; Darnell et al.

2017; Kim 2010).

E. *Literature Review*

<u>Critical Adoption Studies</u>

Although academic studies on adoption and adoptees have proliferated over the years,

few, until recently, have considered the experience of adoptees themselves, and fewer still

the experience of adult adoptees (Willing et al. 2012). In contrast, a plethora of studies have

looked at transracial adoption, but overwhelmingly from the point of view of the adoptive

parent, as the subject given voice and from the positionality of the researcher (Volkman

2005; Howell 2006; Dorow 2006; Dubinsky 2010; Högbacka 2016). My research brings the

voice of adoptees to the fore of adoption research, joining the likes of Kim Park Nelson

(2016) and Kimberlee McKee (2019). These scholars, among others, have begun to reshape

the narrative on transnational adoption from one of White saviorism, paternalism, and

humanitarianism, shifting it into a project of returning agency to adult adoptees. This is

directly in line with the emergence of Critical Adoption Studies that "works to hear and make

heard multiple perspectives from multiple positions within adoption experience," and that

"understands that discourse about adoption and depictions of members of adoption triads

within our cultures are powerful and symbolic (Homans et al. 2018: 20)." Discourse about adoption is political, powerful, and symbolic in its representation, and it is therefore important that we take seriously the experiences of adoptees themselves, because they have been under-studied in the decades since adoption became a site of research. Thus, my project that centers Guatemalan adoptee voices is a critical addition to our body of knowledge.

Because transnational adoptions require an intersectional analysis of multiple identities, numerous fields of study have benefitted from the study of adoption. In psychology, adoptees have served as case studies to explore bicultural/multicultural identity development and integration (Manzi et al. 2014; Ferrari et al. 2015). In communication studies, adoptees have been the center of inquiry in understanding identity formation (Blair & Liu 2019) and family construction (Docan-Morgan 2014, 2017). In sociology, the unique racial-ethnic experiences of adoptees have often been deployed to make claims about how we should understand shifting color lines in the 20th and 21st century United States (Willing et al. 2012; Shiao and Tuan 2007, 2008; Bashi Treitler 2014; Kubo 2010; Ishiwaza & Kubo 2014; Dorow 2006; Quiroz 2007).

The question of how transracial transnational adoptees understand their own racial-ethnic positionality, be that via active ethnic exploration (Blair & Liu 2019; Shiao & Tuan 2008), through partial assimilation, or reculturation (Baden et al. 2012), have been key questions in the field (Bashi Treitler 2014). Shiao and Tuan's important contribution suggested that Korean adoptees engage in two types of ethnic identity exploration, one tied to cultural artifacts and exposure to curricular resources, and the other related to the adoptee's exposure and immersion with Asian co-ethnics (Shiao & Tuan 2008). In a study by Baden et al. (2012), the researchers identified a new process, *reculturation*, meant to better explain

transnational adoptee's process of identity exploration. They define six identity outcomes that the adoptee might arrive at: identification with an adoptee culture, through reclaiming their birth culture, a bicultural identity based in both adoptive and birth cultures, exploring their adoptive family's cultural heritage, and any combination of the above (Baden et al. 2012). These studies suggest that racial and ethnic identity exploration and identity outcomes for the transnational adoptee are complicated processes, with their own particularities that diverge from their co-ethnics in the US.

Much of the research that has been done concentrating on the experiences of transnational adoptees has centered on adoptees from Asia, namely Korea (Kim 2010; Park Nelson 2016; McKee 2019; Docan-Morgan 2014, 2016, 2017; Son 2019) and China (Dorow 2006; Louie 2015; Blair & Liu 2019; Homans 2007; Ponte et al. 2010; Cohen 2015). This makes sense, as Korean adoption is the longest running program in the world and has placed the most adoptees since its inception. Korean adoptees were the first to come of age and have the longest tenure in the US imaginary, so it stands to reason that they have been so duly studied (Kim 2010; Jones 2015). China, on the other hand, saw the transfer of thousands of children, mainly girls, due to the one-child policy from the early '90s to the present; Chinese adoption has taken on a social life of its own in the popular imagination via documentaries (e.g., *Found*; *Somewhere Between*) and television (e.g., *Modern Family*).

Much less studied is the experience of Latinx adoptees (LADs) and their racial-ethnic identity formation in the United States. Although there is an emerging literature that is beginning to take up the experiences of adoptees from Latin America (Flores-Koulish & Branco Alvarado 2015; Flores-Koulish 2014; Andujo 1988; Camacho-Gingerich et al. 2007), extensive empirical studies that take the Latinx adoptee as subject have yet to be conducted.

One exception was a 2017 study by Ferrari et al. that looked at the experiences of Latinx adoptees in relation to their psychological well-being (Ferrari et al. 2017). They found that Latinx adoptees who identified more strongly with their ethnic identity were buffered from the negative effects of perceived discrimination. This was an important finding because it points to the importance of LADs building a coherent sense of their racial identity. Additionally, the authors highlight how these findings differed from that of a similar study done with Korean adoptees, wherein identification with ethnic identity increased the negative effects of perceived discrimination (Lee et al. 2015). This lends further credence to the importance of studying the specific experiences of Latinx adoptees separately from the experiences of other racialized adoptee identities, a gap in the literature that I begin to fill with my study.

On the more qualitative side, Flores-Koulish & Branco Alvarado (2015) explored the shared characteristics that LADs have with what they term, the new Latinx diaspora. They identify the ways that Latinx adoptees and Latinx in the US both have limited media portrayals, are lumped together in a pan-latinidad, are geographically removed from their homelands, a relation that is complicated by loss and generational trauma, and both groups experience racism and stereotyping in the United States racial milieu. In my section on racial Other I continue to extend on their conversation around the Latinx and LADs experiences or racism.

<u>The Self: Others and Liminality</u>

Although they are from the same country, Guatemalan adoptees and their migrant/co-national counterparts differ in significant ways, namely in how the US positions adoptees as orphans versus economic immigrants, and in their relationship to Guatemala. Cecilia

Menjívar has conducted several influential studies that have looked at the experiences of

Guatemalan migrants to the US (Menjívar 2002, 2006, 2021; Menjívar et al. 2002).

Specifically, she has looked at the ways that Guatemalan immigrants experience what she

coins *liminal legality,* characterized by ambiguity, that is neither documented nor

undocumented status (Menjívar 2006). Their legal status as in-between informs the ways that

they engage in family formation, mainly through family separation. Although family

separation finds resonances with the Guatemalan adoptee's experience, adoptees differ from

Guatemalan migrants in that they are constructed as orphans, which allows for them to be

adopted and to obtain US citizenship, either upon arrival or soon after (Briggs 2012, 2020).

Elsewhere, Menjívar highlights the ways in which the children of Guatemalan migrants (1.5

and 2nd Generation) have fewer opportunities to form ties with their communities of origin

and thus are less likely to seek connection with those places (Menjívar 2002, 2021), although

indigenous Guatemalans were much more likely to maintain relations. This may be another

way in which Guatemalan adoptees depart from their co-nationals in the US (other

Guatemalan-Americans), they are much more likely to want to return to Guatemala and

connect with their culture, biological family, and recuperate language. My study continues to

elaborate the ways Guatemalan adoptees are similar and different from their co-nationals.

Migration status is not the only way that Latinx experiences in the US have been

thought through; another important perspective can be found in Gloria Anzaldua's canonical

work *Borderland/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987). In the piece she introduces her

theorization of the borderlands and elaborates on the identity and political possibilities made

available to those who find themselves "neither here, nor there," physically and psychically

liminal. These borderland subjects develop their own way of being in and seeing the world

that diverges from that of monocultural individuals who grew up exclusively in Mexico or the United States. For these and other borderland subjects, there is a constant navigation of the self in relation to dominant social categories.

The in-betweenness of the borderlands and borderland subjects finds resonance with another concept advanced by Tobias Hübinette (2004), writing on Swedish Korean adoptees in relation to what he calls *the adoptee third-space*. An elaboration of Homi Bhabha's (1994) post-colonial theorization on opening up space in Western binaries, "where new conditions are acknowledged and made possible (Hübinette 2004: 23)," Hübinette argues that adopted Koreans, in their difference (and commonalities) are an archetypical model of what it means to exist in a third space between birth country and (Western) adoptive country. I extend on this theorization to show how differences and transgressions of normative identity categories within Guatemalan adoptees' Western adoptive country (in my case, the United States), opens up new conditions, in this case a psychic-social, liminal locale that my participants inhabit. In order to talk about normative identity categories and the ways Guatemalan adoptees interact with them, I paid attention to the micro, interpersonal, social interactions that my participant had.

Identity theory in social psychology offers several useful concepts to understand the formation and negotiation of the self, by way of social identities, social interaction and reflected appraisals. According to Gecas (1982) the self can be understood as a "reflexive phenomenon that develops in social interaction (3)." The self is therefore formed in relation to others outside of oneself. By locating identity formation in the external world, it is also inherently bound to various social constraints of a given society, specifically the salient socially available categories. In the US these salient social identities are things like gender,

sexuality, class, race, ethnicity, nationality. The self-concept takes the phenomenological formation of the self a step further and is defined as the "concept [that] the individual has of himself as a physical, social, and spiritual or moral being (3)." The self-concept is how the individual sees themself in light of their positionality in society, based off their interactions with others, and their internalization of the generalized other within themselves (Cooley's looking glass self, 1902).

These interactions with others are essential to understanding how individuals form a coherent sense of self. Rosenberg (1992) writes that "as a consequence of seeing ourselves from the perspectives of others, our self-concepts will come to correspond at least partially to other people's views of us (597)." These reflected appraisals are one social data-input-stream that individuals use to make sense of who they really are, and are a site where the self is negotiated, contested, and navigated. Reflected appraisals are also one way that we negotiate and make sense of our ascribed identities.

Adoptees disrupt our notions of which identities can be navigated and negotiated because their ascribed racial-ethnic identities do not always align with the ways that they have been culturally socialized (their phenomenological experience) or the ways they racially understand themselves (Walton 2015). Despite US society's best efforts to distill, codify, and reify racial identities, race and its accompanying logics are messy projects that are neither complete nor pre-determined (Omi and Winant 2015). Tigervall and Hübinette, writing on transnational, transracial adoption, remind us that "neither ethnicity nor race are inherited or owned; they are instead ascribed to certain individuals and groups, and they are therefore neither static nor unchangeable, but on the contrary always under transformation (2010: 494)." Additionally, minoritized racial identities are always determined in relation to the

cultures (dominant and subaltern) that they encounter. In the US, racial identities are constructed in relation to Whiteness as the hegemonic and normative category, anyone who is not White is a minority, a racial Other. But race is not the only social identity that is constructed in relation to normative constructs.

There are various normative constructs that structure our relationships and identities in the United States. Not only is there an assumption that you are biologically related to those who raise you (Yngvesson 2003; Friedlander 2003), it is also assumed that the culture you are socialized in will match your ascribed ethnic-racial identity (Walton 2015), and that your citizenship aligns with where you were born. These normative structures are often employed in ways that create Others, stigmatized individuals who do not align with our preconceived notions of what they 'should' be. Transnational adoptees sit at an important juncture, a liminal space created by the assumptions that do not match the lived experiences of transracial adoptees. Indeed, transnational adoptees become multiply Othered, and have the task of making sense of their difference in order to create a complete sense of self. This thesis is concerned with these processes and explores the various other experiences of Guatemalan adoptees.

II.   METHODOLOGY

The research presented in this thesis was collected with the approval of the University of Santa Barbara's Human Subjects Committee (HSC), which serves as the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Due to Covid-19 restrictions, the entirety of the data collection was conducted virtually. In fact, this virtual methodology lent itself well to interviews with transnational adoptees because, as a population, they are not geographically based in any area; virtual interviews allowed for a diversity of perspectives and experiences from Guatemalan adoptees across the United States, some based in cities, others in suburbs, and still others in rural areas of the country.

Recruitment and interviews for this project ran concurrently starting in June of 2020. Recruitment was done by several means: personal networks, private Facebook groups, and snowball sampling. I reached out to several potential participants in my personal network, asking if they would be interested in participating in the project. If they indicated that they were interested, I forwarded them an introductory email introducing them to the study, its goals, and potential risks and benefits (Appendix A).

Additionally, I made recruitment posts in two Guatemalan adoptee, closed Facebook groups following the permission of the group moderators. I had access to these groups and the members in them because I am a Guatemalan adoptee myself. My recruitment post introduced members to the study, its goals, potential risks and benefits, and included my contact information for potential participants to reach out to me via email or phone (Appendix B). I contacted members of the group who liked and/or commented on the post via direct message to inquire about their interest in participating in the project.

Finally, I continued to gain contacts through snowball sampling, asking each of my participants at the end of their interviews if they knew of any other Guatemalan adoptees who might be interested in speaking with me. If they thought that there might be individuals in their networks who would be interested in being interviewed, I asked them to forward my contact information so that the potential participant could decide whether to reach out to me or not.

Between June 2020 and November 2020, I collected data in the form of 33 semi-structured interviews conducted over Zoom and Skype. All participation in the data collection process was voluntary. Prior to the interview, I provided participants with a digital consent form (via an online service, DocuSign) (Appendix C) to read, sign, and submit back to me. At the beginning of every interview, I confirmed that the participant had received and reviewed the consent form. Upon affirmation, I obtained verbal consent, first to record the interview, and then again once the recording had begun. Interviews lasted anywhere from 45 minutes to 3 hours, with the majority averaging around 1 hour 45 minutes. I recorded the interviews using my laptop and later transcribed them with the use of an open-source audio application, Audacity. I began transcription in the fall of 2020 and concluded in spring of 2021.

The interviews followed the same structure and format and were broken down into 5 thematic-experiential sections: (1) Growing up Adopted (2) Return to Guatemala (3) Return to the US (4) Reunion, and (5) Residing (Appendix D). All participants shared their stories of growing up as international adoptees from Guatemala. Depending on their individual experiences, we would continue to the various other sections of questions, for example, if a participant had found their birth family but not returned to Guatemala we would skip the later

section, or if an adoptee had returned to Guatemala but not resided in the country, we would omit the questions on residing.

At the end of every interview, participants were sent a Google Form to fill out. The form (Appendix E) asked for general demographic information about the participant as well as additional information about their adoptive family and birth family (if applicable).

In total I interviewed 33 adult Guatemalan adoptees. I decided to leave one case out of my analysis because the participant was adopted from Guatemala into a Latinx family and therefore had a different racial and cultural experience than the rest of my participants, who were exclusively transracially adopted into White families throughout the US (mainly to the Midwest and Northeast). Thus, my total number of participants for this paper is 32. All participants were residents of the United States and between the ages of 20 and 46 at the time of their interviews.

In deciding the age of the Guatemalan adoptees that I wanted to engage with for my data collection I considered both age of consent and age of the demographic. I chose to interview individuals over the age of 18 to avoid needing consent from the participant as well as consent from a parent or guardian. There was no upper limit that I set for the age of potential participants, although factors like the history of adoption and policy in the US informed what years my participants might have come from Guatemala to the United States. To protect the privacy of my participants, all have been assigned pseudonyms and had any identifying information anonymized in the quotes that I use.

Participants were asked to self-identify which race they felt best described themself and were allowed to pick more than one. The vast majority (29) identified as

Hispanic/Latinx, with the next largest racial identity being Native American (6), followed by two individuals who identified as White, and one preferring not to identify.

In terms of gender, although they were offered a variety of gender identities to choose from (See appendix), all my participants identified within the gender binary at the time of their interviews. A little over a third of my participants identified as men (11) and the rest as women (21). With regards to sexuality, my participants were a little less homogeneous, with 12 identifying as LGBTQIA+.

My participants ranged in age, having been born and adopted across four decades; Five were adopted in the 70s, eight in the 80s, 15 in the 90s, and four in the 2000s. This distribution makes sense as the notarial adoption discussed above was written into law in 1977 and the internal armed conflict kept Guatemala marginal in the global system until the later 90s (Robinson 2003; Rotabi et al. 2008). Additionally, it could be argued that those adoptees born in the 90s are of the age (20-30 years old) where they are coming into their late adolescence/early adulthood, with the necessary resources and agency to explore their identities apart from their White adoptive families and communities. In contrast, those adoptees adopted after the year 2000 are still coming of age, and at the time of my interviews, would have been between the ages of 18 and 20.

Guatemala was known for being fast when it came to finalizing an international adoption (between 4-9 months). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that over half of my participants were adopted before the age of 6 months (20) and even more so before the age of 1 (25) (Siegel 2011a). My oldest participant, at the time of their adoption, was 5 years old. Oftentimes, families that adopt one child are likely to adopt more; this was true for my

participants as well. 21 of my participants had adopted siblings, 13 of whom had siblings (not biologically related to them) who were also adopted from Guatemala.

In terms of returning to Guatemala, 25 of my participants had had the opportunity to go back to their country of birth, eight of whom had only gone back once. Over half of my participants (13) had returned prior to the age of 18, five during the typical college age range, 18 to 22, five during late adolescence/early adulthood ages 23 to 29, and two returned 30 or older.

Of my 32 participants, 21 had reunited with their birth families (66%). I define reuniting, or "being in reunion," as the adoptee being in contact with their birth family, at some point in time, having conducted a formal or informal search (via DNA, Facebook, private investigator, Guatemalan agency, etc.). Elsewhere reunion has been defined as having a degree of ongoing contact (Modell 1997). For me, this fails to capture the ongoing impact that even just one instance of contact might have had on an adoptee and their experience therein. With that said, five of my participants indicated that they were no longer in contact with their birth families and one that they stay in touch sporadically, once or twice a year. The majority of my participants in reunion (15) had a more consistent relationship with their birth family, four even indicating that they communicate with their birth family daily.

Reunion does not necessarily mean that my participants had returned to Guatemala and first contact happened in person, nor that the reunion took place in Guatemala at all (several of my participants had birth family who, since their adoption, had migrated to the US). Likewise, reunion was not necessarily always with a birth mother or immediate birth family, although the majority were. Reunions and the birth family that adoptees closely connected with ranged from siblings (younger and older), aunts and uncles, and cousins.

Whereas the majority of my participants returned to the country prior to coming of age, only three found their birth families in their youth. Most reunions took place as the adoptees grew up, six for those 18-22 years old, seven for those 23-29 years old, and 5 for adoptees over the age of 30.

Table 1. Demographic Breakdown of Participants			
Category	Variables	# of participants	% of participants
Self-Identified Race (allowed to select more than one)	Hispanic/Latinx	29	90.6%
	Native American	6	18.8%
	White	2	6.3%
	Prefer Not to Say	1	3.1%
Self-Identified Skin Tone Figure 1. Skin Color Palette Used in the 2010 AmericasBarometer	Skin Color 3	5	15.6%
	Skin Color 4	5	15.6%
	Skin Color 5	7	21.9%
	Skin Color 6	10	31.3%
	Skin Color 7	2	6.3%
	Skin Color 8	3	9.4%

Decade of Adoption	70s	5	15.6%
	80s	8	25%
	90s	15	46.9%
	00s	4	12.5%
Gender	Male	11	34.4%
	Female	21	65.6%
Sexuality	Straight	20	62.5%
	Bisexual	8	25%
	Gay	3	9.4%
	Queer	1	3.1%
Marital Status	Married	11	34.4%
	Divorced	1	3.1%
	Single	20	62.5%
Parental Status	Parent	12	37.5%
	Non-Parent	20	62.5%
Region of the US adopted to	Northeast	14	43.8%
	Midwest	14	43.8%
	Rocky Mountain	2	6.3%
	West Coast	1	3.1%

	South	1	3.1%
Age at Adoption	At birth	2	6.3%
	1-3 months	5	15.6%
	4-6 months	13	40.6%
	6 months - 1 year	5	15.6%
	1 - 2 years	4	12.5%
	2+ years	3	9.4%
Adopted Sibling	Yes	21	65.6%
	No	11	34.4%
Adopted Sibling from Guatemala (n=21)	Yes	13	61.9%
	No	8	38.1%
Returned to Guatemala	Return	25	78.1%
	No Return	7	21.9%
Times Returned (n=25)	1	8	32%
	2-5	10	40%
	5-10	2	8%
	10+	5	20%
Age at Return (n=25)	Below 18	13	52%
	18-22	5	20%

	23-29	5	20%
	30+	2	8%
Reunion with Birth Family	Reunion	21	65.6%
	No Reunion	11	34.4%
Age at Reunion (n=21)	Below 18	3	14.3%
	18-22	6	28.6%
	23-29	7	33.3%
	30+	5	23.8%
Frequency of Communication with Birth Family (n=21)	Daily	4	19%
	At least once a week	3	14.3%
	Once a month	5	23.8%
	Once every 3 months	3	14.3%
	Once or twice a year	1	4.8%
	Not in contact anymore	5	23.8%
(Estimated) Adoptive Family's Income at Time of Adoption	between $10-40,000	1	3.1%
	between $40-85,000	7	21.9%
	between $85-163,000	13	40.6%
	between $163-207,000	3	9.4%

	between $207-518,000	3	9.4%
	Prefer Not to Say	5	15.6%
n = 32			

Methodological approach: Grounded Theory

I coded my interviews using the qualitative research application Atalas.ti throughout the Summer and into the Fall of 2021. Initially, I read through and coded every interview using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2014). This looked like coding my interviews line by line, so as to inductively 'listen' to what was going on for my participants in their experiences, rather than deductively placing a certain theory onto the research from the outset. Initial codes were things like "highlighting being adopted / an adoptee / stigma," "blending in racially / looking like everyone," "Learning Spanish," and "discussing Guatemala." Slowly, several overarching themes emerged from these codes, things like Othering, Belonging, Being an Adoptee, Language, Returning, Searching, Reunion, 1st Family, and Adoptive Family. These broader categories allowed me to make sense of some of the aspects of the lived experiences of my participants (Othering, Belonging, Language) as well as differentiate the relationships that were important to their sense of self (namely, their interactions with their 1st families and their adoptive family).

Reflexivity

I was born in Guatemala City, Guatemala, and was transnationally adopted into a White family and a White community when I was 6 months old. After graduating college, I returned to Guatemala for 3 months and reunited with my birth mother, half-brother, and the rest of my extended family on my mother's side. My reunion was both extremely emotional

and fulfilling, as well as confusing and dissonant, ultimately leading to some answers, but even more questions (a common theme for reunions, Wrobel & Grotevant 2019). Why was finding my biological family so important to me, when logically I knew I had a family that raised me? What does my return and reunion mean for my relationship to the country as a whole, other Guatemalans who grew up there, and Latinx folks living in the States? Am I more "Guatemalan" now that I have connected with the kin that never left, who ostensibly acknowledge and claim me as theirs?

With these questions in mind, I approached my research from a critically reflexive methodology which allowed me to leverage my identity as a Guatemalan adoptee to inform my research agenda, my interview guide, as well as my analysis and interpretation; rather than hindering my objectivity, my intersubjectivity benefited me by granting me quick and easy entrée with my participants, an insider status, and a way of readily seeing and understanding adoptees (Burawoy 2019). My positionality meant that adoptees were willing to tell me things they might not have told someone who did not understand where they were coming from. This was evident throughout my interactions, my participants chose to share deeply moving moments of trauma, grief, loss, often followed by a nod to my insider status, "you know," or a deeply held desire to be witnessed in their experiences with a "did you ever think of it that way," or "did that ever happen to you?" I approached this work with a lot of self-compassion and empathy for my participants who have literally moved through worlds to get here.

III.   FINDINGS

Introduction

I just didn't fit in anywhere. *The fact that the school that I went to also, was basically all Caucasian people, and I just didn't really fit in. I was made fun of a lot for my skin color, and I just wondered why I was different from the rest and is it good being adopted or is it bad. I just questioned it a lot growing up. And feeling like being adopted can be a good thing, but it also makes you question everything, my background, and why this happened [to me]. And, I just had a whole bunch of questions and **I just felt different from everybody.***

- Sierra Stuart, 24

Guatemalan adoptees "don't fit in." This was a phrase I heard repeatedly from my participants. They are non-normative, or different, in terms of various social constructs in the United States and overwhelmingly aware of it. Guatemalan adoptees are not biologically related to their adoptive family, many are raised in predominantly White, upper-middle class communities and may be the only or one of a few racial minorities (and therefore hypervisible, Florés-Gonzalez 2017), they phenotypically present as people of color but growing up have vastly different experiences from other BIPOC, and they were born thousands of miles outside of the US. Transnational adoptees transgress all of these (socially constructed) normative lines, adoptive, racial, cultural, and national, by virtue of their lived experiences. My participants found themselves constantly having to explain, justify, manage, navigate, and defend their transgressions to others, and importantly, to themselves, so as to come to some sort of understanding of who they are and why they are the way that they are.

Take Sierra, a 24-year-old Guatemalan adoptee from the Midwest. In the opening quote we see how she explains that she went to a predominantly White school where she experienced racism (by being teased for the color of her skin). This and other experiences of racial Othering informed her own internalization of her difference, leading her to wonder "why I was different from the rest." She continues explaining that "being adopted… makes

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you question everything, my background, and why this happened." Implicit in these lines is the reality that Sierra's adoption is a particular kind of adoption, she is both transnationally and transracially adopted, and therefore crosses multiple contentious fault lines that are extremely pertinent to the projects of "Whiteness" and the "United States". In this excerpt we see how Sierra is struggling with making sense of her difference in a way that highlights two processes that I hope to explore further in this thesis: Othering and reflected appraisals.

By taking a closer look at these mechanisms, Othering and reflected appraisals, that underlie the adoptee's experience of being non-normative, I intend to explore how Guatemalan adoptees, and transnational adoptees in general, constantly engage in processes of identity negotiation. The process of Othering is the ways in which individuals are actively made aware of their differences through their interactions with people (Walton 2015). I chose the term strategically, because not all of the transnational adoptee's differences can be boiled down to conversations of racial Othering alone. Rather, as I pointed out earlier, their Othering also includes differences based on family formation, cultural socialization, nation of origin, in addition to racialization. And, although in the context of the US, instances of cultural and national difference might be colloquially understood through a racial lens, I draw from Omi and Winant's (2016) sharp analysis that holds these categories as analytically distinct.

For Sierra, her difference is both about her race as understood by her school peers in the US, as well as her "background," which we might take to mean the fact that she is from somewhere else, namely, Guatemala–a biographical fact that we will return to later in Sierra's story. At the same time, Sierra is stuck with this question of whether adoption is a good or bad thing, suggesting that for her, the fact that she was adopted and therefore

inhabits an identity as adoptee is a salient and charged one, with moral overtones. In the end, all these ways of being different culminate for her in her statement, "I just felt different from everybody." Difference, feeling like you just "don't fit in," I suggest, is one way that Othering has been internalized by Guatemalan adoptees. Like most people, adoptees would rather fit in than be an Other, yet their very experiential identities may foreclose a reality wherein they are ever normative, where they are constantly launched into a third-space, faced with the reminders that they are something different and something new, without a pre-existing heuristic for people to understand them by.

It is apparent then, that Guatemalan adoptees are different on four discernable axes (1) Adoptive (2) Racial (3) Cultural, and (4) National. Their adoptive difference is an identity that they inhabit upon their legal transfer from their birth parents to their adoptive parents. Although there is research to indicate that "non-traditional" family formation is increasingly acceptable to the broader US society (Patton-Imani 2020), US based adoptees continue to live in a social fabric that is constantly concerned with blood ties (Yngvesson 2003). In terms of race, the Guatemalan adoptee, like all other racial minorities growing up and living in the US, is constructed as the racial Other against an (invisible) White norm. My participants also found themselves marginalized from other BIPOC and Latinx communities, as they make sense of their relationship to Latinidad. Finally, there are instances where Guatemalan adoptees are made aware that they were born somewhere else in the world and that they crossed national borders to grow up in the US.

I do not mean to suggest that transnational adoptees are always ostracized from community; my participants shared about important relationships that they had with their adoptive families and White people, with other people of color, with Latinx individuals and

Latinidad in general, with Guatemalans in Guatemala, etc. In this thesis I pay attention to the ways that Guatemalan adoptees' experiences differ from those of their peers (whom they share social identities with), as a means to elucidate how they navigate a society (and thus interpersonal relationships) that hegemonically seeks to homogenize, categorize, and routinize experiences into easily legible identities. Guatemalan adoptees are confounding to this project, revealing the (il)logics of identity politics in the 21st century and the continued relevance of racial, cultural, and national fault lines that undergird identity formation and navigation in the age of color evasiveness (Annamma et al. 2017), post-raciality, and diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Reflected appraisals are the ways in which we, as social individuals, understand our 'selves' based on how we think others perceive us. Through routine interaction and the internalization of the general other into our sense of self, we come to incorporate society's expectations and norms. These imagined, and often accurate (Rosenberg 2017 [1992]), perceptions, give us a glimpse into one process whereby transnational adoptees internalize their Otherness. Through their internalization of society's norms, transnational adoptees are dissonantly aware that they cross social identity boundaries that, for most, are usually so heavily policed as to make them near impossible to transgress. In many ways, the choice to cross was not one made agentically, but made for the transnational adoptee by their adoptive parents, the adoption system broadly speaking, and their birth families. Transnational adoptees are left with the consequences of those choices. Throughout this thesis I explore the ways in which explicit Othering, instances where the adoptee's difference is highlighted, co-create the adoptee's sense of themself with reflected appraisals.

In the opening quote Sierra shares that "I just didn't fit in anywhere." Guatemalan adoptees are extremely conscious of the ways that their difference sets them apart from those around them. For many, growing up in predominantly White spaces meant that they really were the only one or one of a few people of color. In this literal, phenotypic sense, they did not fit in. But beyond optics, transnational adoptees felt different in their lived experiences as well. As we will see, reflected appraisals play an important role in mediating Guatemalan adoptees' interactions with other BIPOC, specifically Latinx folks, with White people, and even other adoptees. In this thesis I begin to sketch out the ways that transnational adoptees find themselves Others along the four axes outlined above: adoptive, racial, cultural, and national.

In the first section I turn to the experiences of an adoptee Other, exploring instances where my participants' difference was highlighted in doctor's offices, via adoptee microaggressions, and in relation to non-adopted persons. I start here because being adopted is the first "strike against" my participants, in terms of their being different from the general populace, that they are made aware of through both interpersonal interactions as well as reflected appraisals. I show the ways that Guatemalan adoptees' social role as member of the family is eclipsed in instances where biology and phenotype are made salient. When these social roles become unstable the adoptee is led to question their sense of self, who they are and who they are in relation to their family, confronted with their adoptee difference.

In the second section I explore how Guatemalan adoptees are interpellated as racialized minorities by Whiteness and explore the ways that they manage their racial Other identity, putting my participants' experiences into conversation with the broader experience of being a racialized minority living in the US. Three major themes arose from this analysis:

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my participants' experiences with microaggressions, their exotification, and being on the receiving end of racism. I contend that in their racialization Guatemalan adoptees are reminded that they are not *just* adopted, but trans*racially* adopted, and that they are not afforded access to normative identities in the ways that their non-adopted, non-transracial peers are. At the same time, this sense of non-normativity is complicated by the ways that honorary Whiteness (and its racial logics) is extended, accepted, and contested by the transracial adoptee.

Then, in the third section I address the ways that my interviewees talked about their differences with the Latinx communities that they are racially grouped with but feel culturally distinct (and distanced) from. The role of language, institutional forced choices, and relationships to Latinidad are analyzed to understand Guatemalan adoptee's subjective distance from Latinx communities in the US. I explore how underlying my participants sense of being cultural Others is a tension between attained (phenomenological) and ascribed (phenotypic) identities, and the normative ways we are socialized to think about the difference between these kinds of identities. I show how for Guatemalan adoptees, a normatively ascribed identity, Latinx, is attainable for them, but not without its own border patrolling and gate keeping.

Finally, I discuss the ways in which my participants find that they are positioned as a national Other in relation to their being born somewhere outside of the US, their immigration status, and their interactions with Guatemalan nationals in the US. I note how being implicated in transnational processes is usually obscured in how Guatemalan adoptee's talk about their identities, even though they have to make narrative sense of this biographic reality from a very young age as well as being tasked with explaining this difference to

others. I show how Guatemalan adoptee's must contend with the ways that Latinidad is rhetorically associated with illegal immigration, which is unique their experience of being adopted from Latin America. I identify how Guatemalan adoptees continue to navigate the tensions of the phenotypic and phenomenological when relating to Latinidad, particularly when they interact with other Guatemalans based in the US.

I end with a discussion of one of the major mediating factors that affected my participants' sense of belonging, their life course, with limitations of the study, and several suggestions to better support transnational adoptees in the future.

I purposefully chose this order of elaboration of my themes because it roughly reflects my participants' experience of coming into their difference. First, they are aware of the ways that they are adopted in relation to their non-biological families, then, slowly, race becomes more salient as they interact with Whiteness outside of the intimate space of their adoptive family, followed by increased interactions with Latinx communities, as well as the renewed salience of foreign-born status in today's political context. This elaboration is only a roadmap though, and the ways of transgressing all these normative identity constructs are intersectional and intimately tied together. How can we talk about adoptee difference for the transracial adoptee without also discussing race? How can we talk about foreign-born status without acknowledging the racial hues of the political rhetoric that surrounds those conversations? How can we talk about race without engaging with the racialization of ethnicity and culture?

For analytic clarity, in the sections that follow I attempt a degree of parsing of these experiences but encourage the reader to keep in mind the reality that Guatemalan adoptees deal with these convoluted, contentious categories daily, both internally and externally.

Perhaps this is why being transnationally adopted is so overwhelming, transnational adoptees are constantly navigating and negotiating other's expectations, perceptions, and ascriptions, while working through their own claims, sense of self, questions, and the third-space.

I conclude this thesis with a short but substantial theoretical contribution, working through processes surrounding the adoptee third-space (an extension of Hübinette's [2004] application of the term devised by Bhabha [1994]) and "coming out of the fog" (Radke 2017; Yue, Santizo-Malafronti, Vasquez-Kelly 2020; Drennan ElAwar 2012). I argue that the adoptee third-space is a psychic-social location that the transnational adoptee finds themself returning to over and over again due to their constant Othering and sense of difference. In every instance that the transnational adoptees' identity is questioned, when they are asked to legitimize their claims to an identity, to navigate their difference, to defend that they are enough, whenever they sense that they are out of place or "don't fit in," I argue they are being launched into the liminal locale of the adoptee third-space, caught in-between, psychically and socially. I suggest that their continued presence in the third-space is one way in which transnational adoptees might connect their individual lived experiences to the structural oppressive systems that allowed for their in-betweenness in the first place, their identity that crosses the categories thus laid out in the analysis (adoptee, racial, cultural, and national). This presence and connecting of the dots is akin to "coming out of the fog," to borrow a phrase popular in the adoptee community, adoptee's coming into critical conscious. This theoretical elaboration is a contribution to our knowledge on liminality and how individuals make sense of their social identities in relationship to broader meso- and macro-level systems.

A. *Adoptee Other: The Doctor's Office, Adoptee Microaggressions, & Non-Adopted Persons*

<u>Introduction</u>

To a point, I knew I was adopted, but we [Eddie's adoptive family] never talked about it. And I've told my parents, "You could've done a better job talking to each one of us about adoption." And my dad said, "We just didn't want you to feel like an outsider." ***But little did they know that all of us [Eddie and his adopted siblings] kind of felt like outsiders anyways, [laughs] because we're all adopted.***

- Eddie Rigby,

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This quote from Eddie, a 36-year-old Guatemalan adoptee, highlights the ways in which my participants felt different because they were adopted. This is not groundbreaking. Our society places a lot of value on blood relations, just think for a minute about common sayings like "blood is thicker than water," or racial laws and policies like "the one drop rule," anti miscegenation, and blood quantums. From these ways of thinking we can surmise that who you are related to and what your lineage is hold an important social place in the US, historically and contemporarily (as demonstrated by the renewed interest in heritage via DNA tests and ancestry companies) (Yngvesson 2003; Homans 2007). In fact, adoption as a means to form a family and as an identity are both stigmatized in broader US society (Friedlander 2003; Fisher 2003). It follows then that, via reflected appraisals and an internalized generalized other (the looking glass self), because Guatemalan adoptees transgress these normative lines, they would be aware of this difference between them and others who are not adopted, even within their adoptive families.

In this section I discuss three instances where Guatemalan adoptees become aware of their difference because they are adopted: in doctor's offices, when they are on the receiving end of adoptee microaggressive questions, and in comparisons of themselves to non-adopted

folks. These vignettes highlight the ways in which my participants, who are transnationally adopted, deal with identity negotiation issues that are pertinent specifically to their being an adoptee. Through this analysis I uncover the ways that Guatemalan adoptees are continuously reminded of their biological difference through their social interactions with people close to them and institutions that they interface with. By biological difference I mean the fact that they are not biologically related to their adoptive family.

This section is mainly concerned with the adoptee in relation to their adoptive family (and families in general), and the social roles that they occupy in that space. Adoptees are sons and daughters, siblings, cousins, etc. and for a time when they are coming of age, these identities are prime among their social identifications. This, I argue, allows Guatemalan adoptees a degree of ignorance, that they also are living in racialized bodies, that they lost culture, that they were born somewhere else in the world. They are paying less attention to these identities because their social role as daughter (etc.) is more salient. Below I explore the ways that these social roles are eclipsed in instances where family, biology, and phenotype are made salient to the Guatemalan adoptee. When these social roles become unstable the adoptee is led to question their sense of self, who they are and who they are in relation to their family, confronted with their difference.

The Doctor's Office (and other biologized encounters)

Elsewhere, it has been demonstrated that the lack of medical and health history is of particular concern to adoptees (Carsten 2000; Wrobel & Grotevant 2019; Tieman et al. 2008). This held true for my participants. Take Jessica Wilkins, for example, a 23-year-old Guatemalan adoptee. Jessica grew up in an upper-middle class household in a major city on the east coast with her mother, father, and two older non-adopted siblings. She shares that

"the times that I would always, most feel like I was adopted, was just going to the doctors. And being like 'No, I don't have any health history. I can't give you any other information.' And my mom wouldn't be able to give any information [either]." Throughout their childhood, my participants described being able to forget that they were adopted in relation to their adoptive family, because other social identities were salient for them, being a son or daughter to their parents, or a brother or a sister. But there were various moments that broke this illusion, for example the lack of medical history was one way in which their adoptive status became salient. Adoptees are able to put themselves into the shoes of those around them and identify that it is out of the ordinary that they do not know their medical history.

For Jessica, her adoptive status does not end at her personal experience of being adopted but is also felt in her interpersonal relationship with her adoptive mother. Not only does she not know any of her medical history, but the woman who has raised her as her mother also cannot fill in these gaps. This rift between the adoptee and their adoptive parents is on full display in the doctor's office, but also realized in other biologized moments. Jessica continues, sharing "I mean, my sister's pregnant right now actually. My mom is super excited. I'm super excited. But that's definitely been like 'Oh—,' like she didn't have me. She's able to tell stories [about] when she was pregnant with my sister and my brother, but not with me." Here Jessica is made aware of her adoptive difference in the fact that she was not biologically carried by her adoptive mother. On a day-to-day basis she can move beyond this sense of being different in her adoptive family, but in the excitement of her sister's pregnancy there is suddenly an active reminder of the way in which she was not carried to term by her mother, and the ways that that process is commemorated in stories, recounted, and celebrated.

<u>Adoptee Microaggressions</u>

Another way in which my participants felt their adoptive difference was when they were faced with microaggressive questions dealing with their experience of being adopted (White et al. 2021; Baden 2016; Garber & Grotevant 2015; Hübinette & Tigervall 2010). Sierra, whose quote opened this paper, was adopted into an upper-middle class family in the Midwest where she grew up in the suburbs of a major city with her mother, father, and brother who was also adopted from Guatemala. She shares how "A lot of my friends have asked me how do you know your birth parents still love you? They gave you up. How do you know that they're doing ok?" There'd be a whole bunch of questions they ask me that I have no clue about [how to answer]." These questions may very well come from a place of genuine curiosity on the part of Sierra's friends, but the impact of their inquiry serves to highlight 1) Sierra's lack of answers (as evidenced by her remark "I have no clue about [how to answer]"), and in turn 2) the fact that if she was the biological daughter of her adoptive parents she would not have to ask questions about their well-being or the veracity of their love, in the first place. These microaggressions then serve to highlight Sierra's difference as an adoptee, someone with birth parents who may or may not love her still, who may or may not be doing ok.

<u>Non-Adopted Persons</u>

This practice of comparison between the adoptee and people who are close to them who are non-adopted (i.e., siblings, cousins, friends, etc.) was common among my participants. Amanda Ward grew up in the Mid-Atlantic in a wealthy household headed by a single mother. She presents as light-skinned and identifies as White when asked her race. This racial similarity between her and her adoptive family may explain why she was fixated

on her experience of being adopted and homed in on the miniscule details that set her apart from her family. Amanda explains that:

> From a young age I always would look at my friends' parents and be like, "Oh, Em, she has her mom's eyes and her dad's smile," and from a very young age I was pinpointing that; and I didn't realize [that it was] because [adoptees] long to know what [their] [birth] parents look like. And I think it really started to affect me more in middle school, when I was older and I was hanging out with friends more, meeting their parents and brothers and all of that. And I think that's when I was like, "Wow, it kind of sucks not knowing what your mom and dad look like. What does my mom look like? What are my aunts, uncles, cousins, my dad?"

In this excerpt we see how Amanda is trying to make sense of why, when she looks at her friends, she is constantly recognizing the features of their parents in them. She attributes it to her own desire to know what her biological parents look like, something that, at the time, could not be known. This information gap (Wrobel & Grotevant 2019) serves as a reminder to Amanda that she is adopted and leads her to sit with these unknowable questions of what her biological kin look like. This is one instance where my participants were aware of their difference without having it explicitly pointed out by another actor.

Joseph Finegan grew up in a middle-class family in the South and had a similar experience of sense of implicit difference. He presents phenotypically as Latinx and self-identities as Native American. He recounts how growing up in his immediate family he never felt different, again suggesting that other social identities supersede race within the intimate space of the nuclear family. But whereas a trip to the doctor's office broke the illusion of sameness for Jessica, for Joseph it was attending a family reunion where he was meeting and interacting with distant relatives:

> One time I remember when I was little, I was at my family reunion in Michigan and with my family and close cousins and stuff I never felt different or like I was adopted, I just felt like I was part of the family. But I remember at one point we were having a campfire and it was a bunch of family that I didn't know so well. And for some reason I felt very, like I was made very well aware that I was adopted at that moment.

But, I mean, no one did anything, it's just, I guess, I felt, to me, I felt—I mean, I always tell people I felt brown.

Joseph makes it clear that there is no one telling him that he is different, yet he still feels out of place with his distant relatives, his literal family members. Of course, meeting aunts and uncles, cousins, etc. that you do not know when you are young is uncomfortable. But for Joseph, he locates his discomfort in his experience of being adopted. He felt that he was adopted at that moment, because the veil of his familiar and unstated social role as a son/brother is no longer stable enough to define how he should or should not be acting in relation to these practical strangers. In fact, it is not just that he is adopted and therefore not biologically related to the rest of the people at the family reunion, it is that his entire family, immediate and distant, are White and he is not. This fact may be somewhat obscured when he is in his quotidian life with his immediate family, but the replacement of the mundane with the strangeness of meeting new relations is enough to make Joseph feel "brown." Most of my participants discussed the ways that their White adoptive families did not engage with critical conversations around race, instead leaning heavily into celebrations of cultural difference and avoiding race when possible, leaving them to figure out what it means to feel and be brown, racially different, on their own.

I end this section on this example of Joseph's sense of his brownness, because it is in relation to his adoptive family that he is recognizing that he is different. This is where the elision of racial difference and adoptive difference begins to become apparent. It is from his sense of being adopted in relation to this adoptive *extended* family that he "felt brown," that he realized he was different from them both because he is not biologically part of the family, but also because he is racially, phenotypically, different. Whereas his role of being a son, a brother, a cousin etc. was enough to obscure his sense of difference in relation to his

immediate family, phenotypic difference, including race, make these social roles unstable,

leading the Guatemalan adoptee to question their sense of self.

B. *Racial Other: Racial Microaggressions, Exotification, & Explicit Racism*

<u>Introduction</u>

Although not all my participants identified as people of color, the vast majority did and are likely to be racialized as such by strangers. Like other racial minorities, Guatemalan adoptees are subjected to various forms of racial Othering. In their critical intervention, *Navigating both/and: exploring the complex identity of Latino/a adoptees*, Flores-Koulish & Branco Alvarado (2015) begin to conceptualize the ways in which Latinx adoptees (LADs) share commonalities with other Latinx in the diaspora and ways in which their experiences diverge. Their project seeks to carve out a space for Latinx adoptees in broader constructions of Latinidad in the United States. They identify how both populations experience removal from their homeland, have limited mass media portrayals, deal with racism and stereotyping, tend to be lumped together into a pan-Latino/a culture, and experience grief, loss, and/or trauma related to their experience of adoption/immigration. Living with racism and stereotyping was an important factor that informed my participants' sense of self.

In her important contribution, *Citizens but Not Americans: Race and Belonging among Latino Millennials,* Flores-González (2017) examines the ways in which her Latinx millennial participants understand their identities as racialized subjects living in the US. In particular, she brings to light the ways in which Latinx folks are racialized via interactions with White people and in White spaces, and how these racial othering processes are mediated by "protective factors" (Flores-González: 155). She goes on to say that "despite individual characteristics that may tone down negative racial experiences, no Latino is completely immune to discrimination (155)." I bring in this work because Flores-González is looking at a similar cross section of the Latinx population as I am, in terms of age. In fact, her finding

that no Latinx individual is immune to discrimination based on their racial background held true for my participants too.

I expand on these findings here as I highlight three ways that my participants encountered racial Othering in relation to White people: via racial microaggressive questions, racialization and exotification, as well as instances of overt racism. In doing so I demonstrate how Guatemalan adoptees are cast as racial Others, in ways that are familiar to other Latinx individuals. Exploring these instances also begins to reveal the divergences between the more general Latinx populace and LADs. For example, whereas other Latinx can turn to their families and communities to make sense of their racialized experiences, Guatemalan adoptees are left to sort through their Otherness on their own (Park Nelson 2016; Patton-Imani in Bashi Treitler 2014).

In this section I am mainly concerned with the ways that the Guatemalan adoptee is perceived by White people and Whiteness. I demonstrate how they are interpellated as people of color (POC) and Latinx, exploring how they navigate this interpellation, ascription of identity. To the degree that they are cast as Latinx, I note the ways that Guatemalan adoptees experience of being hailed as racialized subjects is similar (and dissimilar) to other Latinx persons. These racialization processes name the Guatemalan adoptee as a racial Other insofar as they are being defined against Whiteness as normative category. In other words, they are being subjected to the same mechanisms as other people of color via racial microaggressive questions, exotification and fetishization, as well as explicit forms of racism and exclusion.

Unlike other POC/Latinx populations though, Guatemalan adoptees are tasked with navigating these interpellations with little to no guidance and therefore devise their own coping mechanisms to make sense of the racialized selves that they experience outside of the

intimate space of the nuclear family. Similar to the ways that being adopted disrupted the stability Guatemalan adoptee's social role as child, sibling, etc. race is also always present. In their racialization Guatemalan adoptees are reminded that they are not just adopted, but transracially adopted, and that they are not afforded access to normative identities in the ways that their non-adopted, non-transracial peers are. Their very existence challenges the categories of what it means to be family, what we mean by race.

At the same time, this sense of non-normativity is complicated by the ways that honorary Whiteness (and its racial logics) is extended to and accepted by the transracial adoptee (Quiroz 2007; Baden et al. 2012; Groh 2018). Honorary Whiteness is the notion that you are a person of color but are extended a degree of exceptionality, acceptance into Whiteness. In some ways the non-White subject in question is allowed access to privileges usually thought of as inaccessible to all people of color. These privileges range from things like access education and loans to comfort being in and moving through White spaces. This extension of privilege means that the non-White subject is honorarily treated as if they were White. Below I begin to show the ways that Guatemalan adoptees interact with the honorary Whiteness extended to them.

Ultimately, despite a sense from their childhood that their difference, racial or otherwise, does not or should not matter, through the racial Othering processes described below, Guatemalan adoptees are reminded of the ways that they are not White. At the same time, they are also reminded of the ways that they do not necessarily fit in with other people of color or Latinidad, a sense of cultural difference I return to in the next section. This inability to be one with one or the other is a contributing factor to their sense of alienation.

Racial Microaggressive Questions

[Race] always comes up when strangers ask me "What are you?" The very first time it happened, I was a waitress in high school, and these customers were like "What are you?" And I kind of hesitated for a moment, like "Woah, that's a weird question." And then [the customers clarified] like, "You know, like, Chinese, Mexican, Asian." I was like "What, how—I mean." I immediately thought that's a weird [question], like Chinese and Asian and Mexican, it's just like continent to country to continent.

<div align="right">- Naomi Ackerman, 28</div>

Naomi was raised in a middle-class household and grew up on the east coast in the suburbs of a major city. She self identifies as Latinx and indigenous. In this quote Naomi does a great job of capturing how, implicit in strangers' racially microaggressive, Othering questions, are their own ascriptions of racial identities onto the adoptee; is Naomi Chinese, Mexican, Asian? It elides that the customers know that she is racially different, but not quite sure which kind of racial Other she is, hence the question in the first place, and the subsequent clarification, so as to make sure that both they and Naomi are clued into the fact that they are indeed asking about her *racial* difference. As she recounts it, she is taken aback, not sure how to even convey her displeasure for being asked to signify to these strangers her *particular* racial difference. She identifies it as "continent to country to continent," and is noticing for herself the fallacy of race, its fragility and reliance on shared, socially constructed understandings in order to be intelligible at all (Omi and Winant 2014). Because the transracial adoptee's racial experience is more troubled than other monoracial (individuals with "one" racial background) folks, they are aware of other ways of understanding race, and for Naomi at least, find the question of "What are you?" to be labored.

Morgan O'Neil, 23-years-old at the time of our interview, grew up in an upper-class family from the northeast in a wealthy, majority White town. She explains how she interprets and answers racially microaggressive questions:

It's basically like, "This is why I'm brown." To be completely simplistic about it. It would be like, I'm in this very, very White town and they're asking like, "What are you?" Because it's basically like "Why are you different?" And I'm like, "I'm different because *this*." That's it. It's not like, "Oh, I'm Guatemalan and I know about all these things culturally Guatemalan." It's just like, "This is why I'm brown. Take it or leave it. That's my answer."

Morgan is aware of what information strangers are looking for when they ask her to explain what she is; she deftly points out that this is just a mechanism for White people to ask, "Why are you different?". For Morgan these questions are somewhat disingenuous, the strangers do not actually want to know why she is from Guatemala, they want her to make her racial difference simple and digestible, reduced to small talk, to accommodate their conception of her, why she is brown when everyone else in the "very, very White town," is White. Interactions like these act as reflected appraisals, reinforcing what the transracial adoptee already knows internally–that they do not fit in and that they are out of place.

Whereas Naomi and Morgan find themselves caught off guard when confronted with their racial difference in interactions with strangers, Michael Stuart, a 27-year-old from the Midwest, took a different tact. Michael grew up in a middle-class family in a small farming community. Having grown up one of a handful of racial minorities in his hometown, he is well aware that he sticks out. But rather than allow racial microaggressive questions to catch him off guard, he takes back some degree of agency by inviting the strangers who are trying to make sense of his racial Otherness to take guesses of his racial identity:

I'll go to a bar or whatever, and I'll step outside and have a smoke, and people will come out and you know, somebody asks, "Where are you from?" and I'll, I won't tell them right away, I'll just—"Take a guess, where do you think I'm from?"—And I got long hair, it's down to my ass, it's three feet long, and I got a beard, and I'm big. People almost always think Samoan, or Hawaiian, or stuff like that. And I'll tell them, and they're laughing and it's just like "Take a guess," [the stranger responds] "I don't want to offend you," It's like "You're not going to offend me, I'm asking you to guess." You know, just making a little game of it. And people always have a good time with it.

Michael approaches these racially microaggressive questions with a sense of levity and playfulness, subverting the expectations of the strangers. He explains that he has got long hair, a beard, and is big, all to illustrate that he is aware that he is racially distinct, surrounded by an all or near all White environment. Of note is that the strangers who approach are aware that guessing an individual's racial-ethnic background is offensive, yet they still feel comfortable enough asking the question in the first place.

> In our interview I asked Michael why he thinks he plays that game, he responded:
>
> Because I can, just to have a good time. Make it, kind of diffuse the situation, 'cause somebody asks where you're from, and, I feel like, sometimes people are kind of hesitant to ask that, cause it's like, it's just like asking a woman her age, you just don't necessarily do that, it's kind of frowned upon, you know. So, I'm just diffusing the situation a little bit. You know, come on, take a guess, I don't care, you can't offend me, I'm opening that up. I think that's why.

Michael compares asking someone where they are from with asking a woman her age, both identified as socially taboo. He shares that he plays his game to diffuse the situation. In this case, this diffusion might take on two meanings, first, to ease the tension that is experienced by him and the stranger for crossing those social taboos, asking the microaggressive question, and second, as a coping mechanism, a tactic to diffuse his difference, a means by which to say, "I know I look different, but I am not dangerous, I am actually funny." We might imagine that this approach to handling being asked why he is different is one borne of a lifetime of growing up in predominantly White environments, where his difference is constantly pointed out, where via reflected appraisals Michael has internalized a sense of his difference as threatening to people. Instead of becoming resentful or annoyed by the questions, Michael has developed a way by which he can preserve his energy and puts the social onus of explaining his difference back onto the strangers who probed in the first place.

As we will see in the next section on exotification, this approach is not necessarily made available to all Guatemalan adoptees.

Thirty-one-year-old Lisa Walker grew up in the northeast in a well-off family. She explains that microaggressive questions served as a reminder that she might be accepted by her community but is still different.

> It was mostly just like "Do you ever feel weird 'cause everyone around you is White?" And the more I was asked do I feel weird, or do I feel left out, or whatever, the more I felt weird. And for a long time, I didn't—I thought I—I knew I was adopted, but I also felt like I blended in too, because people just accepted me. But I was also kind of taught to point myself out and know that I'm different.

The question, inquiring about if she ever feels weird, becomes the moment when the spotlight is on the fact that she is the odd one out, the only brown person surrounded by White people. If Lisa was not paying attention to this racial hypervisibility before, because "she knew she was adopted," and that "people just accepted" her in that adoptive difference, the highlighting of her race taught her to internalize her difference, to "know that I'm different." I share this quote to illustrate that even when my participants felt like they "blended in," because family, friends, and peers seemingly accepted them, race is perniciously present, disallowing transnational adoptees from *just* occupying the role of a child, sibling, or friend.

The naming of this racial difference weighs on transnational adoptees, informing the ways that they come to understand themselves. Tara Foster was 23 at the time of our interview and grew up in a wealthy family in the Mid-Atlantic. She explains that for her:

> Kids weren't mean to me about [transnational adoption], but I—it just weighed on me, internally. And like, I would get annoyed when people would always ask, "Are those your parents?" Or, say, "Where are your real parents?" That would really annoy me. But eventually I kind of got used to it. But yeah, mostly just feeling like a little bit of a circus clown freak, or a space alien to people, like "Wow."

> Adults would be like, "Sweetie, you're so pretty. What are you?" And other kids too. Like, I remember a kid asked me, "Why is your skin brown?" And I was just like, "It is?" cause I'm like five years old, and I didn't know the biology behind everything.

Tara opens by explaining how her being transnationally adopted weighed on her, how she internalized that this was something that made her stick out amongst her peers. The microaggressive questions that follow reiterate for her that she is both racially different from her parents and that she is adopted—if she is racially different from her White parents then she logically cannot be their child. She follows this by explaining it away, she eventually "kind of got used to it," normalizing and tacitly excusing her peers' Othering questions. Ultimately, these questions became incorporated into her sense of self, leading Tara to admit that she felt like a "circus clown freak, or space alien," when she thought about how strangers perceive her. This is backed up by further Othering interactions with adults and peers alike, who are constantly racializing Tara when they ask what she is, and why she is brown.

Exotification

Throughout my interviews it became apparent that Guatemalan adoptee women faced different kinds of challenges than their male counterparts. In particular, the women in my study experienced the intersection of their racial and gendered identities, culminating in instances of their exotification. Marissa Anderson was 32 years old at the time of our interview. She presents as light skinned, but strongly identifies as Latinx. She grew up in the Mid-Atlantic in a middle-upper class family that consisted of her mother, father, and a brother who was adopted from Eastern Europe. She explained that race and sexualization came up for her when she was in high school:

> So, in my school, me and this other girl were the only Latino women. And I felt very targeted by the guys in high school, I just kind of felt like, I don't know, I don't know how to put it, like I was a piece of meat, you know what I mean. 'Cause I was like the rare type, but like, I don't know, it was like, it was just awkward.

In this excerpt Marissa explains the way that she and her friend were exotified, made to feel as though they were consumable because of their racialized gender difference. It is specifically that they are Latinas that sets them apart from other women, "the rare type," and that makes them desirable to the men in her high school. Much like Marissa, Naomi also recounted encounters she had with men in her life, this time in college.

> I remember being at a party in college and just enjoying myself and talking to people, and then I was leaving, and some guys were walking me home. And it was a mix of White guys, Black guys, mixed guys, and one of them was like "Oh, what are you?—me and some of these guys were trying to figure it out." And I hesitated—figure it out? Like what the hell? It made me think, "Am I a bitch-mutt that you guys are trying to decipher my breed?" It just is really disgusting to me when people say things like that or think like that. It's just like, wow people are just trying to pick apart my face, and figure out "Oh wow, is she like, part Filipina, is she Mexican?" Why does my race have to play a part into how I look? And why are you asking me this? …Like as a woman, is this all you care about when you first meet me. What breed am I?

Earlier, Naomi shared how being asked what she was in relation to her race was offensive, and here, she shares how asking her "What are you," in relation to her gender identity, is particularly reprehensible. She is frustrated that her race plays a part in how she is perceived by others, here, in relation to her desirability to the men that are walking her home.

This frustration is indicative of the ways in which White adoptive parents do not prepare their transracial adoptees well for the racism that they will face in the real world. There is a lack of racial literacy that leaves TRAs in situations where they have to navigate their inevitable racialization on their own. This absence of education is amplified when race and gender coalesce into exotification, leading to a situation where Naomi must formulate a response in real time, rather than anticipating that she will be made Other based on her racial and gender identities.

Being objects of sexual desire was not the only way that Guatemalan adoptee women experienced their exotification–their racialized gender also came up in instances of beauty standards and racial difference. Elizabeth Kelly was 46 years old at the time of our interview. She grew up in the Midwest in a middle-income family with two siblings who were adopted, one domestically and the other from Latin America. Like Tara being told she was "so pretty" earlier, Elizabeth explains the ways that she was afforded no personal space as a young person, and how she was revered as an object of exotic beauty (Noonan 2004; van den Berg 2007; Blasco 2012; Groh 2018) to those (White) adults around her.

> I have tons of stories about being, you know, people petting me. I mean, I just had no personal space. Constantly touching my hair, constantly pinching my cheeks, constantly remarking on my big brown eyes, and [how] we were so beautiful. Then they'd say these things like "Well, where did you get skin like that? Oh, it's such a pretty color, I don't get to look like that until the summer." But you know what they're getting at is like, it's all about your being different. So, tons of stuff like that. Tons of stuff, and a lot of shame. I mean, I wanted to fit in. I was so conscious that I didn't look like everyone else.

These comments from female observers in Elizabeth's life are meant to be taken as compliments, expressing a casual jealousy, a desire to be like her without being her (hooks 1992). Ultimately though, they serve as a reminder of her difference, the fact that she is brown and will never be White like her onlookers. Elizabeth even explicitly draws the connection between these comments and their function, "what they're getting at is like, it's all about your being different." Elizabeth, like many of my participants, expressed a desire to fit in and the impossibility of that in a context where she "didn't look like everyone else." This sense of being the only one, and therefore hypervisible in racial difference, was a contributing factor to more explicit forms of racism that my participants experienced.

Explicit Racism

Racial difference was not always so tacitly implied or "desirable," but rather explicitly named in overt racist acts towards Guatemalan adoptees. In many cases my participants shared the ways in which they faced racism and then returned to households and parents who did not know how to handle these situations. Chase Larsen was 42 years old at the time of our interview and hailed from a small, predominantly White town in the West. He shares the racial epithets that were aimed at him as a young person:

> And also, growing up in a small, White farming community—I wasn't White. And so, there was, there's always this—so I grew up in the 80s. So, growing up brown back then, I mean, I was called a spick, a n*****, a wetback, a dirty Mexican. All these things and, so that's where self-hatred comes.

He continues later in our conversation, questioning White adoptive parent's motives and plan of action for raising their brown children:

> And how are you going to help your child navigate through that in a White, small town. Your cute little brown little Guatemalan boy will grow up and people will think he's some dirty little Mexican that's going to steal your bag or steal you blind. And how are you going to help your child navigate through that? Cause those are the stereotypes that were thrown on me. I mean, nobody really knew what a Guatemalan [was], so they just assumed that I was some Mexican. And so, I was always afraid to dress down, because I didn't want to be [perceived as] a dirty Mexican. So, from an early age, I knew to dress better. To do my hair better. To look better. Because I was not going to be mistaken as some dirty Mexican.

Chase's comments are rich sites for excavating racial projects that Other, but also expose a race-ethnic hierarchy among Latinx constructed by the dominant society. The first quote exemplifies probably the most explicit forms of racism that my participants experienced, at any period of time or age. Chase's concern for the unpreparedness of (potential) White adoptive parents speaks directly to his own experiences of racism growing up as the racial Other in his White adoptive community. He highlights the ways that "cute little brown little Guatemalan" infants are constructed as desirable when they are babies but points out the paradox that they will grow up into brown adults who will be subjected to racial stereotypes,

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epithets, and will be isolated in these predominantly White communities. From an early age Chase is forced to navigate this racial milieu by learning "to dress better" in an attempt to avoid the brunt of the stereotypes placed on him.

It is also clear that during this process of finding practices to survive in an all-White environment, Chase internalizes racism, trying to distance himself as much as possible from being perceived as "some dirty Mexican." In this instance, this move to distance himself and to tacitly participate in the degradation of another racial-ethnic group, Mexicans, might seem counterintuitive, but when we take a step back and consider that Chase grew up alone in an all-White community, with no co-ethnic or racial role models to imbue him with pride or a positive view of being brown, this move can be read as a manifestation of internalized racism, an invitation that has been extended to him to participate in Whiteness' Othering, as well as a survival and coping mechanism to continue moving through these White worlds.

Guatemalan adoptees also faced racism in the form of exclusion and explicit racial Othering, from their peers growing up, as well as from adults in their community. Lisa shares an instance where she was discriminated against because of the color of her skin and her not living up to White beauty standards:

> I faced racism at a very young age, and I didn't understand that that was what it was, until I was much older. And I faced it from parents [adults]. I remember one very, very specific event. I wanted to do a duet with my best friend at the time, for dance class. She was this real, real skinny blonde girl. And I was always a chunky Guatemalan girl. I wasn't the prettiest little girl growing up, I wasn't, I didn't start getting looks until high school when I started taking care of myself. I was just plain-Jane chunky Guatemalan girl. And the mom said, "No, you guys can't do that, because it would just look awful on stage. Lisa, you are just too big for her." And she's like "and Linda would outshine you, she's just too White." And I didn't realize that that was discrimination and body stereotyping and I just know I felt bad. I remember going home and crying and saying, "Karen [Linda's mother] said I can't dance with Linda because we don't look the same." And that's what I got from that.
>
> CSM: Yeah, how did your parents respond to that situation?

I remember seeing my mom's face and her just being like "She said that?" and I was like "Yeah." And my mom said "You don't want to dance with her anyways, you'll find something better. You guys can be best friends, you can do everything else together, but maybe you just weren't meant to dance with each other." And she tried to make it, tried to explain it easily to me. It wasn't really anything she could say to console me, because I didn't understand race or racism. And she didn't want to open that up. So again, it was avoiding that topic.

Lisa's experience illustrates the ways in which, growing up, Guatemalan adoptees were put directly in the line of fire of racism, not just directed at them by their peers—whom one might be able to dismiss as "still learning" what is socially acceptable in terms of racism, racializing, and Othering—but also from other individuals in their environment, like adults, whose words have an incredible impact on children because of the immense power differential that exists between them. In this permutation, a young girl wants to dance with her best friend in dance class and a parent is disallowing her daughter from performing with the brown girl. Lisa herself names this as racism and discrimination, as well as "body stereotyping." I build on this analysis and suggest that it is also one way in which White beauty standards become visible in Lisa's, and other Guatemalan adoptee women's lives.

In her recounting of the aftermath of the event to her mother, Lisa's mom is left diverting attention from the racial undertones of the discrimination, attempting to console Lisa by saying she does not want to dance with her anyway and that they can still be friends outside of dance. Lisa goes so far as to explicitly name that she had no racial literacy at the time and that her mom "didn't want to open that up. So again, it was avoiding that topic." Race is insidiously present but unacknowledged, leaving Lisa, and Guatemalan adoptees generally, without the tools to make sense of their racialized life experiences until they are, in Lisa's words, "much older".

In other instances, Guatemalan adoptees self-censored themselves from sharing their experiences of racism, because they were aware that it would not be understood by their White adoptive parents. 24-year-old Riley Smith grew up in an upper-middle class family on the east coast. He shared the ways that he experienced racism growing up, being followed in stores, being asked if he speaks English:

> And I feel like, yeah, it's not something [my parents] ever talked about. And I think part of it also deals with the town I was in, it was a very White town, so maybe my parents haven't really had to talk about it. All of our neighbors were White. It's not something that anybody ever challenged them on. Until you're a person like me [brown, racialized], where you get followed around a Kohls because you're Hispanic. I don't think I've ever felt comfortable talking to my parents about that. The amount of times I'm asked if I speak English before anyone says a word to me… And then when I would bring it up [with his parents], it would just be like, "You're not different than anyone else." or like, "It's not really a problem." It's kind of played off a little bit.

Riley notes that without his presence in his family, his parents might never talk about race because they are White and surrounded by an all-White community. He implies that there is no one to challenge his parents on the subject of race because there are no racial minorities around to point race issues out. That person, who brings up race, inevitably becomes Riley because he experiences racism in his day-to-day life, being racially profiled in department stores and being asked if he speaks English by strangers. As he experiences these racialized Othering encounters, he eventually chooses to bring it up with his parents and is met with invalidation, moves to diminish the impact of these instances, being "played off."

It would be hard for Riley's parents to witness his racialization because their presence alters the ways that strangers, in particular White people, perceive and interact with him. He explains that:

> And I think, if I was with my parents, it [his presence] was received differently than if I wasn't with my parents. Especially the older I got. Because when you're a teenager, then, in a lot of people's view, you become this unwanted Hispanic person in their

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town—I don't know if that makes any sense—but like, it's like, "Oh, he must be up to no good," or something. But if I was *with* my parents, it was not that way. *Or*, they [strangers] kind of like, just assumed that my parents were helping me or something, [that] they weren't actually my parents. And so like, that's been weird too, because you never—yeah, just depending on where you were and how it was received by people.

Much in the same way Flores-González highlights the ways that Latino men in her study face racial profiling and overt discrimination because of their racialized gender, being a brown man, Riley also experienced this unwanted-ness, this sense of incursion on White space, because to the White gaze he is perceived to be a Latinx man. But unlike the subjects in *Citizens But Not Americans,* Riley and other Guatemalan adoptees have an additional "protective factor" that, at times, alleviates some of the ill will they face in White spaces, namely, that their adoptive parents are White and to some degree "claim" their adopted child as theirs, as if to say that "he must be one of the good ones." This is consistent with other studies on international adoptees in predominantly White spaces, Tigervall and Hübinette found that "when a non-white person is acknowledged as a legitimate Swedish subject by way of adoptive parents/juridical documents, then the exclusion diminishes or disappears (Tigervall & Hübinette 2010: 497)."

As a young brown man, Riley and his White parents are not even always legible to strangers as a family, rather he senses that he is being read, perhaps, as some at-risk teen that is being helped by a kindly White couple. Although Guatemalan adoptees may, at times, benefit from an extension of White privilege, in the form of being claimed by their adoptive parents, they continue to live and move through a racialized world that attempts to make sense of their inter-racial relationships. It is clear in this quote that this extension of "honorary Whiteness" is never complete nor without its own racial logics. That is to say, as soon as Riley is moving through the world alone again, he is being followed in department

stores, and that in order to be perceived as acceptable in White spaces, he is bound to the legitimizing force of his White adoptive parents, who themselves are unaware of the ways in which race is affecting their son's experience, as demonstrated in their earlier invalidating comments. In either case, Guatemalan adoptees face a lack of understanding for their lived experiences, a lack of being witnessed, which reinforces their sense of not fitting in.

Many of these examples illustrate the ways in which Guatemalan adoptees found themselves experiencing racism with little to no support to help them make sense of and process these situations. It is not until their adulthood that Guatemalan adoptees begin to gain the language to name these moments as racist, in ways that were unnamable in their youth, by either them, or their White adoptive parents. As we have seen, and throughout my interviews, many of my participants' White adoptive parents had little to no idea how to handle these racially charged and racially violent situations, often opting to avoid or invalidate their child's experiences. This is one instance where my participants' experiences depart from their BIPOC peers, whose families also move through the world as racialized Others.

I end this section with another quote from Jessica Wilkins, who continues to illustrate the ways that Guatemalan adoptees face racism.

> So, like, I think one of the things that woke me up to the fact that I was different from my family, like making me realize that I very much am [transnationally, transracially] adopted and different is in 7th grade, that's the year that Swine Flu was going around. So, there were kids in my grade who were really racist, they were like "Oh you're from Mexico, you're going to give it to everybody." And that's when I realized my parent's will never understand that. And like they really, they tried their best, but they just weren't great at it. And I went to a predominantly White school, so I was very much a minority.

Jessica emphasizes the ways in which she is different from her family, both because she is adopted *and* because she is racialized, two experiences that her White adoptive parents can

never fully understand. She is constructed by her peers as a harbinger of disease because she is brown, a racist belief placed on many different racial minority groups throughout history. Jessica explains that her parents "tried their best" to understand her racialized experience, but that "they just weren't great at it." I highlight this quote to also provide an example of the ways in which racial Othering in the form of racism was not limited to only the men in my study. Jessica continues:

> And so, I think that in that moment, I realized that "Hey I identify"—that was kind of a moment where I had to think about, like I was definitely a different color than my parents, and they won't be able to understand that really. But then also the fact that, "Wait, I don't necessarily fit in with the people who I look like." So that was kind of like where I was like "Where do I go." So, I think that part was definitely a moment where I was like "Wow," I just kind of woke up. I think that's kind of what that was.

In the second half of the quote Jessica begins to exclaim that she identifies as a person of color, explaining that it was this moment where she realized that "Hey I identify"—but she shifts to emphasize that this moment highlighted the way that she is noticeably a different color than her parents. This distinction is important, she is one step from claiming being a person of color, and aware of the ways that she is racialized as one in the world at large. She continues, explaining that even though she lives in a body that is ascribed a racial identity, she does not "necessarily fit in with the people" whom she looks like. Jessica is unable to fit in with her adoptive family because they can never understand her experience of being adopted and being a racial minority, nor can she fit in with the people she looks like, the Latinx community.

It is in this instance where she explains that she "kind of woke up," and realized that she did not know where she should go, where she belonged. This liminal moment, between sleep and wakefulness is, I suggest, the adoptee third-space that so many of my participants described spending time in. Jessica's example shows us how external, interpersonal

interactions can lead to internal shifts in consciousness, understanding of oneself. In the next

section I explore more in-depth why Guatemalan adoptees feel as though they do not fit in

with other Latinx folks, despite all the shared experiences of racialization explored above.

C. *Cultural Other: Language, Institutional Forced Choices, & Navigating Latinidad*

<u>Introduction</u>

*In undergrad, they had all these different student organizations you can be a part of. There was [the] Student Organization of Latinos that I tried to join once. And I remember everybody in that group was bilingual. And a lot of them were 1st, 2nd, or 3rd generation into the [US]. And I remember the first time [I went] they started the meeting in Spanish. And I had no idea what was going on. And I asked, "I'm sorry, I don't know Spanish." And they're like, "How do you not know Spanish? You weren't raised within the [culture]?" You know, questioning that. I'm like, "No, I'm adopted. My [adoptive] parents don't speak Spanish." and I remember getting this weird look, like, how different I was—like, **I'm brown, but I'm different. I'm not the same.** It was crazy that it was my first interaction, you know, in undergrad. So, it was just a crazy feeling to get that questionable look.*

CSM: And you didn't continue to go back after that?

No. No, I was done with that. I stopped going.

<div align="right">- Michaela</div>

<div align="right">Toliver, 27</div>

In this opening quote from my interview with Michaela Toliver, we see one of the main ways that Guatemalan adoptees do not fit in with other Latinx folks, namely, language (Sanchez et al. 2012; Planas 2020). Michaela was 27 at the time that I spoke to her and had grown up in an upper-middle class family in a Midwestern state; here she recounts how she attempted to join the Latinx student association at the college that she attended. In her interaction with those in the in-group, she is immediately forced to name her experiential difference because she does not speak Spanish and did not grow up speaking it.

This section is concerned with Guatemalan adoptee's relationship with Latinidad. I am interested in how Guatemalan adoptees do or do not feel that they are a part of Latinidad and how that feeling of being "part of" is mitigated by their interactions, both with other Latinx folks as well as those who perceive them as part of that group. Phenotypically after

all, Guatemalan adoptees present as and are read by others as being Latinx, regardless of how they personally feel internally or wish that they were perceived, hence Michaela's assertion that "I'm brown, but I'm different."

Throughout this section I draw heavily on social identity theory to talk about the ways that scholars have thought about the dynamics of being one with a group. In social identity theory, "the basis of social identity is in the uniformity of perception and action among group members," which is accomplished by "being at one with a certain group," "being like others in the group," and "seeing things from the group's perspective (Stets and Burke 2000: 226)." Perhaps this is why Guatemalan adoptees find themselves constantly explaining their identities to people that they are supposedly in-group members with—Latinx folks, Guatemalans, and Guatemalan-Americans. Guatemalan adoptees are perceived as being a part of these groups, by outsiders and insiders alike, but fail to live up to "being one" with the group, "being like others in the group," and "seeing things from the group's perspective." Michaela captures this well when she exclaims that "I'm brown, but I'm different. I'm not the same." She is legible to the Student Organization of Latinos, they share their brownness, but she is still somehow different, culturally she is not one with the group.

Underlying my participants sense of being cultural Others is a tension between achieved (phenomenological) and ascribed (phenotypic) identities, and the normative ways we think about these kinds of identities (Ruzzeddu 2022). Achieved identities are those that one can become or attain through experience (e.g., getting a Ph.D.) and occasionally through new role taking (e.g., becoming a parent). Ascribed identities, on the other hand, are those identities that we perceive / project onto others (e.g., race). Generally, we accept that one can

change their achieved identities by gaining new experiences, whereas ascribed identities are more rigid, we reject that someone can choose to change their race.

Culture in this paradigm is interesting because it might be understood as the experiential aspect (achieved) of an ethnic group (ascribed). Of course, when you meet a White person who grew up in Colorado who knows a lot about Guatemalan culture, you are not going to confuse them as being Latinx. Guatemalan adoptees complicate these assumptions though. They might have grown up in Delaware but still be allowed to claim space in Latinidad. For Guatemalan adoptees, a normatively ascribed identity, Latinx, is attainable, but not without its own border patrolling and gate keeping. The question of the interplay between perception (ascribing) and experience (achieving) is critical to understand Guatemalan adoptees' experience of navigating being a cultural Other.

Transnational adoptees, it could be said, have a heightened sense of culture. Guatemalan adoptees are aware of all the ways that they do not have it. Adoption is oftentimes celebrated as a win-win for all those involved, a narrative that obscures the profound losses that birth families and adoptees experience. For the transnational adoptee, there is the loss of family history, language, and cultural practices. Yet, despite not having had access to Latinx communities and their birth culture growing up, Guatemalan adoptees are still interpellated as Latinx due to their phenotypic presentation and are expected to be culturally literate in Latinidad, by strangers, White people, BIPOC, and Latinx alike.

Of course, some transnational adoptees do grow up in more diverse settings and thus have a high level of exposure to co-ethnics and other racial minorities when they are coming of age (Shio & Tuan 2008)—in this case they are afforded a level of in-group membership because they can learn from these communities. But the vast majority are reared in

predominantly White communities (Bashi Treitler 2014), isolated, and are structurally denied any degree of racial literacy/exposure, let alone cultural competency when it comes to relating to other BIPOC, Latinx folks, or seeing the world like other Guatemalans and Guatemalan-Americans.

My analysis centers on three ways in which Guatemalan adoptees are made to feel as though they are cultural Others, via the use of language, through institutional forced choices, and navigating Latinidad. I explore the ways Latinidad is border patrolled by those in the in-group, other Latinx individuals. This mainly came up for my participants through the use of language. Next, I turn to a conversation of how Guatemalan adoptees are, at times, institutionally forced to choose being Latinx. This section ends with a discussion of Guatemalan adoptees' navigation of Latinidad, how they change their self-concept and their perception in the eyes of those around them.

<u>Language</u>

This desire to explore one's ethnic background in college is common among transnational adoptees (Shiao & Tuan 2008; Baden et al. 2012). What is less explored are the ways in which Latinx adoptees, and Guatemalan adoptees, must confront border patrolling and authenticity tests to "prove" that they are Latinx "enough" (Ceniza 2018). This is like the experiences of multiracial individuals (Mills 2020; Dalmage 2004; Harris 2017), as well as divisions within Latinx populations that fracture along immigrant status, language use, and generational divides (Menjívar 2002, 2006). Here I focus on the deployment of language as a test of one's authenticity, one's rightful claim to a particular experience.

As shown in Michaela's experience, Guatemalan adoptees often fail authenticity tests because their experiential background is distinct from that of other Latinx folks who were "raised within the culture." Unlike the other undergraduates attending the club meeting, who are 1st, 2nd, and 3rd generation Latinx folks, Michaela was adopted when she was born and came to the US when she was 1 year old. Her White parents were not able to socialize her into Guatemalan/Latinx culture, so instead of learning Spanish growing up she was raised speaking English only. This experiential equation of "instead of x the transnational adoptee learned y" could be said of any number of things. Michaela explains that she got "this weird look" from the facilitators of the undergraduate meeting.

Language as a marker of belongingness did not just come from peers, but also from other segments of the Latinx population. Morgan shares an incident where she was in a grocery store and made to feel shame for her lack of Spanish skills:

> And then just generally in life the same kind of thing, working other jobs and having old Hispanic women come in and speak to me in Spanish—which still happens today but now I actually speak Spanish so it's fine. But in the past having them speak to me in Spanish. I remember once, just in a random grocery store, an old lady was asking me something in Spanish. And I was like "I'm sorry, I actually don't understand." And I said it in pretty, I said it in Spanish, but the accent was all off and everything. And she full-on yelled at me, she was like "Why don't you speak Spanish? Why didn't your parents teach you? I can't believe this." And she just went off. And I was like, I cannot, can't, I don't, I don't have the words to explain to you, or the capacity, like my brain exploded. That was something that's now burned into my brain too.

In this quote we get a glimpse into a common interaction between Guatemalan adoptees and Latinx community members with whom they come into contact in public spaces. In a charged interaction, an unknown older woman is angered by Morgan's lack of language skills, asking "Why didn't your parents teach you?". Morgan explained to me that in that instance she did not have the capacity to explain her adoption to this woman, it is clear that in that moment her difference as not Latinx-enough was on full display, and the shame that this

interaction carried led it to be "burned into [her] brain." Although these experiences of border patrolling might have more to say about the state of Latinidad today, for my participants they had real consequences in terms of pushing them to learn Spanish, informing their own self-segregation from Latinx spaces, and internalizing their cultural difference.

Morgan explains that she is still approached by Spanish speakers conversing with her in their native tongue, but today she has a strong enough grasp on the language to respond which makes it "fine". This was a shared experience among my participants, although language acquisition was less motivated by a desire to be included in Latinidad, and more so to allow them to reconnect with their birth country. Their ability to communicate more fluently with Spanish speakers in the US was a by-product of a different project, one with the promise of being able to build a relationship with their birth family, if and when they reunited.

Forced Choices

Expectations of cultural literacy were not always interpersonal though, but also came up in my participants' lives in structural and institutional ways; think checking off a box on college applications or being identified for a scholarship because they are Latinx. For Jessica, this forced choice came up when she was attending a leadership conference for high schoolers.

> So, in high school I went to this leadership conference for kids in high school. That's also one of the times that I realized that I was very much adopted. Because they had you split into affinity groups and there was no affinity [group] for me, because it was like, people who identify as Latino, or Hispanic, like Latinx, everyone go here. Or if you're White [go here]. So, I had to go with that [Latinx] group, because obviously for me, that's how I look. So, I was like "Ok, this is weird, because I don't understand anything you're saying in terms of how your mom cooks, or how you dance. Or anything like that." So, I was just like "I'm just going to sit here and be really quiet." I don't know, it just felt very strange and very fake to me. Because I was like, "Yeah I don't know what you're talking about." And I realized yeah, I definitively didn't

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grow up in these households. But then I went back another year, and they had an adoption group for transracial adoption, and so that was awesome.

For Jessica this is another instance where she realized that she was "very much adopted." The conference breaks the participants into affinity groups based on what are assumed to be static and clearly demarcated categories. Jessica "had to go" with the Latinx group "because obviously for me, that's how I look." Here we see how for Jessica, and the programming at large, race and phenotype are moving in and out of culture. Jessica presents as Latinx and so she knows that she is not supposed to go with the White group, although this might be a space where she would feel more comfortable, in part, because she was raised in a White household herself, but also because of the discomfort that she knows she will feel in the other affinity group with Latinx people who do not understand her or her experience growing up transracially adopted.

In fact, this is what happens, when she arrives in the Latinx group, she highlights how she cannot relate to the ways that others in the group talk about how their mothers cook, how they dance, and ultimately decides to recuse herself from the conversation as best she can by sitting and being quiet. This moment illustrates for Jessica and for us just how different her experience is from other Latinx youth, but how official accounts of race have a hard time allowing for the nuance of Guatemalan adoptees' relationship to Latinidad. The affinity groups were no doubt implemented with the intention of supporting marginalized people, giving them a space to be witnessed in their experiences and to be in community with people who have similar experiences. Transnational adoptees trouble this though, and when forced to choose these spaces are relegated to self-monitoring, lest their difference be outed. Lucky for Jessica, the issue must have been brought to the attention of the organizers of the conference because the next time that she attends they have created a new affinity group for

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transracial adoptees, formally recognizing their experience, racially and culturally, as distinct from their peers of color.

This brings us to some important questions: Is it possible to become Latinx? Or are Guatemalan adoptees always, already Latinx by virtue of their racial presentation and place of birth? Does it matter if people continue to treat you one way or the other? These are questions that my participants found themselves grappling with as they navigated what it means to achieve identities that are normatively thought of as ascribed, questions that led to confusion, dissonance, and confrontation as they contested and contended their identities with others.

<u>Navigating Latinidad</u>

As we have seen, the majority of Guatemalan adoptees' racial experiences go unacknowledged by their White adoptive family, and these experiences are concentrated in their adolescence and adulthood, moments in their life as they are leaving the honorary Whiteness that the proximity to their adoptive family afforded them. As they grow up, transnational adoptees are engaged in a process of accumulating experiences in relation to Whiteness, being adopted, and race. For example, when they are young, there is a tacit recognition that transnational adoptees are an in-group member of the adoptive community that they grew up in—but as they grow older, this starts to become more and more tenuous.

Jordan Barnett was 24 at the time of our interview, having grown up in the Mid-Atlantic in a high earning household. She had undergone a process of reclaiming her Guatemalan-ness and was now negotiating her pride in being Latinx with people who had known her prior to this emergent reclamation:

> I've definitely had a lot of friends that kind of look at me as White. 'Cause that's how I grew up—I acted White, or I talked White, so they kind of see me as that, even

though I don't look that way. Even my brother-in-law—I one time put something on Facebook about having a new Hispanic pope, because I am religious. And my brother-in-law is like "Why is she so excited about that, it's not like she's Hispanic." And then my sister [was] like, "Well, she kind of is." And I am. Yeah, I might not have the same practices or culture or lifestyle as other Hispanics, but I still am one. So, yeah, I think, definitely it's new for people who have known me a while to kind of get used to that.

In this quote Jordan talks about the ways that she is negotiating her racial-ethnic identity in relation to her White peers and her White adoptive family. When she was growing up, she "acted White" and "talked White," in other words, she was culturally socialized as and embedded in Whiteness. Subsequently, she was interpellated by her friends as White, even though, as Jordan says, she did not "look that way," i.e., she is brown. This is related to what scholars call the adoption paradox—even though adoptees are racial minorities in society, they can be perceived and treated by others as members of the majority (White) culture (Lee 2003; Ferrari et al. 2017).

She goes on sharing another anecdote that involved her sister's husband. He is confused about why Jordan would be so excited that there is a new pope who is from Latin America. He invalidates her claim to Latinidad saying "it's not like she's Hispanic." This comment reveals his conception of Jordan, not as someone who is Latinx and could be excited about the representation of having a pope from their region of the world, but as a cultural/racial Other, removed from Latinx culture. Jordan's sister comes to her side, stating plainly that "she kind of is." Jordan then strongly asserts that she is Latinx; even though she may not have the same cultural practices or lifestyle that are stereotypically associated with being Latinx, she still is. This shift in her perception of herself has been a process, not just in her own arrival at the identity, but also the process of teaching those around her how she

would like to be understood, as a person of color, as Latinx (for more on self-concept change see Swann & Hill 1982; Swann 1987).

Although being Latinx is something that Jordan finds easy to claim, this was not the case for all my participants, some of whom struggled to come to terms with feeling like an imposter when it came to navigating and claiming being Latinx. Naomi, for example, shared her preoccupations with relating to other Latinx folks and her attempts at recculturating:

> I felt like I was this Other. Even if I did meet other Latinos, I didn't feel like I could relate to them. I felt like I didn't identify with Latino culture. I felt like I couldn't understand it because I hadn't grown up in it. And I wondered what it was like. Sometimes I experimented with wearing gold hoop earrings, and I would read Latina magazine. I tried to get beauty ideas from there. Like, how to style my hair. And I would try to experiment with, "maybe I can seem more Latina than I actually am." 'Cause like I don't feel like I actually [am Latina]—I feel like an imposter. I feel like I'm not really Latina, because I haven't grown up with the culture.

> I don't think so much [in] these stereotypes anymore. Now, I kind of just wear whatever I want, and dress how I want. But I guess I felt lost when I was 17 to 19, or 20 or so. I felt like I didn't fit in anywhere. That I could relate to everyone and no one at the same time. So, like, I could relate to people on [the level of] like "Oh yeah, I know what it feels like to feel excluded and even looked at differently because of my race," but like, I don't know what it is to be my own person. I feel like I don't know what it means to be Latina.

Naomi relays how she felt like an Other because even when she would meet other Latinx folks she did not know how to relate to them. Her claim to Latinidad felt like something she did not have sufficient rights to claim because she "didn't understand it," and because she "hadn't grown up in it." Here Naomi calls her own sense of being Latinx into question because the culture was not something that she was socialized into growing up. To harken back to social identity theory, she does not know what it means to be one with the group. Because Guatemalan adoptees are also socialized among other humans, they are implicitly aware that the basis of social identity, belonging to a given group, is based on this sense of oneness, of being like others in the group.

Naomi continues, sharing that it was not as if she did not try to acculturate herself, to become like the group, other Latinx. Naomi consumed media directed at Latinas and experimented with styles associated with the culture, all in an attempt to make herself "seem more Latina" than she felt she actually was. This sense of duplicity, of saying she was one thing but knowing she was another, is central to her inability to fully incorporate being Latina into her sense of self. Ultimately, Naomi comes away feeling as if these attempts at being Latina were false, that she is an imposter and she cannot find a way to resolve it. Upon reflection to those years in her teens and early twenties she concludes that she was thinking in terms of stereotypes, that her conception of what it meant to be Latina was a projection, something that could be gleaned from a magazine or donned through beauty, when, in reality, it is something lived.

In attempting to make sense of who she is, she walks away feeling more alienated than ever; if she claims being Latina she feels like an imposter, yet she still understands what it is like to be racialized and excluded based on her race. She is still figuring out who she is and is right where she started in relation to Latinidad, she has no idea what it means to be Latinx. Naomi lands in-between, a cultural Other, bound by her own instinct to police what it means to be or not to be Latina. She has internalized the norms around identity categories, she knows she is ascribed a phenotypic identity, yet she is phenomenologically distinct from this ascription. This tension continues to land her in a liminal space, not quite one or the other.

Unlike Jordan, who felt entitled to claim being Latinx outright, Naomi is caught up on the experiential aspects of the identity. Jordan is explicitly aware of the fact that she does not have the same culture, practices, or lifestyle that other Latinx have, that she does not share

the same perspective, yet this does not bar her from asserting that she is Latinx. For Jordan, being Latinx is located in how she chooses to relate to Latinidad and relay her Latinidad: she is excited by having a pope from Latin America, she is pushing people in relation to her to recognize her difference. For Naomi on the other hand, being Latinx is located in what she does and how she thinks others, specifically other Latinx individuals, perceive her. As a young person, being Latinx, to Naomi, was tied to presentation and expression of cultural knowledge. Because this felt inauthentic to her, she eventually pulled away from these notions and has found herself in a third-space, not Latinx-enough and not White-enough.

I turn now to one final quote from Elizabeth. She illustrates the sense of difference and non-belongingness that she feels in relation to other Latinx people:

> I think that when I was a younger person, to survive [in an all-White environment], I had created this kind of myth that once I got to adulthood and got to spend more time with other Latinos, I would fit in. These would be my people and I would fit in. And I think the truth is that you don't really fit in. I mean, and if I'm being really, really honest, some of the most challenging conversations, some of the most painful things have come from other people of color, and other Latinos, who don't understand adoption at all. And now I sort of feel like, I think adoption sort of sits in a third space for me, mentally. But do I think traditional Latinos are warm and embracing of adoptees—no, not particularly.

For Elizabeth to survive in her all-White environment growing up she created a myth in her head that once she left and met Latinx folks out in the world they would become her community. She hoped that she would finally fit in racially and that there would be some shared sense of self based in their all being racial minorities living in the US.

This dream is unrealized; when Elizabeth does come to know other people of color and Latinx people she finds that she does not fit in with them either, and that "some of the most challenging conversations, some of the most painful things" have come from these communities who do not "understand adoption at all." She fails to elaborate on the specifics

of those challenges, but we might surmise from her following comments about adoption, kinship, and family-making that they have to do with the ways that her loss of cultural identity due to her adoption is seen as a deficit, something that makes her different and therefore not Latinx-enough, especially in relation to the importance placed on the family that are deeply associated with Latinidad (Grau et al. 2009). Elizabeth suggests that, for her, transracial transnational adoption "sits in a third space," not White and not brown, caught in its own reality (a concept I return to in my conclusion).

In this section I analyzed how Guatemalan adoptees experience cultural Othering via language use, institutional forced choices, and their relationship with Latinidad. I identified how underlying these processes is a tension between attained (phenomenological) and ascribed (phenotypic) identities, and the normative ways we think about these kinds of identities (i.e., you cannot attain an ascribed identity). Guatemalan adoptees feel the brunt of these normative rules when they face border patrolling, when they self-censure and self-segregate to avoid situations where they have to explain their difference, and when they choice whether to claim Latinidad or not. These considerations of phenomenology and phenotype come up again for Guatemalan adoptees as they navigate their relationship with their country of origin and national Otherness.

D. *National Other: Born Somewhere Else, Immigration, & Guatemalans in the US*

<u>Introduction</u>

And then there's just like, growing up. Pretty young, obviously I realized, my parents are white, I'm not [chuckles], and my brother's not. I think just at a young age I kind of realized that I was different and that I was adopted, but I didn't really understand from where [I was adopted] or the people [from whom I was adopted].

- Tia Caufield,

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Guatemalan adoptees are born outside of the United States. This seems like an obvious statement, but often this biographical fact is obscured in the ways that my participants both spoke about their adoptions and the ways they were interfaced with by White people and Latinx people. In many instances, my interviewees' identities as adoptees, as racial/cultural Others were more salient than the fact that they were born in another part of the world. There are plenty of racial minorities, and Latinx folks, who have lived in the US for generations after all (Almaguer 2009); it follows then that in many interactions where Guatemalan adoptees are being constructed as an Other it is their brownness rather than their foreignness that is salient. Yet, this biographic reality does show up in Guatemalan adoptees' lives, for instances when they interact with Guatemalans in the US, when they are made to discuss their immigration to the US, and when they are growing up and expected to understand the transnational element in their adoption.

In this section I hope to take a closer look at the ways that Guatemalan adoptees' place of birth, outside of the US, comes to inform their sense of difference. Rather than subsume these experiences under other parts of the analysis, in my participants experience of being racial and cultural Others, I found it important to draw out just how nationality and foreign-born status show up in Guatemalan adoptees' lives, precisely because it is often

obscured by these other constructs. By looking at how they are made national Others, we begin to see the ways that transnational adoptees face different kinds of challenges than their racialized minority peers.

Specifically, Guatemalan adoptees are asked to understand that they were born somewhere else. They must make narrative sense that they are not, by birth, from the US, and are asked to explain this to people when they are growing up. This narrative burden (Homans 2007; Godon, Green, & Ramsey 2014) ultimately highlights the information gap (Wrobel & Grotevant 2019) that Guatemalan adoptees have because they were raised in the US, and therefore most have no memory of their birth country.

Likewise, by drawing out the national Other, we see that Guatemalan adoptees are asked to speak to their immigration status. Because Latinidad has been so rhetorically associated with illegal immigration, Guatemalan adoptees deal with the ways that being born elsewhere opens them up to the ire of others. Additionally, because of the ways that Latinidad has been racialized in the 21st century, the questioning of immigration status is most likely one to be most found within Latinx adoptee spaces as opposed to other adoptee groups.

Similar to the ways that Guatemalan adoptees have to navigate the tensions of the phenotypic and phenomenological when relating to Latinidad, they must navigate these tensions when they interact with other Guatemalans based in the US. Namely, that Guatemalan adoptees and other Guatemalan nationals have different relationships with their country of origin based in their experiences, despite their shared racial presentation. Often this tension becomes another way that the Guatemalan adoptee feels different, and not-enough, outside of what it means to be Guatemalan.

Looking at the national, and the ways that Guatemalan adoptees' themselves often elide the fact that they were born elsewhere, tells how they are generally not identifying themselves as part of transnational systems. This is of note because they are the end-product of a specific transnational adoption system (outlined in the introduction of this piece), that came about at a particular time with the confluence of various transnational processes. Despite Guatemalan adoptee's ignorance of these processes, they still manifest in the ways that affect their lives, from having to name their foreign-born status in the first place, from Americans' need to know where they are from and their immigrant status, and to their interactions with other Guatemalans in the US.

<u>Born Somewhere Else</u>

Tia, for example, explains how growing up she had a grasp of her racial difference in her White family, as well as her adoptive status, but that a missing piece for her was the *where* and *who* of her movement from one family into another. This inability to conceptualize the *where*, Guatemala, was common for my participants growing up, with several explaining that Guatemala was just a story, an imagined place, unreal. Lucy was forty when we spoke, she grew up in a middle-class household on the east coast. She shares that:

> [My parents] always talked about it, that I'm from Guatemala. But growing up as a kid, I never really knew how to pronounce Guatemala. And so, I think I remember telling people in school, when people would ask me where I'm from, I would just say I'm from the United States, because I couldn't remember or think about how Guatemala was pronounced. I didn't know anything about the country.

For Lucy, Guatemala is just an idea, the place that her parents talked about, told her that she was from. Illustrative of the inconsequentiality of this 'where' is the fact that Lucy could not even pronounce Guatemala growing up. She could be from any number of countries with difficult pronunciations that seemingly could stand in for one another, fungible, because for

Lucy they are all immaterial, imaginary, as real to her as Far Far Away. Her inability to pronounce Guatemala though led to a degree of shame, especially when she is asked to explain where she is from. Rather than attempt to enunciate the name she just says that she is from the United States, skirting her inability to say Guatemala correctly, but also avoiding any further questions because she "didn't know anything about the country" in the first place.

As we saw earlier, adoptees face a wide array of microaggressive questions, that function to Other them in adoptive and racial ways; here we see how for transnational adoptees being asked where they are from is a layered and complicated question, one that belies not only their racial difference but also makes salient the fact that they were born somewhere else in the world, whether they choose to explain that or not. It is also true that an aspect of Latinx racialization is their equation with immigrant status (Florez-Gonzalez 2017), but the experiences of my participants cannot simply be reduced to this overarching reality of Latinidad as it is read in the US. The question of "where are you from" launches the Guatemalan adoptee into a moment of crisis, wherein they have to determine whether their questioner is asking about their racial background or their national background, whether they are asking in good faith or out of unabashed microaggressive curiosity, or whether they should use this instance to out themselves as being transnationally adopted, among many other considerations. Riley elaborates on these points, explaining that:

> The amount of times I'm asked, "Well, where are you from?" And then my response is, "Well, do you want to know where I'm from?" 'cause as a [transnational] adoptee it's hard. It's like, "Well are you asking where I grew up or are you asking where I was born? Because they're very different and your reaction is going to be different." Or if I say that I'm from Milton or from Boston, basically, then it's like, "Well where are you really from."

Being transnationally adopted is often implicit or implied in the experiences that my participants shared with me. This quote is a good example. In the original excerpt Riley explains that being an *adoptee* is hard because when you are asked where you are from you must determine if the person asking wants to know where you grew up or where you were born. It is not just that he is adopted but that he is transnationally adopted that riddles this question of where he is from for him and other transnational adoptees.

The fact that my participants often do not explicitly name their transnational-ness is interesting; it perhaps suggests that they are not often thinking of themselves as transnational subjects, the end product of global structures and systems that led to their adoptions (Santizo-Malafronti 2022). This makes sense insofar as this axis of their Otherness, being born in another country, is maybe the least salient and legible. For international adoptees born after 2001, they automatically became US citizens under the Child Citizenship Act (Flores-Koulish & Branco Alvarado 2015; Smith 2000). For those born prior to this act, their naturalization was a distant memory or almost inconsequential, with many of my participants recounting a vague memory, a story that their parents shared with them, or recalling a photo that they might have from the event, holding an American flag or sitting in a court room. And yet, their being born outside of the US did come up from time to time. Sierra, for example, shares how her adoption from abroad is mobilized to interrogate her legal status in the US.

> My mom picked me up one day [from work], and [my coworkers] were like, "Oh, is that your grandma?" and I was like, "No, no, she's my mom. I was adopted and everything." And they're like, "Oh, ok, so you're not actually legal here." And I was like, "Yeah, you know, I went through naturalization papers. I went through documents and everything to get to be able to live here." There's just different things that do come up, people asking if I'm legal here or not, or people asking why didn't I stay in Guatemala. I share my story with people, I just [am] more cautious sharing with certain people that I meet, that are strangers to me.

In this moment, Sierra's claim to citizenship, and by extension, her belongingness in the US, are thrown into question when her coworkers presume that her being transnationally adopted means that she is "not actually legal here." Sierra corrects them, explaining that she went through a naturalization process in order to be adopted to the United States. At first this question might come as a surprise, seeing as transnational adoptees are rarely positioned as immigrants and do not usually think of themselves as such (Lee et al. 2010).

Zooming out a little and considering the heightened visibility of migration in US politics since the 2016 election, this line of questioning begins to make a little more sense (Kennedy 2021). A question like why a Guatemalan adoptee did not stay in Guatemala demonstrates a clear conflation (and confusion) of the Latinx adoptee with a migrant subjectivity, who presumably had a degree of choice in their movement (In this sense, Guatemalan adoptees are more akin to those youth who are brought to the US by their guardians; Menjívar 2002). Legal status was not the only instance where my participants were cast as immigrants by others.

Immigration

Jordan shared with me how she visited Guatemala on a heritage trip (a structured return trip meant to facilitate the adoptee's reconnecting with their birth culture/country). The coordinators of the trip were facilitating a conversation about immigration to the US from Central America, and in particular Guatemala. During this conversation, Jordan's peers looked to her to share her perspectives on migration, a topic that she felt they assumed that she had some greater insight into than other participants, by virtue of her adoption from Guatemala.

> I think I was really uncomfortable, because I didn't really know where the
> conversation was going. And also, I think people kept looking at me to hear what I

had to say, my opinion on it. And again, being the quiet person that I was, I was like, "I don't have anything to say, I'm just writing down everything that you guys are saying or trying to." And they were like, "But what do you think? You know you're in this position. You're Guatemalan." I'm like, "Ok, so? I grew up in the United States, it doesn't really involve me, like what do you guys think?" So, it was kind of awkward for me to be put on the spot like that, but I kind of get why they did it.

This positioning Jordan as being from Guatemala ultimately serves to Other her in a way that makes her uncomfortable. In a breath before this quote, she shared how she is aware that "Well, technically I am an immigrant. I legally came over because I was adopted, but technically that still is what I am," but at the same time contradicts this sentiment when she explains to her peers that she grew up in the US (read, I am just like you), and so she has as much authority to speak to the experiences of migrants as they do: little to none. In an instance like this, Jordan's foreign-born status is being placed on her but is an identity that she herself has not thought of herself as before. Moving forward this experience will serve as an instigation, prompting her to reconsider her sense of being an "immigrant" moving across borders.

Guatemalans in the US

The last instance of my participants' awareness of their being born in Guatemala that I wish to highlight in this paper takes us to their interactions with Guatemalans and Guatemalan-Americans living and working in the US who have more traditional immigrant experiences. In these interactions, my participants' sense of being Guatemalan became salient as it was a shared identity between them and their interlocutors. For some, this offered an opening to further explore that national identity (insofar as they were born there) and begin to formulate a more in-depth sense of themselves as Guatemalans or Guatemalan-Americans. For others though, these interactions were bitter reminders of the ways in which

they have become something completely different, removed from their culture, language, and any connection to the country itself.

This was the case for Morgan, who spent some time working with farm workers, advocating for their labor rights. In a typical interaction she is out in the field with her supervisor, interacting with the workers who would inevitably inquire about where they are from. The supervisor would explain that she is from Ecuador, but Morgan is from Guatemala.

> And so many times [the farm workers] were like "Oh, I'm Guatemalan too." And I could understand all the conversations, like my Spanish was good enough to understand virtually most of it. But I was never able to start or carry a comfortable conversation with them about having anything to do with Guatemala because they would be like "Oh, where are you from in Guatemala," you know, "Where are your parents from," and just have these conversations that I knew they wanted to have… it was frustrating because it wasn't necessarily my fault, but it still kind of was, to them. Because I'm not the one who made any of these decisions for myself, I was 9 months old when I was adopted. To [the farm workers] I was the face of the situation, and I was the one who [is like] "I am Guatemalan, but I don't know anything about Guatemala. I don't speak Spanish." And so, there were a couple instances where they were really confused and almost offended, which really, that had the biggest mental toll on me.

Morgan clearly desires to connect with the farm workers that she is interacting with, yet there is a distance that exists between their experiences of being from Guatemala that transcends phenotype and language. Unlike in the prior examples of Othering presented earlier, it is not that Morgan does not speak Spanish or that she is not recognized as Latina by her compatriot, on the contrary, it is clear in the farm workers' line of questioning that she is being invited to be in community with them. Rather, it is because Morgan and the farm workers have such vastly different relationships to the country that they are both nominally from, that a gap is realized.

Morgan cannot "start or carry a comfortable conversation with them about having anything to do with Guatemala" precisely because she lacks a relationship with Guatemala that is constructed from memories of places, relationships with people, or tastes for foods, music, etc. that make up the sort of relationship that the farm workers have with the country. They want to know where in the country she is from, where her parents are from, an attempt to locate her in their imagined map of Guatemala. But because she was adopted at 9 months old, Morgan lacks these details that might close the gap between her and these Guatemalan immigrants. Her transnational adoption has made her "the face of the situation," the one to blame for her lack of a relationship with Guatemala, the one at fault. Morgan is aware that this is not true, that she did not make this decision for herself, yet she is the one who is claiming to be Guatemalan without knowing anything about the place. In the farm worker's confusion and offense, Morgan is made to realize that her relationship to being from Guatemala is confounding and somehow less than if she knew the relevant information about her life history.

E. *Mediating Factor: Life Course*

Here I attempt to draw out one of the mediating factors that informed my participant's experience of Othering, namely their life course. In terms of life course, an adoptee's sense of self is changing over their youth and adolescence, much like any other person. In addition to needing to contend with the social stigmas (real or imagined) of being a young person, transnational adoptees also must navigate all of the instances of Othering enumerated above.

A general pattern that I noticed in my data is the change of saliences of differences over time. In their youngest years transnational adoptees are afforded a degree of safety and ignorance in their difference—they are their parent's children and have not been socialized to

name their adoptee, racial, cultural, or national difference yet. As they get little older,

Guatemalan adoptees are much more likely to experience a sense of being out of place due to

their racial difference in the adoptive family as they leave the private space of their nuclear

family and become conscious of the ascribed identities placed on them in the public. This

was true of my participant Riley, who shared:

> And then I think the older I got the more I realized I didn't really fit in with other
> people in my town. So, I grew up in a very White, upper-middle class community.
> And so, when you're a kid, and when you're with your parents, you don't really think
> about it. But then as you get older, people start to question, "Oh, is that your kid?"
> Maybe not believing it or wondering what the backstory is.

For Riley, "when you're a kid, and when you're with your parents, you don't really think

about it," 'it' being the fact that he did not fit in with the other people in his town. This

echoes back to the previous discussion around protective factors, honorary Whiteness and

Guatemalan adoptees. For Riley though, in his childhood, his relationship with his adoptive

parents, his role of being a son, is his predominant identity. This changes over time as

strangers begin to ask his parents if he is their kid, thus emphasizing that there is a

discernable difference that exists. This racial difference also has valences of his adoptive

status, in that Riley's different phenotype implies that he could not possibly be his adoptive

parent's biological child.

The opportunity for these sorts of interactions to happen diminish over time as the

adoptee leaves home and sets out on their own life (Baden et al. 2012), physically and

geographically separate from their White adoptive families. Sonia Rivera grew up in an

upper-middle class household in a midwestern state; she was 20 years old at the time of our

interview and had just left her white adoptive community to attend university two years prior.

In high school she felt that she was grouped in with White students, even though she

described how she was different from them and desired to be in community with other Latinx folks.

> I found that now, in college, I really connect with more Hispanics and Latinas and Latinos, because I don't have my parents with me. So, no one is able to see that [she is transracially adopted]. They just see me as a Hispanic, they don't see me as an adopted child. Whereas everyone, from where I grew up, saw me as the adopted child, because it was identifiable, it was recognizable. And it's kind of [allowed her to create] my own identity, which I like now.

Leaving home, where Sonia is "identifiable" and "recognizable" as the (implicitly, transracially) adopted child allows her to connect with more Latinx folks because now, without the association with her adoptive family and the community knowledge of her life history, she is free to claim a Latina identity uninhibited. Sonia remarks how she likes this new identity that she has stepped into, and how in college it is much easier for her to connect with Latinx folks than in high school. This opportunity to recreate oneself in college is a tried trope but takes on a new character with new stakes when it comes to Guatemalan adoptees (and transracial adoptees in general, see Shiao and Tuan 2008). Rather than just a shift in personality or other more superficial aspects of the presentation of self, this cleaving of Sonia's relationships with her adoptive family and adoptive community opens up a real opportunity for her to finally pursue and explore an identity that she has interpersonally been denied up until this point. In college she is more readily accepted and read as Latina and has begun to find a community that is willing to meet her where she is in her journey to claiming Latinidad, which creates a positive feedback loop, reinforcing her sense of self as a Latina.

The ability to claim or not claim being transracially adopted informed by the spatial separation between adoptive family and adoptee continued throughout adulthood. Michael shared an instance where he disclosed his adoption to a new coworker who was not expecting this biographical information.

> Well, I had a co-worker start [at work] and we just happened to be talking about this and that. And I happened to throw it out, and she was, I guess, surprised by it, just "Oh, you're, like—" "Yeah, I'm adopted." And she's just like "Oh, ok, cool." And, honestly, it's not something that I guess people really think about. You don't just meet somebody, and you start thinking, "Oh, are they adopted?" or "Do they have a stepparent?" This and that, it's not something that people normally think about.

Michael names for us that "it's not something that I guess people are thinking about. You don't just meet somebody and start thinking, 'Oh, are they adopted?' or 'Do they have a stepparent?'" And he has a point, when you are meeting someone for the first time, or just interacting with a stranger, there are much more salient identities to ascribe to someone— their race, their gender, maybe their class or sexuality—but generally not what their kinship network looks like. This has various implications, one being that without being grouped with or claimed by their adoptive families, Guatemalan adoptees in the "real world" are much less likely to be assumed to be a transnational adoptee. Rather, they are actively being read by strangers as people of color, presumably raised in families of color, with all the accompanying acculturation (hence the expectation that they be culturally competent and one with their group).

Perhaps these presumptions are why it comes as such a surprise to Michael's coworker when he discloses his adoption to her. She is working from a set of assumptions based on his phenotypic presentation (Recall that Michael shared earlier "[I've] got long hair, it's down to my ass, it's three feet long, and I got a beard, and I'm big."). All of sudden this new input of information would merit a rethinking of these prior assumptions, possibly without a pre-existing set of heuristics about transnational, Guatemalan adoptees, to fall back on. This reassessment might be read into the way that Michael recounts her reaction, one of stammer-y surprise.

Michael continues, explaining that "I usually don't share that information, that I'm adopted. And so, I mean, if it comes up in conversation, I'll volunteer it, it's nothing that I'm ashamed of. It's part of who I am. It's just, to me, it seems that people are surprised about it." In this quote, we see that the fact of Michael's adoption is not something that he readily shares, though it is also not something that he tries to hide. It is just that, a fact, a part of who he is. His connecting of not usually sharing his adoption with his awareness of the reaction that he will receive from strangers, perhaps implies that his unstated motivation for not disclosing is to avoid these socially uncomfortable situations, where he is suddenly re-defining himself in the eyes of his perceiver.

Throughout this analysis we have seen that transnational adoptees are aware of the ways that they are perceived and the ways that they buck these presumptions in their lived experiences. How they relate and are allowed to negotiate their sense of self are mediated, in part, by their age and the relationships that they have with their White adoptive family/community.

F. *Limitations and Future Directions*

I would be remiss if I did not take a moment to highlight some of the limitations and omissions of my discussion thus far. There were several variables with regards to my findings of Guatemalan adoptee's Othering that lie fully or partially outside of the scope of this project. Prime among them is an in-depth analysis of the adoptee's psychological development. Throughout this thesis I have noted my participants' ages but oftentimes they are recounting memories of events that occurred in their childhood and adolescence, some many years removed. Faulty memory aside, there is something to be said about when exactly different interactions that Other the adoptee occur. A more in-depth analysis would take up a

developmental psychology analysis and put subject's understandings of difference, and race in particular, into conversation with the instances that Guatemalan adoptees are experiencing Othering.

Another important factor that lies outside of my analysis is attention to geography. It is probable that Guatemalan adoptees who grew up in rural areas compared to urban areas had different experiences as well as those who grew up in regions outside of the northeast and Midwest (where most of my participants were concentrated). In the above analysis closer attention to these differences were sacrificed to draw out initial findings from my data.

Another important factor that should be analyzed in the future is the role of colorism in Othering and belonging in relation to Guatemalan adoptee identity navigation. Colorism has been of recent concern to Latinx studies and an application of this research to Latinx adoptees will only yield further rich and insightful findings. For my study colorism did not come up in interviews often and it felt out of the realm of analysis. A future study would do well to engage in participant observation and pay closer attention to the ways that differently shaded individuals are perceived and interpellated in relation to their adoptive status.

To date, and to the author's knowledge, this is the first empirical study that looks at Guatemalan adult adoptees and takes their experiences up as the subject of a study. With this in mind, it would be impossible to take the data in every possible direction, looking at every possible variable. Future researchers with different research questions and new primary data will have to extend my findings. For now, I see my contribution as a ground-setting one.

G. *Discussion and Recommendations*

In this thesis I have explored the ways that Guatemalan transnational adoptees are Othered along four axes, 1) Adoptive/familial, 2) Racial/phenotypic, 3) Cultural/ethnic, and

4) National. To do this, I have explored the reflected appraisals and Othering processes that my participants experienced in relation to each of these social identities as they navigate to create a complete sense of self. I focused on these Othering processes not to suggest that transnational adoptees are not able to find belonging and community along these axes. Scholarship has shown how transnational adoptees arrive at various identities, in no small part because of relationships with the White adoptive families and communities that they grow up in, their interactions with communities of color, and more specifically, with Latinx populations, as well as their relationships with their co-nationals living in the US and in their country of birth.

Rather, I focused on these Othering processes to elucidate how Guatemalan adoptees navigate a society that hegemonically seeks to homogenize, categorize, and routinize complex, nuanced, and liminal experiences into easily legible identities; identity categories like child, White, person of color, Latinx, and American that my participants inhabit and confound in this project. The non-normative experiences of transnational adoptees ultimately reveal the (il)logics of identity politics in the 21st century and the continued relevance of blood ties in family; racial fault lines that undergird identity formation and navigation in the age of color evasiveness (Annamma et al. 2017), post-raciality, and diversity, equity, and inclusion; the border patrolling of ethnicity within Latinx communities; and the continued relevance of place of birth/origin.

As more Guatemalan adoptees come of age in the coming years, it will be important that scholars, adoption agencies, governments, adoptive parents, and adoptees themselves critically examine the ideologies, structures, and relationships that brought forth a system like

transnational adoption. We need to continue to understand the lived experiences of transnational adoptees so as to better support their growth and development.

One way we can do this is by encouraging current adoptive parents of adopted minors to intentionally seek out mentors and communities to expose their children to their culture, race, and heritage, as well as other adoptees. Isolation, geographic and experiential, is one of the main issues that transnational adoptees face on a daily basis growing up, and exposure to positive role models and communities in their adolescence can go a long way to combat a sense of not fitting in. This exposure should go beyond culture camps and heritage trips that occur infrequently throughout the transnational adoptee's youth, but should be lasting, sustained relationships with people that the adoptee can approach to process racism, questions around culture, and ostracization.

In a similar vein, those involved in the placement and rearing of transnational adoptive children (governments, agencies, religious groups, and adoptive parents) have a responsibility for their well-being and should be *materially* and *symbolically* supportive of adult transnational adoptees' continued identity development. By continued identity development I mean transnational adoptees returning to their birth country, their search for cultural community in the US, their reunion with their birth family, and in some cases, their choice to reside in their country of origin. By *symbolically* support I mean the affective approval and encouragement of transnational adoptees' identity exploration, as well as acknowledgement of stakeholders' role in the creation of transnational adoptees. By *materially* support I mean the passage of laws that retroactively make all transnational adoptees citizens of the US (for more, see the Adoptee Citizenship Act), similar laws that make it easy for transnational adoptees to return and reside in their birth countries, as well as

financing post-adoption services and mental health services for continued identity exploration.

Mental health professionals, teachers, counselors, and other social service providers who work with transnational adoptees must continue to develop critical, reflexive, and informed practices and approaches that center the experience of adoptees. This means an awareness of the lack of witnessing that the transnational adoptee faces in their formative years, and their sense of alienation, being out of place in relation to the racial communities they are presumed to be a part of. This nuance is important if we are to hold the transnational adoptee in their full experience rather than reduce them to their phenotypic presentation and the solutions and practices that have been shown to work with those communities.

The various stakeholders of the Transnational Adoption Industrial Complex (TAIC) (McKee 2019) need to disrupt their own white savior and paternalistic mentalities if they are to support transnational adoptees. This looks like the recognition of transnational adoptees as full, agentic subjects who exist as the result of systems of oppression, coercion, with their own traumas, as opposed to the positioning of transnational adoptees as saved from their conditions, living a better life in the US with more opportunities, and thus necessarily obliged to be grateful.

Finally, those with a stake in the well-being of transnational adoptees, especially other transnational adoptees, are tasked with helping one another to understand their lived experiences and supporting their "coming out of the fog" (Radke 2017; Yue, Santizo-Malafronti, Vasquez-Kelly 2020; Drennan ElAwar 2012).

IV.   CONCLUSION: Out of the Fog and The Adoptee Third Space

The personal is political

- Feminist Saying, often attributed to Carol Hanisch

Acknowledging how personal the political is can be most unpleasant.

- Diane Nelson, *Reckoning: The End of War in*

Guatemala

I could have written a thesis that valorizes my participants who have worked to find belonging, to make and claim space for themselves, who have found resilience in being liminal subjects. But I stopped short of that in this paper because the valorization of their experience, as resilient subjectivity, only serves to homogenize the experience of being a transnational adoptee. In fact, to locate a resilience in that liminality feeds into the narrative of what Kimberly McKee (2019) calls the *every adoptee*, the one "whom mainstream society wants to root for–the adoptee who negotiates [their] culture, potentially searching and reuniting with their biological parents, while simultaneously maintaining strong ties to the adoptive family (12)." We want to root for the underdog, the resilient, those who have lived and overcome the conditions that they find themselves in. And although most, if not all, of my participants have reculturated, returned, and reunited, it would be a stretch to say that these experiences pushed them beyond what was socially expected of them as good, worldly American citizens raised at the end of the 20th century in a foggy-milieu thick with neoliberal multiculturalism (Melamed 2006).

That is to say, the acts of reconnecting with culture, the search for roots and birth family, and for the lucky few, the reunion with that family, are all part and parcel with the logics transnational adoptees are socialized in by US society and in their White families. In

their White adoptive families, they are taught to celebrate their 'culture' (refracted through the White gaze) in digestible (through food), entertaining (through dance, popular media), and social capitalizing (differentiating through representational politics on college and job apps) ways, but never in a way that threatens the totalizing and cohesive strength of the narrative that they are living a better life in the US because they were adopted.

Likewise, I could have written a thesis that continued to elaborate typologies of adoptees (ala Baden et al. 2012; Shiao & Tuan 2008; Kim 2010; Park Nelson 2016). The adoptee who reconnects with their birth culture, the adoptee who identifies with their adoptive family's heritage, the adoptee who connects with co-ethnics in the US, the adoptee who returns to their country of origin etc. Rather, I chose to concentrate on the processes of reflected appraisals and Othering in the hopes of understanding one aspect of transnational adoptees' navigation of rigid, hegemonic identity categories.

I want to suggest in this conclusion that the Othering experiences that adoptees have throughout their life land them in what we might call a third-space (extending on Hübinette 2004). It is this psychic-social location, this crossroads, this borderlands, that the transnational adoptee finds themself returning to over and over again; and not necessarily of their own accord. Rather, the transnational adoptee is launched into this liminal locale in every instance that their identity is questioned, when they are asked to legitimate their claims to one identity or another, when they get the sense that they are not enough, that they are out of place, that they do not belong, that they "don't fit in" to harken back to the beginning of this thesis.

This is why I chose to focus so decisively on the Othering instances that my participants found themselves in, it is my attempt at naming some of the experiences that

leave Guatemalan adoptees wondering who they are when they are so clearly not "one with" the groups who they are normatively supposed to be a part of. As we have seen, they confound this oneness because of their transgression of the social norms that construct family, race, culture, and origin; namely, their non-biological familial ties, crossing of racial fault lines, mismatch with exclusive notions of culture, and their confusing of xenophobic ideas about places of birth.

As one can imagine, being an Other is generally undesirable. Humans are social creatures who yearn for and need connection, community, to be seen in their experiences and to be validated. To continue to have to defend, explain, navigate, and question one's claim to an identity is exhausting. It is not surprising then that Guatemalan adoptees have developed a number of coping mechanisms to mitigate the potential to feel their difference: from playing with questions of racial background, to attempting to pass as Latinx by distancing oneself from their adoptive family, to not bringing up one's adoption, to seeking out language, culture, and relationships with their country of origin so as to legitimate their claims (which may very well look like the identity outcomes ala Baden et al. 2012 or Shiao & Tuan 2008).

But what if instead of coping mechanisms or inhabiting the various typologies of adoptee identities, transnational adoptees were to sit in that third-space? What would they begin to question: How is it that I became so different? What system made it possible for me to be moved from one family, racial group, culture, nation to another? Why am I asked to legitimate my existence, over and over again? What could have been different so that my birth parents did not need to put me up for adoption? What if I did not have to choose?

Thus, I locate in the third-space, the potential to motivate transnational adoptees to "come out of the fog" (Drennan ElAwar 2012; Yue, Santizo-Malafronti, Vasquez-Kelly

2020; Charles 2021) and embody the political identity that McKee (2019) calls the *adoptee killjoy*. By come out of the fog, I mean the critical questioning of the practice of adoption itself, like those outlined above; the discarding of inherited White savior narratives that posit the adoptee as a savable orphan; the recognition of the systems of oppression that allow for and maintain international adoption (The Redwood Collective 2022). I lean on McKee here and her description of the adoptee killjoy who "disrupts adoption narratives of child rescue through political activism," and who "reveal the contradictions and violence of adoption including fraudulent creation of orphans and denial of rights of birth parents (11)." This politically-motivated adoptee literally kills joy, jettisoning the ideal notion of the multicultural family and the every adoptee whom we want to root for, the adoptee killjoy refuses to ignore the realities of the conditions that allowed for their adoption in the first place.

In sum, transnational adoptees have their own unique ontological experience, they cannot be compared to other groups that they might otherwise be associated with (their adoptive family, other people of color, their co-ethnics, or their co-nationals). They remain heterogeneous in their embodiment of their ontologically distinct in-betweenness, or how they navigate the adoptee third-space. This third-space is created by the transnational adoptee's experience of Othering and reflected appraisals as they form a complete sense of self. The embodiments are necessarily mitigated by the social-structural systems (biopolitics, neoliberalism, multiculturalism, and global racial capitalism, to name a few I have been alluding to) that they were born and then adopted into, systems which come into question the longer they inhabit the third-space. This questioning, instigated by the discomfort of the transnational adoptee third-space, the dissonance and sense of difference, the not fitting in,

the questioning of their authenticity and sense of self is one means by which coming out of

the fog is motivated.

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VI.   APENDIX

A. INTRODUCTORY EMAIL

Hello,

My name is Chris Santizo-Malafronti, I am a graduate student in the Department of Sociology at The University of California, Santa Barbara and a transracial international adoptee from Guatemala. This summer and fall I am collecting data for my master's thesis that investigates the experiences of Guatemalan adoptees. I am specifically interested in the relationship between adoptees and their country of birth, particularly those who have returned to Guatemala as well as those who have reunited with their birth families.

This project is important because it will focus exclusively on the experiences of adult adoptees, a perspective that has traditionally been left out of the literature. In addition, few projects have concentrated exclusively on the experience of adoptees from Latin America, and fewer on Guatemala in particular. I see this project as an opportunity to have the stories of Guatemalan adoptees heard, told and to highlight the importance of listening to the voices that adoption has directly affected.

Participation in the research is voluntary and would involve a 60-90 minute interview with me that will be remotely conducted at your convenience. You may experience some discomfort answering some of the questions, but you may also find it rewarding to reflect upon your experience being adopted.

Any information you share with me will be kept confidential and any future presentations or publications of the will not include names or other identifying information. The Institutional Review Board at the University of California, Santa Barbara has approved this research. If you have any questions regarding this research while you consider your possible participation, contact information for that office is provided below. I also encourage you to contact me with any questions you may have.

If you or someone you know would be interested in participating in this research, please reach out to me at cmalafronti@ucsb.edu or (302) 650-0867.

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research subject, please contact the Human Subjects Committee at (805) 893-3807 or hsc@research.ucsb.edu. Or write to the University of California, Human Subjects Committee, Office of Research, Santa Barbara, CA 93106-2050

Thank you very much for your consideration, I hope to hear from you soon!

Best,

Chris Santizo-Malafronti
University of California, Santa Barbara

B. INTRODUCTORY SOCIAL MEDIA POST

[Research Participation Opportunity]

My name is Chris Santizo-Malafronti, I am a first year graduate student in sociology at The University of California, Santa Barbara and a transracial international adoptee from Guatemala. This summer and fall I am collecting data for my master's thesis that investigates the experiences of Guatemalan adoptees. I am specifically interested in the relationship between adoptees and their country of birth, particularly those who have returned to Guatemala as well as those who have reunited with their birth families.

This project is important because it will focus exclusively on the experiences of adult adoptees, a perspective that has traditionally been left out of the literature. In addition, few projects have concentrated exclusively on the experience of adoptees from Latin America, and fewer on Guatemala in particular. I see this project as an opportunity to have the stories of Guatemalan adoptees heard, told and to highlight the importance of listening to the voices that adoption has directly affected.

Participation in the research is voluntary and would involve a 60-90 minute interview with me that will be remotely conducted at your convenience. You may experience some discomfort answering some of the questions, but you may also find it rewarding to reflect upon your experience being adopted.

Any information you share with me will be kept confidential and any future presentations or publications of the will not include names or other identifying information. The Institutional Review Board at the University of California, Santa Barbara has approved this research.

If you or someone you know would be interested in participating in this research, or you have any questions about who is and isn't able to participate, please pass my information along or reach out to me at cmalafronti@ucsb.edu or (302) 650-0867.

Thanks, and I hope to hear from you soon!

C. DIGITAL CONSENT FORM

Remembering Kinship: Guatemalan Adoptees on Returning to Guatemala

Informed Consent

You are invited to participate in a research study about being adopted from Guatemala. The goal of this research is to understand the relationship between adoptees and their country of birth. Specifically, I am interested in Guatemalan adoptees who have or intend to return to Guatemala.

This study is being conducted by Chris Santizo-Malafronti; This and other interviews conducted will be used in my master's thesis and, potentially, in future academic publications.

There are 3 qualifications to participate in this study: (1) You are adopted from Guatemala; (2) You are over the age of 18; (3) You must have or intend to return to Guatemala as an adult.

Participating in this study is voluntary. If you agree to participate, I anticipate the interview will last between 60-90 minutes. The interview includes questions about your background, your experiences growing up adopted, and your experiences returning to Guatemala.

Participating in this study may benefit you, by providing a space to share your story and talk about your experience. You may find answering some of the questions upsetting if your experiences have been painful, but it is expected that this would not be different from the kinds of things you discuss with family or friends. At any time, you can decide not to answer a question, ask me to stop recording, and/or end the interview.

The information you will share with me if you participate in this study will be kept completely confidential. I would like to record this interview. The recordings will be transcribed, and the original recording will be destroyed after I have completed all analysis. The transcriptions and recordings will be kept on a locked computer that only I will be able to open. Your name and other identifying information will never be associated with the content of this interview. I will assign a pseudonym to you in any future publications or conference presentations that use information from this interview.

If you have questions about the research, please contact me, Chris Santizo-Malafronti, at (302)-650-0867 and cmalafronti@ucsb.edu.

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research subject, please contact the Human Subjects Committee at (805) 893-3807 or hsc@research.ucsb.edu. Or write to the University of California, Human Subjects Committee, Office of Research, Santa Barbara, CA 93106-2050

_____   ____/____/_____
Name (print)   Date

_____   ____/____/_____
Signature   Date
      D. INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Guide

Thank you for agreeing to share your experience of being adopted from Guatemala with me. I am a graduate student in sociology at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and am studying the relationship between adoptees and their country of birth for my master's thesis. Specifically, I'm interested in Guatemalan adoptees who have or intend to return to Guatemala as adults. This interview and the other interviews I conduct will be used in my master's thesis and, potentially, in future academic publications.

I anticipate the interview will last anywhere between an hour and an hour and a half. This interview is completely voluntary. At any time, you can decide not to answer a question, ask me to stop recording, and/or end the interview at any time. Are you interested in participating in this research?

I would like to record this interview. The recording will help me remember the interview. The recording will be transcribed, and the original recording will be destroyed after I have completed all analysis. Do I have your permission to record?

I am interested in hearing about your thoughts, feelings, and experiences, so I appreciate you being as honest and candid as you can with me. Your name and other identifying information will never be associated with the content of this interview. I will assign a pseudonym to you in any future publications that use information from this interview.

If, after the interview is over, you have questions about the research, you can reach me at cmalafronti@ucsb.edu.

Okay, I'm going to start recording now.

Growing up adopted

1. I'd like to know about the story of your adoption. Would you tell me the story of your adoption?

2. Can you talk about a moment or time growing up in which being adopted felt especially significant?

3. Did you grow up with any other adoptees?

4. How did your parents, if at all, discuss your adoption when you were growing up?

5. Did you ever go through your paperwork with your family?

6. Growing up, how did you discuss Guatemala with your family?

7. Growing up, how did you discuss race with your family? / how did race come/show up

8. Growing up, how did you discuss race with strangers?

9. How, if at all, have you learned about Guatemalan history?

10. Other adoptees have shared objects, like an outfit they were adopted in, a weaving someone brought back from a trip to Guatemala, or a Guatemalan flag, that have particular meaning to them because of their association with Guatemala – I'm wondering if you have anything special related to Guatemala you could talk about or share with me?

11. (If they haven't yet returned) What are some considerations as to whether to return or not?

12. (If they haven't searched yet) What are some considerations as to whether to search or not?

13. Naturalization / citizenship?

14. Conceptualization of birth mother growing up / is that different than what you think of today? Who was she to you?

15. Growing up, did you give any thought to your birth father?

16. Have you done any DNA tests? Can you tell me about your experience with them?

17. Is there a time when adoption has felt more important in your life than another?

Return to Guatemala [If they have returned to Guatemala]

18. I'd like to hear about the first time you returned to Guatemala. To start, when and how did you decide to return?

19. Can you walk me through your return trip, from the time you left the US?

20. Tell me about what you did while you were in Guatemala?

21. How did you relate to Guatemalans while you were there- are there any interactions that stick out in particular?

22. Were there any moments where ethnicity or race felt important in Guatemala?

Return to the States

23. How do you think about Guatemala now?

24. Can you tell me about interacting with your adoptive parents after your trip and how, if at all, you discussed the experience with them?

25. Can you tell me about going back to your hometown in the US for the first time after your trip?

26. How did you discuss your trip with your friends?

27. Has the trip changed how you talk to strangers about being adopted? If so, how do you explain to strangers that you are adopted now?

28. What advice would you give to an adoptee or who is planning on returning to Guatemala or the country they are from for the first time?

Reunion [If they have reunited with their birth family]

29. I'd like to hear about the first time you met your birth family. To start, when and how did you decide to search for them?

30. Can you walk me through your first meeting, from the time you found your birth family to when you returned to the US?

31. Can you tell me about your relationship with your birth family today?

32. Has the global pandemic impacted your relationship with your birth family?

33. What advice would you give to an adoptee who is planning on searching for their birth family?

Residing [If they have resided in Guatemala]

34. I'd like to hear about your decision to move back to Guatemala. How did you decide to move back to Guatemala?

35. Can you think of a time when your adoption seemed significant in your interactions with Guatemalans (while living in Guatemala)?

36. How would you describe your relationship to where you grew up in the States?

37. How does your adoptive family feel about you living in Guatemala? Your birth family?

Wrap Up [After Demographic Survey]

38. Is there anything that I have forgotten to ask that you would like to talk about to help me understand your experience as a Guatemalan adoptee?

39. Can you think of any other adoptees who might be interested in participating in this study? Would you be willing to pass along my information to them?

40. Finally, do you have any questions for me?

E. Guatemalan Adoption Timeline

TIMELINE

1977
The Law Regulating Processing by Notaries of Matters under Voluntary Jurisdiction goes into effect – the introduction of Notarial adoption

Nov. 2002
Guatemala ratifies the Hague Convention, to go into effect March 2003

1963-1977
Judiciary adoption is codified in law in Guatemala

1996
The Peace Accords are signed in December, adoptions from Guatemala start to increase

2002
The United States remains the lone developed country allowing adoptions from Guatemala

TIMELINE

2007
Adoptions from Guatemala reach their peak, 5,577 Guatemalans are adopted, with 4,728 going to the US

Dec. 2007
The Adoption Law is passed, regulating adoption in Guatemala, establishing *El Consejo Nacional de Adopciones (CNA)*, Guatemala's central adoption authority, in attempt to make the country Hague compliant

Oct. 2003
The Hague Convention is challenged in court and overturned by the Guatemalan constitutional court allowing for private, notarial adoptions to resume

Late 2007
The Guatemalan constitutional court overturns previous ruling, recognizes ratification of The Hague Convention

Jan. 2008
The Adoption Law goes into effect, effectively ending notarial adoption, although allowing for a transition period

Jan. 9 2008
The U.S. ceases adoptions from Guatemala until Guatemala's adoption procedures are fully Hague-compliant

2019
The first year since adoptions to the US from Guatemala started that no children are adopted

Jan. 1 2008
Guatemala ceases adoptions to the US citing that it is a signatory of the Hague Convention but has not ratified it yet

2008-2018
Transition period wherein 2,000 adoptions that were "in process" prior to **The Adoption Law** continue

Feb. 2019
The Author reunites with their birth family 23 years after they were adopted